Where Do I Go From Here

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Summary

Just after being put on probation John Rambo is sought out by Deputy Mitch, who is still plagued by guilt after the fateful incident in Hope. Mitch offers Rambo a place to stay and a helping hand to get back into a society that has turned its back on him. Now trying to live a civilian life is as hard for Rambo as it is for Mitch trying to help a person who long ago shut out all human contact.

Notes

First of: This fanfiction will take on a very different view of John Rambo as the majority of people have of him. I am trying to figure out what would have happened, if someone helped John to get back into society after his stay in prison following the end of the first movie 'First Blood'. Because beside being a highly-skilled killing machine he is also a suffering human being which sadly isn't the central issue of the movies and only shown briefly in some scenes.

I share this small John/Mitch ship with the most amazing artist tattiosala (tumblr) to which this fanfiction is dedicated and who is also my beta <3 Before I ever watched the movie First Blood, I saw their artwork of John and Mitch and I was instantly captivated by it. So if you have the time, check out tattiosala's truly amazing artwork! As for my fic ... I don't claim to know anything deeper about PTSD, I just tagged it that way, because David Morrell said John Rambo suffered from it. I'll try my best to write it in a appropriate way! So, I hope I will
find some more people out there, who are willing to see a different side of John Rambo.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Still I wonder

Chapter Summary

Today is the day that John Rambo might finally be put on probation. Mitch – former deputy of Hope – approaches the ex-solider to offer him help and a place to stay, but is met with rejection.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

* "If I knew the way I'd go back home;
But the countryside has changed so much I'd surely end up lost;
Half remembering names and faces so far in the past;
On the other side of bridges that were burned once they were crossed"

PAUL WILLIAMS – Where Do I Go From Here

* He maneuvered his way through the masses of people clotting the vast corridors of the court house of Westbridge. It was late in the afternoon and the sun had already begun to set, basking the walls in a
bright pinkish glow. It was a peaceful light, quite unbefitting of the rather sober interior of the court. Going on tiptoes and looking over the bare heads of the people surrounding him, he finally found the court room he was looking for. Number 3a. It looked the same as all the other court room entrances, but still Mitch’s heart gave a jump, once he spied it.

It had taken him over three years of research, a lot of phone calls and dead ends to finally be here. It has been almost four years, since Rambo had come to the small village of Hope and laid wreckage to it. Thinking back to that fateful event, Mitch didn’t feel any remorse towards it at all, only guilt. His former superior sheriff Will Teasle had bailed John Rambo for vagrancy and the other policemen had brutally tortured and abused him. All Mitch had done was to stand and stare. When Rambo had been brought into custody he had immediately seen, that there was something different about that man, about the way he held his shoulders, how he shut down his facial expression. That the man turned out to be a green beret just out of Nam should have given his superiors pause and a chance to use their brains. But they didn’t.

After Rambo had been arrested, not before nearly killing Teasle, Mitch was unable to forget his own cowardice. He not only never stood up to his colleagues, but instead had agreed to go with them on the manhunt for Rambo. Well granted, Rambo had given him a severe cut to the thigh, but it was just to disable from continuing, not to kill him. They had chased him like an animal, no wonder that man had reacted the way he did. Then, three months later Mitch had asked for a transfer to a different town. He wanted to put as much space between him and Hope as he could. So he had been transferred to the even smaller village of Fairview, just about 20 miles away from Westbridge. From there he had started his search.

Still plagued by guilt and shame, Mitch had begun to sort through Rambo’s police files he had nicked from Hope’s sheriff department. The scar on his upper thigh a constant reminder of his cowardice. He wanted to find Rambo, step up to him and apologize. That man had fought in Viet Nam for this country, just short of giving his life, and all Mitch had done for him was … Nothing. Exactly just that. As it turned out, the military didn’t took kindly to investigations about their personnel, especially, when the person in question turned out to he a high ranking colonel. The first year of rejections and failures had been hard on Mitch, but he refused to give up. Well into the second half of the second year, he managed to get hold of colonel Trautman.

At first Trautman tried to cut off all of Mitch’s attempts to explain himself, until Mitch finally was able to rush out the words of ‘John James Rambo’. And now there he was.

A queasy feeling settled in Mitch’s gut as he stood there in the hallway. The last time he had been here, he had been at trial himself. Remembering his hearing shame welled up in him. Distracting himself, he looked around the people in the hall. Surely they couldn’t all be here just for Rambo’s first hearing after his initial conviction. The case of a Nam veteran destroying a backwater village in the northwest of Washington State was something the press was forced not to bray about too loudly. The state had enough problems with all the returning soldiers as it were.

The sinking sun blinded Mitch for a second as he surveyed his surroundings, suddenly spying a more or less familiar figure, colonel Trautman.

The man in question had the same rigid set to his shoulders as Rambo has had. His green uniform was a harsh contrast to the fuzzy pink light, still clinging to the court walls. With a determined set to his features he stalked through the throng and drew level with Mitch, overlooking him.

"Colonel Trautman," Mitch burst out, his heart in his throat.

Trautman turned around and fixed him with a hard stare, for one moment surely not recognizing the young, red-haired man in a beat up jeans jacket and brown slacks. They had only telephoned
beforehand and Mitch’s memory of the colonel on the day he came to Hope to ‘save them from Rambo’, was rather misty, too.

"Deputy Rogers," was all he said in return.

"Yes … Say, how do you think the court will decide today? In favor?" Mitch’s voice was shaky. Not really because he was afraid of the colonel, it was suppressing anger that did that to Mitch’s voice. He despised that man for his cool and uncaring attitude.

"I can’t say anything for certain," Trautman blocked Mitch’s question and then continued, "So, deputy Rogers, you’re still here, to help? I can’t believe it." The last sentences were said in such a condescending manner, Mitch felt his hands clench.

"Of course I am. After all Rambo’s done for this land and after what Teasle did to him, it is time to give something back. Everyone needs a little help sometimes," Mitch stuttered. He hadn’t intended on getting so worked up, but Trautman just ruffled his feathers.

A low, dejected chuckle before Trautman mumbled, "He needs help alright. All of them do …"

With that he turned briskly on his heels and vanished behind the honey-colored wooden door of the courtroom, leaving a stunned Mitch behind.

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The room where the hearing took place was as dull and sober as the hallways outside. It was a squarish room with waist-high wood-paneling and otherwise bleak white walls. Windows, set high up in the walls, admitted only a small sliver of the late afternoon light, so the neon tube underneath the ceiling was turned on, giving everything a flat, colorless look.

In the middle of the room sat Rambo, facing away from the audience. He was clad in a tight fitting red t-shirt and a heavily used jeans. His hair was as long as Mitch remembered it, flowing down his neck onto the broad back. A funny tingling started in Mitch’s stomach and he fumbled with the hem of his jacket. It was weird seeing Rambo in person, after four years of searching for him only with his memory of the fleeting meeting they have had. Shaking off the feeling, Mitch went on along the aisle to settle on one of the benches in the front row.

As dull as its surroundings, so was the hearing. The judge read the accusations brought against Rambo in a monotone voice, seeming not to care about the case and its accused at all. Questions were asked and statements made. Trautman argued heavily in Rambo’s favor, explained why everything had happened and why he should be released early, although remaining rather unfeeling and cool. Despite the importance of the hearing, Rambo betrayed not a single emotion, while giving account of the occurred events from his perspective. He sat upright in his seat, the hands folded in front him on the wooden table, always facing the judge head-on. Somehow he seemed more like a resting predator, knowing that no-one in this room could do him any harm, sure of what he was capable of.

Mitch shifted awkwardly on the hard bench he sat on, wedged in between an elderly lady, who was the type of person, who would go to any hearing, just to have something to talk about, and a middle aged men who looked rather disinterested. He was nervous because if Rambo shouldn’t be put on probation, he would have to go back to prison and there would be no chance talking to him. Well, not for another five years.

The hearing went on and the stern faced judge announced that the jury would withdraw now, to cast their votes. Still unfazed by it, Rambo sat unmoving, not even facing colonel Trautman, who Mitch
though was Rambo’s only confidant.

After a while of anxious waiting, more on Mitch’s part than anyone else’s, the jury returned. The people occupying the small room dropped silent to hear the verdict. And in his ever droning voice the judge read that Rambo was to be put on probation. Mitch’s heart leaped.

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Once outside the court house Mitch was greeted by a crisp chill, which immediately bit into his cheeks. Behind the towering peaks of the mountains only a low gleam spoke of the setting sun, leaving the sky a lilac color, here and there broken by the first stars coming out.

It had taken Mitch some time to get out of the court, because all of the people left the building at once. His heart pounded heavily against his chest and his nervousness rose. He wasn’t even sure if Rambo was just to be cast outside the court after his hearing. Looking frantically over the scattered people standing on the concrete steps leading down to the street, he spied him. Rambo was clad in his green military parka and a bedroll slung over his shoulders, just like four years ago. Mitch started to push himself forward, to overcome his anxiety, but then he saw who Rambo was actually talking with. Trautman.

Mitch froze in mid-movement, watching both men in their subdued conversation. Rambo’s face was impassive. He nodded sometimes and answered only seldom. After a while Trautman only clapped him on the shoulder, nodded and turned around. Mitch inhaled sharply as his and Trautman’s eyes crossed. But the man didn’t come over, just strode up the steps and went inside the court again. Forcing himself to tear his gaze away from the leaving Trautman, he looked out for Rambo once more. He was gone.

"Shit," he cursed under his breath, running a hand over his mouth.

Then his eyes caught a familiar glimpse of dark, shaggy hair. Rambo had started to walk down the road, bedroll over his shoulders, head held high. Mitch broke into a trot, glad to leave the court house and his memories of it behind.

"Mister … Mister Rambo!" he called out, catching up with the other man.

Rambo turned around and immediately fixed Mitch with a stare, that was neither rejecting nor inviting, just impassive. Mitch, feeling rather observed tugged at his collar unconsciously. He noticed that Rambo’s face was clean shaven and he hoped that this time he had been allowed to do the shaving himself … The expression in Rambo’s face when the policemen in Hope had caught him in a strangle hold and brandished a blade in front of his face had been heartbreaking.

"I’m sorry Mister Rambo for stepping up to you, all out of the blue but …" Mitch was stammering now. Although he was half a head taller than Rambo, the other man emitted an aura of authority.

"John’s fine," Rambo said in a low rumble, slightly slurred speech as if he came from somewhere south of the states.

"Ah! Yes, I know. Er, I mean … Thank you! I’m Mitch Rogers. Well Mitchell actually, but … Yeah," he faltered lamely to an end and looked at Ramb—John, who was gazing back at him. "You probably won’t remember me, but I know you from back in Hope when … It happened." His head was whizzing now and John’s passive features unnerved him. Mitch would have never thought that it would be that hard talking to John.

"I do. You’re the deputy, got your leg," John responded, as if not having noticed Mitch’s incoherent
"Yeah, that was me, but no offense taken," he confirmed with an awkward laugh although the scar on his upper right thigh seemed to flare up in defiance. "And that’s why I’m here really. You see, I’ve seen everything they did to you, while you were in custody … And then I even followed them, hunting you down … I just wanted to … Apologize," Mitch explained, looking straight into John’s dark eyes, searching for any emotion that would show itself.

"You didn’t do anything."

Mitch straightened up, "But that’s exactly the point, I didn’t do anything! I– I didn’t stop them … Heck, I didn’t even say anything to them." He let his head fall down, breaking eye contact. "I’m truly sorry for that, I should’ve been more brave."

"Taking on an enemy who’s stronger than you ain’t brave, it’s foolish," John stated, then nodded like accepting Mitch’s apology anyway and turned to leave.

"I–" Mitch took a step forward, arm outstretched to keep John from walking away, but refrained from touching the other man in the last minute. John turned back towards him nonetheless, giving Mitch’s extended arm just a fleeting look. No danger. Obviously.

"I just wanted to offer you some … Help. I mean you’ve only just been set on probation and I thought getting back on your feet might be hard." He cast a careful smile towards the quiet man. "I’m fine."

"But …" Mitch gave out a defeated sigh. "Yeah, you are probably," he admitted, cursing himself inwardly for forgetting that people like John, who have lived through hell, were always capable of finding their way. Everywhere. "Can I at least buy you some dinner?" He cast a glance at the darkened sky, that had already turned a deep blue, more speckled now with small, cold stars.

John studied him for a long silent minute, exhaled breath hovering like a misty cloud between them. His gaze was intent, his mouth set. Mitch’s mouth twitched involuntarily, trying to smile, trying not to smile too obvious.

"Sure."

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Mitch knew the diner from his few small trips up to Westbridge, when he had to cooperate with the local police department. It sat on the corner of a larger cross-road and had a simple, glass paned front which was topped by a huge glowing sign, reading ‘Mike’s Diner’. Inside the floor was laid out in heavy black and white tiles and well used seats and tables were arranged haphazardly across the room. Despite the worst-for-wear look, the food was good and affordable. Being a small town deputy didn’t leave you with as much of a salary than one might think.

Mitch held the door open and ushered John in, who set course for one of the tables beside the glass front, overlooking the street and even revealing the slightly misted mountain tops, towering over the city’s roofs.

The walk up to the diner had been rather silent, Mitch trying to bite down his stream of questions and offers to help. Inside the diner the waitress had given John a more than condescending look, when spying his military parka, revealing him for what he was, a war veteran. Mitch’s heart clenched with guilt because he had brought John into this place, which seemed openly hostile towards him. John either didn’t notice the look or was used to it by now. He never made any move or showed any
emotion at all.

After their food had arrived and Mitch had taken one bite of his meat loaf, he looked up at John again. John had ordered a burger accompanied by some fries and a coke, which he sipped slowly.

"And what are your plans for your next steps, John?" Mitch inquired with an encouraging smile, getting used to spelling out the name.

John sat down his fork and turned towards the window, which by now was really only reflecting the lights of the diner, since it had gotten quite dark outside with the approaching night. He turned back to Mitch and replied, "Find a job, find a place to stay, get on with life."

Mitch nodded and gave a awkward laugh. "Yeah, that was obvious, wasn’t it?" Then he added a little bit more thoughtfully, "But it’s going to be hard, isn’t it?"

John had busied himself with his food again. "Always has been."

"But it’s just so unfair," Mitch mumbled, poking his food with his fork.

John raised his head and gave him a look.

"Ah, I mean," Mitch started to stutter. "All those soldiers were sent into Viet Nam, because the USA wanted them to go there and now those who came back are treated like … Well, they are not treated fair."

John still looked at him and Mitch fidgeted, as if he was pierced by that dark eyed stare.

"I– I talked to some other soldiers and to Trautman, while I was looking for you …" he began clarifying and then realized what he had said.

Mitch wasn’t able to tell if the conversation had taken a wrong turn, because John still remained unreadable and his whole posture hadn’t changed inside the diner at all; His back was straight, the shoulders set and although it wasn’t obvious, John surveyed his whole surroundings.

"I mean, I tried to figure out to what prison they took you to because … You see, I felt so wretched after what had happened in Hope and all, I just thought it would be a decent gesture to lend you a hand if you got out of prison early. And apologize, of course!" Mitch quaked through his explanation, despite not being asked.

"I see," was all John replied to that, before getting to his food again.

Mitch rubbed a hand across his chin towards his cheek, his nervous gesture of course, and turned to the window. Outside the street lamps had come to life and in the distance some traffic lights blinked, conducting the low, but steady flow of traffic. Over the course of his meeting with John he had felt his heart sink. For almost four years had he tried to find that man, imagined he could be of some help to at least one person he met. As a deputy in a city where nearly everybody knew everybody you tended to stick out a bit. And if you weren’t, that kind of ‘officer’ who overlooked smaller delinquencies, you weren’t much welcomed at the local bars at all.

"Something wrong with your food?"

At first Mitch didn’t realize that the low rumble had been speech at all. When he had figured that out he was so taken aback that it was directed at him, that he jerked away from the window and towards John once more. It was the first time the other man had asked him a direct question instead of giving mono-syllabic answers.
"What? Oh no, it’s fine! Lost in a thought, or something," he laughed nervously.

For the remainder of their food, Mitch talked about random things he had caught from the news and thought they might interest John, or set him better into perspective, after four years of prison. After a while the waitress got more and more frequent with her visits, making it clear, that she wanted them, or more likely John, to be gone. Mitch settled the bill and they went out on the street again.

By now the air outside was freezing and Mitch stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jacket, trying to keep warm. Around them the street lights basked the concrete walkways and roads in a warm glow.

"Thank you for the dinner," John remarked, settling the bed roll more comfortably over his shoulder.

"Oh sure thing! You are welcome. I really wish I could … Yeah, help you a little more. I mean it wouldn’t be a problem, if you’d stay at my place for some time, until you find a job and an affordable place to live …" Mitch trailed off, he had been refused already, why would John change his mind now.

The cold settled heavily on Mitch and he shivered. He couldn’t get rid of the thought, that John had next to no money with him to afford some warm place to stay for the night. Still, he had said that he was fine …

"You still live in Hope?" John asked.

"Oh no!" Mitch waved his hand. "Asked for a transfer three months after you’d been taken to prison, couldn’t stand it any longer with Teasle and the other guys. Now I live in Fairview, 20 miles from here."

"I see." Nothing more.

"Yeah, so, well … I think I’ll head to my car then, if I can’t be of any help any longer," Mitch felt miserable and somehow he wanted to throw up. He never knew that disappointment could be that devastating.

"You wouldn’t mind?" John inquired, his voice still low, gaze intent.

Mitch blinked in confusion, "What? You staying with me? No, of course not!"

"I’ll pay you back," John stated matter of fact.

"There’s really no need! You just stay as long as you need, it doesn’t bother me at all," Mitch beamed, his heart fluttering again.

Mitch was almost sure, that he saw John giving a … Smile? It wasn’t really a smile with lifted corners of the mouth, but more like an all over lightening of his otherwise dark expression.

"Thank you."

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The rusty red pick-up truck that Mitch drove followed the winding road from Westbridge to Fairview. It took them through the lower feet of the mountains, through dark pine woods and sometimes over rolling hills, plastered with already harvested fields. Now dark had completely fallen and covered the whole sky in a deep, velvety blue. The stars still glimmered cold and distant, as if they were trying to make way for the moon, which shone bright and full.
All the way towards Mitch’s car and the first half hour of their trip both men had remained silent. At first Mitch felt uncomfortable, he wished he could somehow connect more to John. But the other man was very reclusive and Mitch couldn’t blame him for that either. He must have a lot going on in his mind. So Mitch tried to settle into that given silence and found it rather comforting after a while. Nonetheless he had kept the radio turned on, although very quiet, so the voice of the anchorman buzzed in the background, joining the rumble of the old car.

Mitch’s eyes were focused on the narrow road, only occasionally illuminated by a street light, as he suddenly picked out what the anchorman said: "And now here’s Credence Clearwater Revival with ‘Who’ll stop the Rain’.

And then John Fogerty sang:

"Long as I remember the rain been comin' down,
Clouds of mystery pourin' confusion on the ground.
Good men through the ages tryin' to find the sun.
And I wonder still I wonder who'll stop the rain."

With a quick motion, Mitch turned the radio up and the song filled the cabin. A smile played on his lips as he tapped the rhythm on the steering wheel with his fingers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that John watched him, with a hard to read look on his face.

Mitch cast him a short glance and a broad smile, before looking back on the road and said, "I like the song. They’re my favorite band."

Chapter End Notes

A huge THANKS goes out to everyone who has read this far <3

Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
Who’ll stop the rain

Chapter Summary

Mitch has taken John home with him. Now he has to learn that living with the ex-soldier might be more complicated than he thought. His eagerness to help John is stunted when his well-meant attempts of help turn out wrong.

Chapter Notes

As always a huge thank you goes out to my amazing beta and even more stunning artist tattiosala (tumblr), for whom I'm basically writing this fic <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was already well past 1am when they finally drove into Fairview. The town itself was very small but had a well developed city center, some cluster of residential areas you could call a suburb and an industrial part of town, where most of the work for the townspeople came from. Mitch had a modest house on the outskirts of town, where the rent was cheap. Driving through the town, everything seemed quiet; Streetlights cast a warm glow upon parking lots and the empty streets. At some point Mitch even saw a police car which drove slowly up the street, checking for eventual irregularities, although that never really happened in Fairview.

Mitch gently turned into a small road and then pulled up a concrete driveway, where he brought the pick-up to a halt in front of a tiny, wood-paneled house.

"Here we are," Mitch announced happily while he turned the key and the pick-up went silent.

Both men got out of the car. John retrieved his sleeping-bag from the back of the pick-up and then followed Mitch up the three wooden steps to the unlit porch.

"It’s a smallish house, I admit," Mitch laughed, careful not to be to noisy at this time of night. "But I was lucky to get it. It’s quite nice not being at the center of the town … No matter how small the town."

"I can see that," John confirmed with his low voice and Mitch silently beamed to have gotten a response out of the quiet man.

Mitch stepped into a dingy hallway, the well-used wooden panels creaked underneath, and turned on the light. Behind him, John entered and closed the door. All of a sudden Mitch was aware that he had accomplished the mission he had set for himself and wasn’t even prepared. He hadn’t readied a room or a place on the couch for John, because a voice in the back of his head had always told him, it wouldn’t be necessary, because he wouldn’t succeed.

"I, uh … This way’s the bathroom, if you need. My bedroom’s the door at the end of the hallway. I … I’ll go and clear space for you in the living room, on the couch … If that’s fine?" Mitch babbled awkwardly and turned towards John. How stupid could one be? Invite people to your place before
arranging something. He felt his face redden.

John gave him a nod. "That’s just fine." And continued un-zipping his parka.

Still with the flush rising to his cheeks, Mitch said, "Right." And set off towards the living room.

The room in question was the biggest of all in the house. It connected with the kitchen through a wide opening in the wall. There used to be a normal wall with a door between the kitchen and the living room but the previous owners had the wall nearly completely removed. Now floor boards connected with the terra-cotta colored tiles of the kitchen. The lower part of the living room walls were paneled in honey colored wood in front of which stood the sparse furniture Mitch owned: A checkered sofa and armchair, combined with a low table that was facing the TV set, that was flanked by two overflowing bookshelves. But the most stunning part of the room were the huge windows from floor to ceiling, that lead to an outside veranda.

Frantically and muttering to himself Mitch rushed into the room and started picking up the TV magazines from the sofa, gathering the cushions and folding the thin blanket.

"Should’ve prepared that beforehand … Stupid," Mitch mumbled as he turned around to get a decent blanket and some covers, when he nearly ran into John.

The smaller man had come into the room as quiet as a cat, a trait that didn’t seem to fit his muscular body. Now that he had taken off his loose-fitting parka, the faded red shirt he wore beneath displayed the deadly grace that resided in his muscles. Suddenly Mitch noticed that John, like himself, had taken off his shoes. That sight seemed so utterly hilarious to Mitch that he covered his laugh in a cough, choking.

"I’m sorry … I never really prepared, because I thought … well," He trailed off and gave John a sheepish look, suppressing the urge to scratch at his nose.

"Thought, that I’d refuse?" John continued for him, his head cocked slightly to one side.

"Yeah," Mitch admitted guiltily.

"I did at first."

Mitch gave an unsure laugh, "Oh yeah, right, you did. We–ll, I’m going to get you a blanket and covers, just wait a sec." Mitch stepped around John and hastened to the hallway.

Why was he acting like that? Mitch somewhat chided himself internally. First he wanted to help John, to offer a hand and now he felt constantly flustered by the man? No, he shouldn’t be that way. John needed someone he could confide into, he needed a friend and Mitch was determined to become that one friend.

When he returned to the living room, carrying sheets and a huge blanket, John was still standing in the exact same place as before, but turned to face him.

"You could have taken a seat, you know, you can feel at ho–" Mitch stopped as John reached out and helped to carry some of the sheets.

"It’s fine," John rumbled and set his load on the armchair, where Mitch joined him.

Together and in silence they readied the sofa, which turned out just to be about the right size for John. A funny feeling spread in Mitch stomach as he bent over, tucking the sheets between the cushions to make it stay, next to John who was doing the same on the other side of the sofa.
Somehow he could feel the heat radiating off the other man and John’s gaze that was intently set on his work made Mitch clumsy.

When they had finished Mitch said, "I really hope this is alright for you."

"I’d worse," John answered and Mitch wasn’t sure if he had seen some kind of sad smile for a split second.

"Yeah, I guess … Oh, here, I brought you some sweat-pants and a t-shirt for the night. They were my dad’s so I think they could fit you." Mitch reached for the dark grey pants and a white shirt. "I mean, mine would be too … ah," He stopped, his face going red again.

"Too tight?" Again John finished his sentence and this time he even raised his eyebrows into what looked like a … friendly mocking gesture?

"Haha, yeah, I’m more of a pushover …" Realizing what he had said Mitch continued hastily, "Well anyway … I hope this is fine, do you have all you need? You can use the bathroom at anytime and feel free to get anything out of the fridge. I mean it–"

"Mitchell." John’s voice wasn’t loud or rough, but spelling out his name made Mitch’s heart stop. "Everything’s fine. Better than I’d in four years." He reached out his bare arms and, surprisingly gently, took the clothing out of Mitch’s hand.

Mitch nodded, a little bit lost for words. "Alright, yes … Tomorrow I’ll get you some more clothes to change into, when you’re out looking for a job, if you like. Oh and Mitch’s fine."

"Alright." A husky rumble, while unfolding the pants and the shirt.

Mitch rubbed the side of his nose, unsure what to do now. When he realized that John was about to change, he gave a start. "Right, good night John," He mumbled, while walking out of the room, fumbling at the hem of is shirt.

"Night, Mitch."

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A shrill beep sent Mitch rocketing straight upright. With bleary eyes and his hair sticking out wildly from his head he looked around. The bedroom was filled by a fine morning light filtering through the half drawn shutters and his alarm clock told him it was 6:00 am. His parent’s old king sized bed stood with the back to a wall in the middle of the room faced by a broad cupboard which Mitch eyed quizzically. Then he remembered. With a little effort, he pushed aside his heavy blanket, set his feet on the carpeted floor and shuddered. Although it was sunny outside, the autumn chill was already approaching, so Mitch took to wearing a sweatshirt covered with a t-shirt and flannel pj-pants that always hung awkwardly on his slim hips.

Sleep-dazed Mitch strolled down the dingy hallway into the living room. Since John had no alarm clock Mitch wanted to wake him up. Carefully he bent through the door, looking at the sofa. It was empty.

"John?" Mitch choked as he stumbled over his own feet to get into the room.

The sofa was neatly made, the sheets and blankets folded with the pillow sitting on top. Mitch whirled around and his eyes searched the whole room frantically. He started to get dizzy. John wasn’t here.
Without putting on his boots or a jacket, Mitch made for the porch, driven by a rising panic. The front door banged against the outside wall, as he pushed it open, ran over the porch and nearly fell down the small flight of stairs into the dewy grass.

"John?" Mitch shouted looking down the deserted road. Only a few of his neighbor’s cars had left their driveways and there was just one elderly lady walking her dog, who cast Mitch an offended look.

Dew soaked through the bottom hem of his pj-pants as it dawned on Mitch. John had left early in the morning, only accepting his hospitality to show good grace, but actually not needing it. Mitch choked down the lump that was starting to form in his throat. *I never really knew him so … It doesn’t matter?* He didn’t feel convinced.

"How stupid of me," He mumbled.

"What was?" Said a rough voice behind his back, Mitch whirled.

There, sitting on the rickety chair on the porch, was John Rambo. He wore yesterdays clothes and had also put on his parka and boots. *That’s why they were missing from the hallway,* it dawned on Mitch.

"John," Mitch exclaimed, starting back towards the porch, rubbing at his eyes, willing the upcoming tears to go. "Me, I was stupid. I thought you’d … gone." A feeble laugh.

"No, I just went outside. Wasn’t sure when you were bound to get up, so I waited here." He gave a small wave of his hand, indicating the porch.

"Outside?" Mitch was incredulous. "But why?"

"Didn’t want to intrude," John explained, his face serious.

"Why would you think … You’re not intruding!" Mitch slowly became aware how ridiculous he looked in his sleeping clothes, barefoot and nearly crying. "I meant what I said, you can feel at home, you don’t have to wait outside for me to get up, John."

John eyed him for a long second, then with something similar to a smile he said, "I’ll remember."

Mitch gave a relieved laugh. "Gave me quite of a shock there."

"Didn’t mean to. Let’s go inside then, you look cold." John said and got up. Mitch followed happily.

Back inside Mitch told John he would get dressed and then make them both some breakfast. Upon entering the kitchen through the living room, John had already seated himself in one of the chairs.

"So, how about some bacon and eggs for breakfast?" Mitch asked and started rummaging through cupboards and the fridge.

"Sounds fine by me. Should I help?" John wanted to know and started to get up again.

"No, no, I’m fine! But I’ve laid out some other clothes in the bedroom, if you’d like to change before we go into town."

With that John quietly vanished into Mitch’s bedroom to get dressed and Mitch busied himself with cooking. A calm feeling settled over him, as he slowly got into the routine of preparing eggs and unpacking the bacon. It was actually very nice to have a different person around to share your
mornings with, to eat together, to talk … A little bit, just being with someone felt nice. When John returned they had the bacon and eggs with some toast and freshly brewed coffee.

"Are the clothes alright?" Mitch wanted to know, as he bit into his bacon.

John wore a white t-shirt under a red and checkered flannel shirt with blue-jeans. "Yeah, they fit very well. Thank you," John mumbled, dipping back his coffee mug.

After breakfast Mitch put on the last pieces of his uniform: Boots, police jacket and hat. It felt odd wearing nearly the exact same clothes he had, when he first met John. He frowned down at himself in displeasure, his scar itching.

All of a sudden John said, "'s fine," As if he had heard Mitch’s thoughts.

"Uh, yeah, lost in thought … I guess."

With that they left the house and got into the van. Now more cars and people filled the streets and some kind of relief washed over Mitch, that John hadn’t left and that he was still able to help him. Focusing on that feeling, Mitch drove John into town, hoping he would be able to find a job and get back on his feet.

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When Mitch got off duty it was raining heavily. It had been building up for a proper rain weeks before with clouds hanging deep above the mountains, although they tended to vanish in the evening to reveal the cold stars. But not today. The sky was a muddy grey smudge, here and there specked with a mottled cloud looking like a bruise. Against the window pane of the small sheriff’s office the rain splashed like bullets, bursting on impact.

"That’s one fine weather to get back home, huh?" It was Thomas, his fellow deputy. He reclined in his well worn office chair and had his boots propped on the edge of a wooden desk, littered with forms.

"Yeah, lucky you’ve to stay put for a whole shift, right?" Mitch joked and put on his hat.

When he had come to Fairview nearly four years ago, Thomas had been the first person in the sheriff’s office he had met. He was an outgoing and joyful man around his mid-thirties, with dark brown hair and mustache and blue eyes that always held laughter. He and Mitch realized quite early on that they would get along perfectly. Where Mitch was more silent and contemplative, Thomas was all talk and gestures. It made the work seem easier.

All the more reason to feel bad about not telling Thomas that Mitch had taken in John Rambo. This might be something to actually tell your best friend.

"Just so. You just check the time when the rain stops and you’ll see, it is time when I get off duty," Thomas explained, imitating a professors tone, although he wasn’t entirely able to hide his full, white grin.

"Will do!" Mitch called smiling as he quickly flung open the door and made a dash for his car.

Inside the pick-up the rain water dripped from the rim of his hat down onto his lap and Mitch cursed silently. He only hoped John had somewhere to wait for the rain to be over. If the rain would stop, anyway. Since John had refused Mitch’s offer to pick him up after his shift, he couldn’t stop thinking about how the other man was going to get home.
Well, not dry in any case. Mitch thought wryly and turned on the ignition.

Before he finally drove back home Mitch ran some errands. At first he brought some groceries for the upcoming week because he wasn’t accustomed to feed more than one person and was running low. With that he also got some sanitary stuff like a second toothbrush, razors and shower gel. The second part on his shopping tour was a little bit more uncomfortable. Mitch was more than happy to give John all of his father’s old clothes, but there was no underwear to speak off and he could impossibly wear Mitch’s. So to be on the save side, not knowing when John would go shopping by himself, or if he would actually spend money on something like that, Mitch bought a cheap package of boxer shorts in the nearest shop.

The beating rain hadn’t stopped when Mitch turned up on his driveway and brought the car to a halt. With bags and packages under each arm he hastened over the lawn and into the house.

Normally, Mitch was used to return to a dark and silent home since he had moved out of his aunt’s and uncle’s house. But now that John had moved in with him, well only for a day so far, it still felt weird to step into an empty house. Shaking off the feeling and his worry for John, Mitch set to his usual household chores. It wasn’t that long until he heard the doorbell ring. His heartbeat started to quicken as he walked through the hallway to open the door.

Out on the porch in a puddle of rain water stood John. His dark brown hair was wet through and through, looking nearly black. It clung to his sharp features like tar, giving him an even grimmer look. The old army parka could also have been a soggy green bag that John had fished out of a river, for all the resemblance it still bore to a jacket. Still, his face was calm and he made no rush for the door as any other person might have done.

"God, John!" Mitch gasped and forgot his caution, as he reached out and grabbed the other man by the elbow. "Come in. You’ve got to come in."

John’s eyes widened for a second and Mitch felt as if he just had tugged at a mountain. John didn’t move. But then, slowly, carefully John gave way and followed Mitch inside.

Mitch closed the door and started fussing in an instant. "I’m so sorry! I really should’ve picked you up. I knew that this rain was coming up for weeks, and still I didn’t even think that far–"

"I’m really alright, Mitch," John explained while he extracted himself from the wet and clingy fabric of his parka, dripping onto the floor.

Mitch blinked, his face starting to redden. Right, he shouldn’t behave like some startled chicken. John was a grown man, who could take care of himself. But still … Mitch slowly took the dripping parka out of John’s unresisting hands. With his other hand he cautiously touched John’s bare upper arm. It was like marble to the touch, hard and cold.

"You should take a hot shower. I’ll take care of this," indicating parka and boots. "And I’ll bring you some dry clothes."

And John actually lifted a corner of his mouth and gave a nod."That’s kind of you."

"’Course," Mitch breathed and shuffled off to his bedroom. Frantically he slapped the light switch, illuminating the whole room with a warm orange light that seeped through a beige lampshade. After a hectic search the content of his cupboard yielded some more spare clothes. He really should tell John where to find his dad’s old clothing otherwise it would always look like Mitch was dressing John up. And now, he had even bought underpants. The blush on his face and neck deepened.
Get a hold on yourself, Mitch scolded himself, feeling giddy.

The door to the bathroom was only ajar and a thin sliver of bright light cut through the gloom of the hallway. Instead of clearing up the rain had intensified and now the whole sky was an impenetrable dirty blue. Outside the feeble streetlights gave off murky glow, not enough to enlighten the hallway. Heedlessly, Mitch pushed the door open with a foot, carrying the clothes bundled in front of his chest. "Right, I got you some…" Mitch stopped mid-sentence.

John stood in the middle of the dingy bathroom, his drenched shirt carefully draped over the rim of the bathtub, his hands busy with the buttons of his jeans. His whole body looked like the epitome of grace, as he lowered his hands and muscles and sinews played underneath his taut skin. It had a fine, sun-tanned color, but Mitch’s breath stopped, as he saw the cruel and twisted scars again, that criss crossed his chest. And his back, Mitch knew.

"I … John, I’m sorry," was all that he could stammer as realization struck.

"’S fine," John replied too fast. At his sides his hands clenched and unclenched, causing his biceps to flex and un-flex sending small droplets of rain water trickling down.

The blush in Mitch’s face rushed out instantly, leaving him drained and sick. He had intruded despite knowing how scarred John was and how it must pain him to be seen like that. And then he thought about his own scar and cursed himself. He just hadn’t thought and put John in the same place Teasle had in Hope. Striped naked, vulnerable, a thing to inspect.

With an incoherent murmur he placed the spare clothes on the sink, turned on his heels and shut the door. All the while cursing himself.

He had rushed into the kitchen grabbing at random objects, picking them up and discarding them again. With his thoughts in a blur he tried to put together the meal he had planned. In the end he had sliced up a pepper, set an unlikely amount of pots and pans on the stove and a single platter on the table. He was panicking.

He bent over the sink as if he was sick, his hands planted left and right on the kitchen top. Deep, forced breaths shook his body. He had to calm down now. When John returned, Mitch would apologize and explain. It would be easy. John would understand he wouldn’t go. He couldn’t go!

"–tch? Mitch?"

A warm hand grabbed Mitch by the shoulder and turned him around. Barefooted and dressed in a loose fitting sweater and pants John stood behind Mitch. The dark hair was combed back and revealed all of his angular face with a shadow of a beard grazing his jaw.

"Sit down, you don’t look well," John instructed calmly. Mitch obediently walked over towards the table and took a seat in front of the single platter.

"You alright?" John asked, taking place opposite to Mitch, the same way they had sat this morning.

"Me? If I’m alright? Yes I’m fine but look! John, I’m sorry," Mitch nearly wailed, completely taken over by guilt and shame. "I really didn’t mean to intrude on you like that. I know better than that … I know about the … the …" Again, as so many times before with John, Mitch’s sentence faltered and he looked helplessly at John.

"’Bout the scars?" John finished for him.

"Yes. Back in Hope, when they dragged you into that cell and … I wanted to be a help not an
obstacle, I’m really sorry,” Mitch whispered, his hand on the table top clenching and not trying to rush to his face.

"You shouldn’t be sorry for things you didn’t do, Mitch." John’s voice was low as always but it carried a new note. Mitch looked up. The dark brown eyes were overcast by a harsh shadow due to the kitchen light, making them difficult to read.

Mitch opened his mouth to respond but he suddenly felt rather parched so he just nodded feebly.

"So tell me," John asked, "What meal requires three pans, one pot and only one pepper?"

Automatically Mitch drew himself up, preparing for an answer but then the words died on his lips. He looked at John and for the first time in twenty-four hours he saw him smiling. It wasn’t a broad, toothy grin like Thomas’, but it wasn’t guarded either. He had made a joke and a dry one at that.

"Oh!" Mitch exclaimed, suddenly unable to hold back his laughter at his own tomfoolery in the kitchen. Hands, shaking from relief, brushed away the tears caused by this heavy laughter. "A— A very profound one." Mitch was able to choke out between his giggles, glancing at John.

"I see … Would a beer do, too?" John wanted to know and got up.

"Yes, a beer’ll do nicely," Mitch replied smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I am still really grateful for everyone who takes the time to read this fanfic ... <3

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Do you feel like letting go

Chapter Summary

After the first bumps of living together have straightened themselves out, a quiet routine settles in. But this quiet seems treacherous since John can't cast off his shadows from the past.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I can't believe that I am still writing this fanfiction! A major part of my motivation stems from tattiosalas (tumblr) great support and continuous supply of heartwarming headcanons, thank you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Slowly and without noticing the days John spent at Mitch’s place blended into a by now familiar routine. It must have been roughly two months since Mitch had picked up John after his trial. Today, the last day of the month, John was obligated to check in with the probation officer set on his case. So instead of dropping John off in the industrial part of the city, in hope to find a job there, Mitch drove him into the city center and the public authorities. He had offered to accompany him but John had said he was fine and entered the office complex by himself. Unable to do anything more Mitch drove off to his shift, feeling a little sad.

"Hey, what’s that look on your face for?" Thomas’ cheerful voice took Mitch by surprise and he jerked upright from his paperwork.

"Uh, I was just concentrating, it’s nothing Thomas," Mitch laughed awkwardly, scratching his temple with the end of his pen.

"C’mon, Mitch. I’ve known you long enough to tell the difference on your face between concentration and moody brooding," Thomas replied while grabbing for his coffee mug.

Outside everything was doused in a murky grey light with deep hanging clouds. That was why inside the police station the neon tubes had been put on, giving the sterile and sober interior a duller look, making Mitch even sadder. He evaded Thomas’ eyes and looked onto his paperwork that reflected the neon glare sharply. Maybe it was time to tell Thomas about John.

"Oh well, you see two month ago I … I invited a friend of mine to stay at my place. He has been put on probation, so he’s a little bit in a tough spot at the moment," Mitch started carefully, leaving out details he thought Thomas mustn’t know. Not yet.

"Gee, why’s that?" Thomas looked curious and that was the wonderful thing about him. Although he was a police deputy he never looked down on people who committed crimes. He had told Mitch once that sometimes people were driven too far and were put into a situation where they couldn’t act differently. For Thomas every person had a motivation to justify their actions. And that was why, when Mitch had told him, that he actually had a history of smaller crimes, that Thomas didn’t judge
"He had some falling-out with the public authorities and tempers ran high and things started to escalate … So since he is on probation he has to report back to his probations officer. That’s today," Mitch explained. Thomas nodded and took a sip of his coffee.

"I asked him if I should accompany him, you know, as moral support. But he declined and now … I guess I feel bad that he did. I worry," He admitted looking back at Thomas who studied him.

"So you feel bad because you offered help and were refused?" Thomas wanted to know, quickly casting a glance around the office to see if their chatting had been noticed. But today the office was quiet. A lot of police men were on city patrol, sheriff Hobbs sat in his own office and only Hughes was at the far end of the room, operating the radio.

"Yeah I guess so. I mean, I’m not angry at him for refusing, I just feel mad at myself for not being of any help," Mitch replied.

"Oh Mitch, that is so typically you. You shouldn’t feel that way. You’ve offered your help, he refused, you’re fine. And anyway, maybe he felt ashamed." Thomas offered.

"What?" Mitch was startled by that statement.

"Don’t you think? You’re a deputy and he’s a former delinquent. You’ve taken him in, offered him help. Maybe he feels bad that he can’t give something back and that he’s dependent on you," Thomas reasoned and gave Mitch a smile to cheer him up.

"But … But I’m his friend! And I don’t have an exactly white vest either," Mitch exclaimed.

Thomas got up and clasped Mitch warmly on the shoulder. "I know buddy, but that’s just the way it is. Just you wait when your friend is back on his own feet. He’ll come around."

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When Mitch returned home from his shift he knew that John would’t be there. In the last weeks John had always returned late, unsuccessful in finding a new job. But since Mitch had to take some night shifts too, he couldn’t always make sure to be home when John returned. So after some talking he had finally managed to convince John to take the spare key with him. Of course John had refused at first, saying that he didn’t want to intrude, like he had on the first morning Mitch thought John gone. But after Mitch had assured him several times that it was fine, John agreed.

Mitch heaved a sigh as he cast off his jacket and hung it on the wardrobe. On one hand he would love for John to find a job soon, to earn money and start a normal life after all he’s been through. But on the other hand Mitch knew, once John found a job somewhere, he would leave to get on with his own life after being dependent on Mitch for so long. Downcast after that thought Mitch plucked at his shoe laces, untying them absentmindedly. But surely they could keep in contact? When John found a job it was bound to be in Fairview so he might start renting a flat in town. That wouldn’t be too bad, would it? Although Mitch really liked living together with John and giving that up would grieve him sore.

While unbuttoning his shirt Mitch went into the bathroom. A thin red stubble had started to form on his cheeks and chin. Mitch hadn’t the appropriate hair growth to keep a beard so he took to shaving regularly.

In the bathroom he opened the hot water tap to get it warmed up. Out of the mirror cabinet he extracted the straight razor that once had been his dad’s. His uncle had shown him how to shave with
it, since Mitch’s father had died before he could. A normal shaver might be less of an effort, but Mitch loved the memories the razor held so it became a small ritual for him to shave with it.

As he reached for the shaving creme he stopped. Had there been a noise of the front door shutting? But when Mitch had stilled to listen, the house remained silent so he continued. The pot of shaving creme turned out to be empty and Mitch sighed and cut off the water tap. Hoping that there would be some spare in the pantry he opened the bathroom door, still absentmindedly carrying the open straight razor in his hand.

The instant he walked out he bumped into another person. Mitch gasped in shock and instinctively drew his arms upward to protect himself. For a split second he saw the horror struck face of John. Pale skin, eyes wide open and in them a look of utter, primeval panic. The image vanished the instant John’s fist connected with his face.

A white hot pain shot through Mitch’s face as he felt the bone of his nose crack and the skin of his brow ridge tore. He let go off the razor and it hit the ground with a hollow sound. His own muffled shout of pain mingled with John’s who drew his fist back instantly. He looked at Mitch like a haunted animal before sinking to the ground moaning.

Mitch stumbled backwards himself, knocking against the doorframe and slowly sliding down towards the floor. Carefully he fingered his nose but stopped as a sudden sting ripped through his head. His hand came away bloodied. Blinking, Mitch willed down his own confusion and rising panic, instead he fixed his look on John. John sat on the floor, his knees drawn up and his face hidden behind trembling fingers. His whole body was shaken by spasms and his voice had died down to a incoherent drivel sometimes interrupted by choking sobs.

Mitch sat transfixed before his eyes started wandering down John’s body, over the wooden floor and came to rest on the straight razor, now broken apart into handle and blade. And Mitch understood. He had seen how John had reacted to a gleaming razor back in Hope when Ward and the other policemen tried to force John into shaving. But then Mitch had also read in John’s file where all the scars on his chest and back came from. They spoke of such a cruel treatment that they had shocked Mitch so much the first time he had seen them.

Slowly Mitch got to his knees, pushed the broken razor behind him and shuffled closer to John, dripping blood all the way. He sat his hand on John’s trembling shoulder trying to calm him down. But the moment he touched him, John flinched away.

"John …" Mitch whispered. "It’s me, Mitch. It’s alright now." Again he extended his arm and got a hold of John.

He saw John tensing under his touch but he didn’t shy away again. Haltingly the shaggy head moved and John looked up, crossing his muscled arms over his chest as if to stop the trembling. The angular face was drawn and his eyes still held a wild look that darted everywhere except to Mitch.

"John, you’re alright now. I put it away," Mitch murmured in a soothing tone, edging closer to get his other hand on John’s shoulder too.

"Don’t…” John choked. "Shouldn’t’ve…” He rocked forward and backward a little bit, shaking his head.

Mitch’s chest clenched at the sight. In Hope John had gone berserk at the sight of a straight razor, even after he had been told that he would be shaved and had been shown the blade from afar. Now the encounter was purely accidental and he had no time to think and prepare, just to react.
"No, no, it’s fine. It … It was my fault. I put it away." Murmuring, Mitch kneeled in front of John, clasping both rigid shoulders. Gradually he eased his grip into a stroking motion.

John’s head was turned away from Mitch, fixing an invisible point somewhere on the floor. The muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched while he still shook all over.

"Shouldn’t’ve done that …" John mumbled, his speech even more slurred as silent tears streamed down his paling face.

Mitch heart sagged. He should have realized from the start that shaving with a straight razor had to be out of bounds, as long as John stayed with him. He drew a breath to form a proper reply when all of a sudden John mumbled on.

"I’m sorry." His voice was husky and deep and Mitch had to strain himself to hear it. "I’ve hit you, Mitch." The last word was a nearly inaudible sob and John’s head slumped down.

"No, John. No, it’s not your fault! I … I’m fine," Mitch smiled and immediately regretted that decision since his face split apart with pain.

John looked up, his dark brown eyes slightly calmer now and intently set on Mitch. Involuntary, Mitch gave him a warm smile again and grabbed John’s upper arms more fiercely. It was a wretched feeling to see John in such a shaken and troubled state. With a weak motion John tried to twist away from Mitch and opened his mouth to say something, when he doubled over all of a sudden and was sick.

John made a horrible retching sound as his stomach contracted, forcing out what little had remained of today’s breakfast. His whole body was once more taken by cramps and shivers as he braced his hands on the floor in order not to slump forward.

"Christ, John!" Mitch exclaimed.

Instinctively he dove towards John’s side, wrapped one arm around his waist and with the other hand he cupped the sweat dampened forehead. Holding John like this he could feel each and every contraction and how he strained himself to remain in his kneeling position. Mitch strengthened his grip and huffed, John was nearly too heavy for him to support and the pain in his own nose and brow stung like fire.

"John, can you hear me?" Mitch asked while he simultaneously tried to get his feet back under him.

"’dn’t’ve…" Was all John was able to press out, saliva dripping from his chin.

"Alright, it’s fine," Mitch soothed. "You’ll be fine, don’t worry, I’m here. Can you get up?" He gave the smaller, but heavier man a careful tug and both came staggering to their feet. "Yeah that’s right, partner. We’ll get you into the bedroom, you’ll be fine there," Mitch promised, falling back into his deputy-mode as panic rose in him once more.

Awkwardly supporting the shivering John, Mitch led him into the dark room towards the bed.

"Here, lie down. It’s fine." When he had tucked John away into the bed to his satisfaction, Mitch left for the kitchen in quick strides. There he filled a glass of tap water and got a wet towel.

Upon returning and switching on the light he found that John had rolled onto his side, his arms crossed across his chest once more. His dark hair was plastered to his sweat-slick face.

Mitch kneeled in front of the bed, touching John’s upper arm. "Hey, partner, how’re you?" Carefully
he dapped the wet towel over John’s brow and chin, cleaning away tears and saliva. "Can you drink something?"

John’s eyes opened sluggishly and he nodded. He bent forward and got his arm under his body to push himself into an upright position. Mitch handed him the glass and John took two, three careful sips before passing it back.

"I’ve …" John husked but Mitch stopped him.

"It’s alright, John. Just relax." Mitch leaned against the bed frame and clasped John’s hand. He wasn’t sure how long he sat in that position but slowly the throb in his nose and the stinging cut on his brow ridge forced his eyes shut and he fell asleep.

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Mitch woke to his fingers cramping after having remained in the awkward position of holding John’s hand. When he tried to wrinkle his brow he felt that the whole right side of his face was plastered in blood. The cut on his brow ridge must have emitted a constant flow of blood until it had dried up and crusted.

Moaning he pushed himself off of the bed frame and tried to adjust his eyes to the soft orange glow of the lamp, which seemed like glaring sunlight to him. His hips and legs were numb from where he had sat on the thinly carpeted floor. He turned around a little stiffly to find John fully awake. The other man was still lying on his side, his arms crossed, but his face wasn’t so haunted anymore and his eyes looked calmer by far.

"John," Mitch exclaimed and got to his knees. "How … How d’you feel?"

John eyed him for a very long minute and dread rose in Mitch that John might be angry at him for having exposed him to a straight razor so cruelly. "I’m alright," John replied, his voice rougher and deeper after his vomiting.

"That’s good to hear," Mitch smiled and extended a hand but stopped in mid-movement. He felt embarrassed as he realized that he had wanted to touch John’s face, just to make sure he was really fine. His hand dropped into his lap. "I’m really sorry, John."

"What for?" John wanted know and pushed himself upward, ignoring Mitch’s protests.

"That … With the razor. I shouldn’t’ve been running around with it like that. I knew … I know how it was," He admitted with his voice getting thicker and thicker with emotions. He felt ill and inside his head all of the information about John’s horrible experience in war were writhing about like a pit of snakes.

John was sitting normally on the bed again, his feet planted on the floor, elbows rested on the knees. He gave a huff. "Told you, you shouldn’t feel sorry for things you didn’t do."

Mitch sat on the floor facing John. In that position he even had to look up to meet his eyes, they were very serious and betrayed no hint of the passed events. He wanted to argue with John, to tell him that it was indeed Mitch’s fault and ask him if he really felt alright. He wanted to be privy to John’s problems and emotions. He wanted to relate. But any word or sentence he was about to form died on his lips and he just looked at the man who at one time took on a whole town in warfare and on other times was more vulnerable than a newborn child.

"I broke your nose."
"Wha-?" Mitch blinked in surprised. He had been completely absorbed in John’s dark eyes and his own brooding thoughts, that he didn’t realize that John was talking to him.

"You took quite a blow from me to your right face. Broke your nose," John explained again, pointing at Mitch’s bloodied face.

"Oh," Mitch replied, carefully touching his nose. "I, I don’t know. I’ve never had a broken nose … But it hurts alright." He gave a shaky laugh.

"I can set it for you," John offered and leaned forward.

Mitch wanted to refuse and tell John that he would go to the emergency ward tonight or to a doctor in the morning. But then he thought about John’s military career and that as a green beret he had tended the more severe wounds of his brothers in arms than a broken nose. Also he had been trained as a medic, Mitch had read in the nicked files. He felt himself nod.

John’s face was as impassive as the days before when he gave Mitch a nod in return. He extended his arms and placed both hands surprisingly tenderly on the each side of Mitch’s face. The palms were warm and calloused and Mitch felt himself ease into the touch, still looking at John, who looked back calmly.

"You’ll be ok," John told him.

Mitch felt one of John’s thumbs touching his dislodged nose and pain flared through his whole head, but he kept steady, assured by John’s careful hold. Then in an instant John pushed Mitch’s nose back while he simultaneously held his head in place with a firm, but gentle grip.

A gasp fled Mitch’s trembling lips as pain and realization struck. Before his eyes bright stars exploded then his vision went fuzzy and finally black. He was only kept from fainting and falling over by John who held him still.

"You’ll be ok, Mitch. It’s done," John assured him in his deep soothing voice.

And for a long moment both men sat there unmoving. Outside a light rain had begun to fall and pitter-pattered against the window in a lulling rhythm. Carefully Mitch let his eyes flutter open and focused on John. A strange feeling was shifting in Mitch’s gut when the whole extent of John’s breakdown and their current position sunk in. His face began to redden.

"I …" Mitch began but the pain in his nose got worse when he moved his lips too excessively so he stopped.

"You should put ice on that," John suggested and a very private kind of smile grazed his lips as he let go of Mitch’s face.

Mitch nodded carefully. "Beer?" he grinned?

***

John and Mitch sat in the kitchen till well past midnight, emptying one can of beer after another. At some points Mich held the chilled and dripping cans to the bridge of his nose and brow ridge to avoid any more swelling than he already had. Their conversations were few and low but the shared silence engulfed them both warmly and in the background the radio blared:

"It's so easy to do nothin’
When you're busy night and day
The next morning Mitch stood in the kitchen in front of the stove, pushing eggs and bacon around in a sizzling pan. The whole right side of his face felt swollen and throbbing and he knew he had to go to a doctor before going to work, but still he didn’t give John the fault of last night’s event. He sighed and closed his eyes and listened to the tinny sound of his kitchen radio, his hand on his thigh.

"Mornin’ " a low voice said behind him.

Startled, Mitch wheeled around, spatula still in hand and beheld John. Again the smaller man had entered the room making as little noise as a cat would. Some weeks before Mitch had told him where to find his dad’s old clothes in his bedroom cupboard. So now John wore his usual jeans but over that a white t-shirt and a deep green knitted sweater that seemed to be made for his broad shoulders.

"Morning, John," Mitch smiled, at ease again. "How d’you sleep?"

"As well as can be expected. You?" John asked.

Mitch wanted to reply but froze when John cupped his face with both his hands and slightly turned him left and right. Like yesterday John’s hands were warm, dry and here and there a little calloused. Mitch felt a tingling jolt crashing through his spine, leaving him dizzy.

"Still swollen. How’s it feel?" John wanted to know, studying Mitch’s black eye and bruised nose intently.

"Uh … It’s still hurting, but duller," Mitch was able to breath. His heart hammered in his chest and he was unable to explain why.

"You’ll see a doctor today?"

Mitch wanted to nod but realized he couldn’t because John still held him. "Yeah, before work. He might even give me a sick note."

"He’d better, I kept you from shaving to look reasonable enough for work." John stated and let go of Mitch’s face, grazing the reddish stubble on his cheeks.

It took Mitch a second again to realize that John had been joking. Although for Mitch it was rather a sad joke since it made light of John’s breakdown yesterday. "Yeah, can’t represent Fairview’s police looking like a thug myself, right?" He laughed, trying to cheer up.

They both sat down to the breakfast Mitch had prepared and it was only then that he realized that John still looked very pale and sick. He hadn’t eaten anything since yesterday’s breakfast and the few beers they had drunk in the night. And he didn’t even sleep well after what had happened, Mitch was sure.

"So, what’s your plan for the day?" Mitch asked carefully. "Should I give you a lift into the city or do you want to stay home today?"
John shrugged. "Might as well stay put, for all the good it did me to go looking for jobs."

A pang of guilt pierced Mitch’s heart as he heard all of the bitterness and demotivation in John’s voice. Usually, Mitch had learned, John didn’t betray much emotions through his voice, he always was very guarded. But right now it seemed that the last day’s events had rubbed him sore. His usually erect posture had crumbled into a slight hunch.

"Don’t say that. You just have to keep trying," Mitch assured. "It’ll all work out, I’m sure."

John rubbed a hand through his tired face, looking away. Outside a gray, muddy morning showed itself. The sky again a promise of rain.

Feeling guilt and the need to help rise in him, Mitch pressed on. "It doesn’t matter how long it’ll take you to find a job, John. You can stay here as long as you like. One way or another some job’ll present itself." He reached out a hand to clasp John’s arm but he was brought short.

"Don’t," John nearly barked, his voice pressed. "Nothing’ll present itself, Mitch. Face the truth."

Mitch sat thunderstruck and could only try not to tremble. Tears pressing behind his eyes.

"After yesterday you should’ve realized that no one would ever employ a war veteran nutcase." John’s whole body was strung taut as a bow, his hands trembling with building pressure. "In their eyes we’re only trash capable of violence. You, of all people, should know by now."

Mitch knew, he had pushed too far. Don’t push it, John had told Teasle, before the sheriff had pushed it and John had laid wreckage to a whole village. But then again, Mitch felt wronged. He had helped John to get back on his feet, he tried to be a friend he could confide in and now John told him that Mitch shouldn’t feel like that. But didn’t everyone deserve a second chance? When Mitch had been sentenced for his offenses, he had gotten a second chance too. So now Mitch was going to push it over the edge.

"I– I don’t care what you think other people see in you," Mitch stuttered heatedly. "I am your friend, John. And I see you for what you are. You’re a mistreated and sidelined person, who doesn’t get the respect he has earned. But you’re a true and honest man with a good heart. I just know something good will happen. And if it takes ages, then so be it, I’ll be there to help you." The last words were nearly yelled because it hurt Mitch to move his lips so much while talking, he just shouted over the pain.

On the other side of the table John sat like a statute, not moving, face impassive but still drawn.

Mitch breathed heavily. He was unsure if his outburst had been the right decision. The atmosphere in the room felt as murky and uninviting as the weather outside. Maybe Mitch had broken the thin sliver of trust that had formed between them.

"You’re bleeding," John said and got up reaching for a paper towel.

Mitch blinked in confusion and touched his upper lip. A small stream of blood had begun to drip from his maltreated nose. "Oh, yeah I do. Thanks," He mumbled, accepting the towel from John who stood next to him, eyeing him closely.

Mitch carefully dapped at his nose. "Look, John. I’m sorry I–"

"No, you’re right. Shouldn’t be that pessimistic. The objective’s always been to survive," John interrupted him. "Let’s get you to a doctor."
Looking at the bloodied towel and feeling the tension lift between them, Mitch managed a smile. "Yeah, you're right."

Chapter End Notes

As I've said before, every hit, kudos and comment are appreciated and THANK YOU to everyone who has read this fic!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Chapter Summary

Having navigated through John's first panic attack since the incident in Hope, Mitch is determined to make everything as safe for John as he can. But what Mitch is unaware of, is that bad memories lurk in unexpected places.

Chapter Notes

I am still so happy that I find the motivation to work on this fanfiction albeit that this is a rare pair and the Rambo fandom isn't exactly huge ... But I am more than glad to have the absolutely marvelous support of tattiosalas (tumblr) who also betas this fic <3

Warm sunshine touched Mitch’s face, washing away the first chill of autumn that clung to the leaves and grass. The whole garden was covered in a fine layer of frost that faded the instant the sun kissed it. In the tree next to the shed some leaves already showed small tinges of orange and red. Clad in his sleeping clothes, his bare feet only partly registered the chill that was creeping up the wooden veranda. Mitch smiled into his steaming mug. Out of all seasons he liked autumn and winter best.

This Saturday and Sunday was his weekend off and he intended to get some work done on the house. To wake up properly he had gone outside just after fixing a pot of coffee. It had been so early that even John was still asleep when Mitch entered the kitchen. Those moments in which the ex-soldier was off-guard were very rare and Mitch couldn’t help himself but to stop next to the sofa and take a look at the sleeping man. John’s back was closely aligned with that of the couch, probably a reflex to keep his blind-spot covered. Despite that, his face had a relaxed, albeit sad expression Mitch couldn’t put a name to. He fought the urge to touch the other man’s face and wake him up, so he stepped outside.

Now, looking at the frosty garden, Mitch’s thoughts traveled back to events two month prior. After John’s breakdown Mitch was determined not to let anything like that happen again. Now he always made sure to lock the bathroom and tried to train his hearing to pick up John’s silent movements. The first week Mitch could have sworn that he had made progress. But after a while he remembered that John was trained to move like a shadow, it was his second nature and not a thing he would unlearn in a matter of a week. The reason Mitch was able to hear him was due to John purposefully closing doors louder than he had to and treading heavier than usual.

Had he really thought that he had been able to attune himself to John? After all this time they had spent together he still felt like he was looking at a painted front which read ‘John Rambo’ and wasn’t able to look past it. Past the information that police file had given him. They never even talked about the razor incident afterwards. His heart fluttered as an image of John holding his cheek sprang up in his mind.

Mitch felt an awkward blush rising to his face and his nose giving a little sting where the break still
healed. Luckily, the cut above his brow never left a scar. Although Mitch sometimes thought he deserved it for being so inconsiderate.

"Lost in thought again?" A by now so familiar low voice rumbled behind Mitch, carrying the hint of a smile. Mitch turned slowly, as he had learned was the best way to approach John.

"Mornin’ John." Mitch smiled. "Yeah, I was just thinking about … The plans for today." The lie slid easily past his lips and he didn’t even feel bad about it. It wouldn’t do just to blurt out his boyish fantasies …

"What’re the plans?" John wanted to know, as he pushed one hand into the pockets of the worn-out pullover he wore and took a sip from a chipped mug he held in the other.

"I’ve always meant to fix a weak spot on the roof. I’m getting a wet ceiling in my bedroom when it rains too much. And since the autumn storms will get stronger soon, I gotta do it quickly," he explained as he guardedly watched how the early morning light caught itself in John’s dark hair, setting it aglow.

"You got experience with that?" John inquired further, turned around and eyed the roof with his usual casual expression, but also with close scrutiny.

"Ah," Mitch laughed awkwardly. "Well, my dad always did all the fixing on our old house and I helped him. But that was quite a long time ago. I– I just though I’d take a look and see what I could figure out." He rubbed a hand over his face and then through his already sleep-ruffled hair, making it stick out even more.

"I can do that for you." John turned around and Mitch was suddenly captivated by the naturalness of John’s presence here with him on the veranda. The other man wore the old clothes of his father like they were meant for him and Mitch couldn’t stifle the feeling that John belonged here.

"Really?" Mitch stumbled somewhat over his own words, due to his fluttering heart. "I mean, that would be great! You, you could do the roof and I could do some fixings in the living room. The loose floor boards drive me nuts." He laughed enthusiastically. Of late, Mitch found it easier to laugh freely in John’s presence, because now he wasn’t so unnerved by the silences and intent gazes the other man was prone to.

John smiled a very small smile, that sent Mitch’s mind reeling. "Sure."

***

After a wholesome breakfast and small but unwound strands of conversation, Mitch showed John around in the garden and the accompanying shed. Inside was an assortment of tools, wooden boards, tarpaulins, paint buckets and bottles that all carried a faint odor of earth, turpentine and winter chill. Mitch’s heart clenched at the smell because it took him years away and back to Hope. When he had been a small child he had always played in the shed alongside his dad who was busy with some woodwork or handcraft. Somehow he wanted to tell John about his dad and all the happy memories the motley tools and materials evoked in him but he remained silent. John won’t be interested in that, Mitch told himself and fought the urge to shower the other man with questions about his childhood.

When John had assured Mitch that he would get along on his own in the shed and on the roof, Mitch went inside. There he prepared the living room for his search of loose floor boards. While doing so his gaze fell on the couch. Today, like everyday in the past weeks, a neat staple of sheets and pillows sat on the right arm-rest, facing the ceiling to roof windows leading to the veranda. And next to the couch on the floor was his bedroll, still tightly bound up.
A smile appeared on Mitch’s face at the sight of John’s display of respect and consideration. It had only been a few times that John had come home late, because he had actually found some work. On those days he would carry a cheap envelope with his payment for the day’s work. With an intent gaze and no room for arguments he would hand the envelope to Mitch. To cover expanses. Mitch didn’t have a problem with John not being able to pay for his food and lodgings, but John thought differently about that. So while he still stayed at Mitch’s place and wasn’t able to offer any money as recompense, he would try to make as small a nuisance of himself as he could. Each day he restored the sofa to its former appearance.

Shaking his head Mitch focused his attention on his work once more. It took him quite some time to locate all of the loose boards before he could start fixing them again. The monotone work of nudging boards to see how bad they would move, removing rusty nails and putting in new ones soon aggravated Mitch, as he found his mind wandering to John more often. Mitch had felt some kind of attraction towards the other man for some time now, but he told himself that this was only his growing wish to become better friends with John. Suddenly Mitch got up and turned on the TV. Maybe some mindless blabbering in the background would keep him distracted enough.

Just as he was about to bend down to work again, the TV program caught his eye. He had chanced upon a news channel that ran a report about Viet Nam. In flickering pictures a mass of anti-war protesters marched over the screen, shouting their paroles and curses about ‘baby killers’ and ‘rapists’. Mitch cringed, thinking about the alienation all those returning soldiers must feel at that. After having risked their lives, they wanted nothing more than to return to their peaceful homeland, but instead of welcoming arms they were greeted with hatred and made outcasts. Mitch thought about John and how he had been treated by Teasle because of what he was.

Heavy gun shots and screaming jet engines ripped Mitch out of his reverie rather brutally. His head jerked up and he watched another strand of images. This time it was depicting a scene with lush green jungles, here and there ripped apart by explosions, planes flying overhead, people fleeing on the ground. Mitch felt his gut twist. After all the research he had done in order to find John, he knew perfectly well what the screams and explosions meant.

A sudden clatter from outside made Mitch whirl around as his heart plunged to his knees. The glass paned door was ajar and in it stood John. In front of him a box of nails had fallen down and burst open, spilling the content all over. John’s face was twisted into a pained mask and his arms seemed to be frozen into place by severe cramps, unable to reach up and cover his ears. Despite his broad frame, the fierce red of his flannel shirt and his heavy boots, John looked like a scared child unable to defend itself.

"John!" Mitch heard himself bark as he scrambled for the television switch, turning it off.

The muscular man seemed to shrink as he bowed his shaggy head and pressed his hands firmly over his ears. Mitch felt a clear calm settle over him, as he walked up to John and gently covered the other man’s trembling hands with his own, giving them a little squeeze. John gave a hitched sob when his body jerked as if trying to twist away from Mitch.

"Can’t … off …" John choked out while trying to move backwards.

"John," Mitch breathed and gave John a careful tug. It was as if the smaller man had no will of his own anymore. The simple pull was enough to make him stumble forward towards Mitch, who readily slung an arm around the other man’s waist.

"Can’t turn’t off …" John muttered, this time more clearly with a voice that was pitched higher than usual.
"John, it’s fine. I’m here," Mitch soothed. "You’re … here."

Despite his calm, Mitch’s heart hammered in his chest laden with guilt. Again he had exposed John to a memory of war that deeply distressed the other man. Instead of showing him something, he had made John listen to something, which seemed to vividly recall his memories of the war.

Before he could delve any deeper into his self-hatred, John winced violently in his embrace. He was going to be sick again.

"Deep breaths, John,” Mitch told him and they both stumbled towards a slightly dislodged couch. "That’s it, Johnny, deep breaths." The endearment slipped from Mitch without a second thought and he hadn’t the time to ponder over it.

John sat heavily on the sofa, his face all covered in a cold sweat and a ghastly pallor. He held his head in his hands, each elbow brazed on one knee and he retched. It was a horrible, heartbreaking sound and of no avail.

Between retching coughs John sputtered, "I can’t turn it off …" His voice pleading.

Sitting next to him Mitch fidgeted, unsure of what to do now. The calm had left him for good. "Oh, I know, Johnny. I know."

"Ev’ry night… I–" A gagging cough. "I hear ‘em… All th’time." John was getting more and more frustrated and desperate by the second. He grabbed his hair violently and the cramps turned into a rocking motion, back and forth.

Without a second thought Mitch lunged forward, throwing his arms around the shaking frame of the other man. He pulled John into a fierce embrace that crushed their heads together and left him breathless. Uncaring, Mitch buried his face in the crook of John’s neck, nuzzling the shampoo scented hair and skin underneath.

"I know, John," Mitch mumbled fervently because his mind was blank of anything else to say. "But it’s fine now. It’s fine. We’re here. We’re here."

Mitch heard himself repeating the words over and over trying to convince himself that everything was fine. What a lie that was. He knew that for John nothing was fine. Nothing would ever be fine. The war had broken something inside of him and all Mitch could do now, was holding the parts together as best as he could. But he felt them slipping already.

For the first few moments John’s whole posture remained stiff, occasionally shaken by tremors. "I can’t turn it off," was a constant flow of words that he spoke like a mantra which didn’t do any good. But after a time his frenzied mumblings died down and with that the stiffness in his body. In one graceful motion, like a wave breaking itself on a cliff, John sank against Mitch’s slighter frame for support. Hands slid from his clammy face into his lap bereft of all energy.

A deep and soothing silence entered the room after the harsh and unforgiving sounds of war had ripped it apart. The smell of wet grass washed in through the open door and the late afternoon light cast a warm glow over everything.

Slowly, the last hectic minutes spread themselves out in front of Mitch’s inner eye. A blush rose from his neck towards his face as he became aware of his current position, but he didn’t dare to move. Remaining like that, Mitch couldn’t help but breathe in the warm, earthy scent of John, mingled with the cheap shampoo he had bought. Being so close to the other man intimidated Mitch. Despite all the days John had spent with Mitch, he wouldn’t let him look past his unreadable façade of calm and
control. A façade that in John’s mind covered the ugly face of a killing machine, a person you
wouldn’t want close. But now that façade had cracked and spilling out came only a broken man, not
the fierce killer everyone saw in him. And Mitch wasn’t sure if he was strong enough to piece him
back together.

Shoving his dark thoughts and fears aside, Mitch tightened the embrace and carefully pressed his lips
to John’s neck. It wasn’t so much as a kiss as it was a contact to reassure himself of John’s presence
when he mumbled, "It’s alright now. I’m here with you."

"You shouldn’t be," John breathed, his voice ragged. Mitch wanted to protest but was too startled by
John’s sudden statement. "I’ve done terrible things, Mitch."

Still clinging to the other man, Mitch pressed his eyes shut. "I … I know but I don’t care. I like you
still. I’ll still be here."

For a while there was silence and Mitch listened to John’s by now evened out breaths. The warmth
of the other man soon became a welcome feeling and a deep longing stirred in Mitch’s heart that he
couldn’t suppress. He let out a halting sigh, cradling John closer still.

"Mitch, I cut you. I’ve killed people." Back in the war, back in Hope, the following pause seemed to
add.

Mitch’s fingers dug into John’s flesh at the memories of his injured leg. He had never been mad at
John for having attacked him back in Hope. For Mitch the scar spoke of his own cowardice not to
stand up to people doing wrong. It wasn’t John’s fault. "I’ve done some bad things, too and besides
… they can’t except to beat a dog all the time without it biting back at some point."

"I’m not a dog."

"Ah, I know! I, I mean … I didn’t–" Mitch fumbled for an explanation, afraid of having hurt the
other man.

"No Mitch. I’m saying that I’m a human. I should’ve known better," John’s voice was getting lower
still, his pronunciation more slurred.

"But you couldn’t!" Mitch nearly shouted with the surging sadness inside of him. "Not after what
they did to you! They … They …" Mitch stopped.

"Broke me?" John’s voice became flat.

"No …" Mitch whispered, giving John a gentle squeeze. "They made you believe that you were
someone who you’re not. You … You got to un-think that, learn who you really are." The words
tumbled out of Mitch’s mouth while he kept very still, afraid of letting go now and breaking the
fragile calm that had settled into the room.

For a long moment both men remained silent and the sun outside sunk even lower, giving the
treachorous impression of a peaceful afternoon.

"Mitch," John exhaled in a quiet voice and slowly disentangled himself from the embrace.

Mitch felt his heart picking up speed as John broke the contact, because now he realized how close
they had been for nearly half an hour. He carefully he pulled away and watched the man sit upright.

Before Mitch could stammer out anything awkward John had rubbed a hand through his shaggy
black hair and clasped Mitch on the shoulder. "Thanks."
Mitch opened his mouth to respond but he couldn’t. He just sat there and felt himself leaning slightly into the other man’s touch. "S- sure," He breathed out at last, trying a smile.

"Now let’s get that roof fixed."

***

Mitch lay in his bed and stared up at the ceiling. His bedroom was dark and only a thin sliver of moonlight fell through his curtained windows. Despite how much he tossed and turned, he couldn’t fall asleep. Involuntarily his thoughts kept drifting back to the events of today. Mitch sighed and bunched up his blanket for what seemed like the millionth time.

Although John had calmed down after his initial panic attack and had even repaired the roof, Mitch still wished they had talked more about what had happened. It was just like the encounter with the straight razor; John broke down, gathered himself up again and soldiered on, while Mitch was sure that deep inside he still felt wretched and hurt. But John wouldn’t talk anymore and Mitch was afraid of pushing him. The last time he had pushed John, his defenses came up and he had yelled at Mitch for trying to understand him.

Mitch rolled onto his side and grabbed the pillow. “Stupid …” He mumbled and wasn’t even sure whom he meant.

Again his mind slipped and he found himself thinking about how he had held John in his arms and how good it had felt. Mitch blushed. Somehow it was like connecting with John, not only physically but also somewhat deeper, on an emotional level. For Mitch it seemed that John was either not very good at putting his problems and needs into words or he didn’t like it. Holding him might be a different sort of communication, something that came easier to him.

But then Mitch remembered his own treacherous heart. All the time he had spent with John he had tried to tell himself that his nervous stuttering and his racing heart where just a reaction to John’s gruff and silent character. It wasn’t. Mitch had fallen in love.

Stifling a groan into his cushion, Mitch swatted at his feelings of guilt and shame but they just kept piling on top of him like layers of snow, weighting him down. He had always known that he was different from the other boys at school. It had taken him some time to understand that he was attracted to them on a level that was more than friendship. It had occurred to him only after he had dated a girl named Christina for about four months, when they had started making out he couldn’t get it up. Of course she had thought he didn’t like her enough so she dumped him that very night, drowning in his own confusion and despair.

As he became older he figured that he really was gay and that no-one could ever know about it. Not the way society acted about people like him, anyway. It was alarming enough that back in Hope Ward had called him a ‘faggot’ on several occasions. But that had only been to rile him, Mitch hoped.

He couldn’t fall in love with John. Not him! Mitch had offered him a place to take refuge from the society that nagged at his heels like a rabid dog. He couldn’t betray him like that. An army man like John would properly beat him into a pulp, if he knew what Mitch was. The scar on his thigh twinged.

No, John wouldn’t do that. Mitch wanted to believe.

A muffled shout and a thump made Mitch sit upright in his bed, all of his guilt and shame dropping off of him. Where had that come from? Mitch sat silently for some seconds and only heard his own
heartbeat and hitched breath.

Pushing his heavy blanket aside, he slipped out of the bed and silently entered the chilly corridor leading towards the living room. With quick, careful steps he crossed the hall and knocked before he nudged the door open. Everything was dark beside the same weak pool of moonlight on the floor.

"John?" Mitch breathed and squinted into the room, his eyes refusing to adjust. "Should I turn on the light?"

After a moment of silence that lasted forever, John answered, “No, it’s fine.”

"Did … Um, did anything happen? I heard a– a sound," Mitch wanted to know as he cautiously crossed the darkened space to where he could make out John’s silhouette against the tall windows.

John stood in front of the sofa, next to the table that had been pushed forward several inches. The white blankets clearly visible in the dark were rumpled and partly thrown on the ground.

"Just a … Bad dream," John mumbled, picking up the blankets.

Mitch wanted to scream, shout, yell! Do anything, to express his concern for John and make the other man see that he cared and that it was fine. Mitch had never heard John stumble on a sentence in a normal conversation. He definitely wasn’t fine.

Instead of saying anything, Mitch just acted on his former assessment of John. He bent down and grabbed John’s hand lightly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He wanted to know in a low voice and looked up into John’s face that was covered in shadow, his eyes only hard, black discs.

"Not if I can help it," John replied and Mitch instantly took a step back to give him space. This was further than they had ever come in discussing John’s feelings, now was no time to push.

In the dark, Mitch never saw John move, he suddenly just felt a gentle, featherlight touch to his hand. Calloused fingers gingerly encircled his wrist and stayed.

"Would you still … Stay?" John asked.

Mitch felt his earlier thoughts about betraying John gnawing at the back of his mind but he pushed them aside. John needed him now.

"Sure," He smiled reassuringly and tried to let it show in his tone of voice.

In silence both man readied the bed and re-arranged the table before sitting down, shoulders touching. A familiar heat radiated from John’s taut body and Mitch couldn’t keep himself back from slightly leaning into the contact. Maybe John wasn’t really good with words, maybe talking about it hurt too much, but maybe this gesture said enough.

Taken completely by surprise, Mitch felt John’s weight pushing back. Silence settled over them like a heavy blanket, cradling them in its protective confines. Only an occasional thrum of wind against the windows spoke from a world outside their shared bubble of tranquility. As Mitch had learned early on, silences shared with John were never uncomfortable, they meant something to the other man, he needed them, so Mitch was willing to accept that.

After a while and between heavy breaths John mumbled, "You can ask … If you want."
This was the first time John had ever lowered his guard and invited Mitch inside. Mitch knew he had to be careful and didn’t step too far. For John this was a great show of trust and Mitch couldn’t break it.

Choosing his words cautiously Mitch asked, "How … How often do you have things like that?"

"All the time," Came the almost impromptu answer, delivered in a flat and husky voice.

Mitch nodded and hoped John could feel his movement through their touch. He wanted to say something, but he found he couldn’t say anything without getting carried away.

"Every… Everything seems to remind me of Nam," John broke the newly building silence.

"I, I can’t imagine … It must be so … Hard," Mitch words started to fail him and he could have hit himself for this stuttering platitudes. Again there was a pause and Mitch winced as more words just toppled out of his mouth. "I mean, every time I heard or read things about the war I was terrified … I always feared that they might draft me and I had to go too. Luckily I failed the medical examinations and then I was already employed at the sheriff’s department so … I got out of that. But the thing I am trying to say is … You did it. You made it. You gave your life for your homeland and did what it asked from you. And you gave it not only your life on the front, but also you life at home. The war has followed you back and they didn’t help you … I heard how many medals you earned. Back at the trial in Westbridge. You’ve done great by your country, John, but it should’ve treated you better."

All of a sudden the darkness around them seemed more dense and stifling. Mitch was sure he had done it again. He had pushed John too far. He shouldn’t have said all that, he should have–

John had taken Mitch’s hand into his without a single word. Mitch released a deep breath and his panic slid from him like fine silk. If John could let him in only this far, that was fine. Mitch was happy to be there and wait for him.

Chapter End Notes

And I can't put my joy into words how I feel for every Kudos and even comments I got on this fic! Honestly folx, that made me so happy, thank you!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
The blues they sent to meet me

Chapter Summary

Mitch had kept it more or less a secret that John is staying with him. But after the latest panic attack Mitch can't hide his preoccupation anymore, so he confides in his best friend Thomas at work.

Chapter Notes

By now this fanfiction has taken up such a huge part of my life, I can't describe how glad I am, that people are actually reading this! But the most important thank you goes out to my amazing beta tattiosala (tumblr) who provides me with so many of their heartbreaking and heartwarming headcanons that I never run out of inspiration <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Absentmindedly Mitch tapped the rubber end of his pencil on a form in front of him. His face was turned towards the low windows which showed a lead-grey sky, diffusing the sun’s light. The whole morning his attention kept sneaking away to yesterday's events. Again John had acted completely normal when he and Mitch sat together for breakfast and so Mitch had taken care not to say anything. He understood that John would only talk about his problems when he was up to it and not when he was pushed.

And despite having had a severe panic attack, John had insisted on going into the city to look for a job. Like so many days before. Mitch felt wretched as he thought about all the rejections and disappointments John must live through again today. If only John could find some work, Mitch was sure he would feel better instantly.

"Someone died?"

Mitch bolted upright in his seat as a mug full of coffee was set on top of his empty form. In front of his dingy desk stood Thomas, his wide grin showing beneath his mustache.

"Thomas," Mitch exclaimed shakily, trying to gather his wits about him. "You really startled me there for a second."

"Actually that's rather easy today. You look kind of preoccupied. What's the matter?" His friend queried and sat on the edge of the desk, cradling a mug of coffee himself.

"Um …" Mitch stuttered and toyed with his mug, enjoying the warmth seeping through it. A quick glance around revealed a nearly empty police office, equally bleak as the sky outside. It was always very quiet in Fairview in the winter months.

"Ah, I see. Well that is shocking indeed," Thomas declared with an exaggerated matter-of-fact voice. "But really Mitch, what's wrong?"
Mitch’s stomach churned as he thought about confiding in the other man, who deserved it more than anyone else. But then he would also have to explain the whole John-situation and why he hadn’t told Thomas everything in the first place.

Thomas sat silently and gave Mitch a concerned look. Oh alright, Mitch thought, here goes nothing.

"You see, Thomas … D’you remember why I came here, four years ago?" Mitch started cautiously, worrying his chin between thumb and index finger.

"Yeah sure, you left Hope because this dim-witted sheriff of yours couldn’t stop chasing that Nam veteran, who turned out to be a highly trained green beret and recipient of the Medal of Honor. So the whole town went up in flames, that soldier was arrested and Teasle brought into a hospital." The older policeman summed up what Mitch had told him long ago, giving him a questioning look.

"Right. And I also told you how horrible and inhuman Teasle and the others treated him?" Mitch continued.

"Yeah, real sonsuvbitches, if you ask me."

"Yeah but you know, I wasn’t really a role-model either. I didn’t do anything to keep them from getting at that veteran," Mitch had to watch himself so he didn’t say 'John’ instead.

"Bullshit," Thomas interrupted. "In their pecking-order you were the lowest of the low. You were young, they were a group of older policemen ganging up on their charge, there was no way you could’ve done something. They’d’ve nailed your ass to the wall if you’d said anything." His voiced turned low at his last sentence. It wasn’t well-liked to slander other colleagues.

Mitch gave a weak smile. "I appreciate that, Thomas. But still, I’d those terrible feelings of guilt, because I just knew that if that veteran came out of prison, Hope would happen all over again. Know what I mean?"

His friend’s face had become very grave and his brow was furrowed. "Yeah, I guess … The people around here wouldn’t have changed much and there still would be people like Teasle who would harass every Nam veteran they come across … So that soldier would have been provoked again."

"Exactly! So … So I thought if I’d figured out when that soldier would come out of prison, I could … Help him get back on his feet? Offer him a place to stay, to find a way back into life," Mitch went on slowly.

"Mitch," Thomas voice wasn’t necessarily chiding, but it had querying note beneath.

"But don’t you see, Thomas? I had to," Mitch pleaded. Startled at the emotion in his voice and the volume of it, he looked around the office to see if anyone might eavesdrop.

"So you’re telling me," The other man leaned forward, his gaze intent. "That that ‘friend’ you told me about some weeks ago, is actually that war veteran? What’s his name again … Rambo something."

"John Rambo, yeah," Mitch confirmed, now finally taking a drink from his coffee, the caffein would surely only jangle his already fluttering nerves, but that couldn’t be helped now.

"But didn’t he cut you?" Thomas wanted to know with a slightly incredulous tone.

"Well, I rather deserved that for hunting him like that," Mitch replied.
Mitch met his friend’s gaze who gave him a long, measuring look. A twinge of guilt coiled around Mitch’s heart. He really should have told Thomas earlier than that.

But then Thomas clasped Mitch’s shoulder and gave him a friendly shake and a crooked grin. "You know, Mitch, sometimes I think you’re too good for you own good."

Mitch laughed. "Guilty as charged."

"So, what’s the problem with … John, then? Why’re you so all up in thought?" Thomas asked.

"Ah … He has been trying to find a job ever since he has been put on probation. Four months ago. And I’m worried about him. I think a job would do him a world of good, so he feels useful again," Mitch explained, controlling himself not to spill anymore of his private feelings about John. No matter how much Mitch trusted Thomas, or any other person, he would never come out to them.

"Finding a job can be real hard, when ‘soldier’ is written all over you, I imagine. So what’s his job then, what did he do before the military?" The older policeman shifted slightly on the desk, acting as if he was grabbing for a file. They were still at work.

Mitch, getting on to his friend’s game, handed him a completely empty file, nodding. "Uh … I, I think he actually didn’t do anything before he went to the forces. I snatched his file from Hope’s sheriff department and he enlisted for the military quite early on. You know, the green berets and the other special forces don’t take draftees. So yeah, his profession is … Soldier," He concluded sadly.

"Oh Jesus," Thomas mumbled, "Now I can really see why he can’t get back into society. Without having a real profession and all."

"Yeah. And going back to the military is out of the question. You should’ve seen him--" Mitch halted abruptly, unsure if he should tell Thomas that kind of private information about John.

"Yes?" his friend urged with raised eyebrows.

Mitch gave a defeated sight. "This weekend … Well yesterday we did some fixing on my house and I was working inside in the living room. I had turned on the TV to keep me company and then they showed some footage filmed in Viet Nam. How, how they bombed the jungle with napalm."

"Oh no."

Mitch nodded. "John saw … Heard those awful, awful explosions on the TV and went ballistic. Just broke down." Mitch’s voice faltered at the last bit and he bowed his head, too sad to look back at Thomas.

"I’m sure you did what you could," the older man gave Mitch a nudge. Mitch rewarded him with a tight smile. "So what did he fix on your house?" Thomas interjected, changing the subject to Mitch’s relief.

"John? He, uh, he fixed the roof. I had a weak spot with the rain coming in, when it rains too much. I think he has quite a hand with woodwork and crafting, you see, being an expert in guerrilla warfare," Mitch gave a feeble laugh.

"But that’s it," Thomas crowed, slipping from the desk.

"What is?"

"Woodwork, crafting!" his friend exclaimed again. "C’mon Mitch, who do you know, who owns a
And then it dawned upon Mitch and he shot straight out of his rickety swivel-chair. "Chuck!" Mitch jabbered. "Oh Thomas, you’re a genius!"

"As if I didn’t know," Thomas grinned and checked his watch. "Here, your shift is only another quarter of an hour and sheriff Hobbs isn’t in today. So why don’t you get out early and try to catch Chuck while he’s still in his workshop? I’ll fight the onslaught of people here." Thomas indicated the empty room.

"Next to a genius, you’re also a philanthrope!" Mitch sang and made for the doors.

"Don’t give me that attitude, son!" Mitch heard Thomas laugh, as the double doors shut behind him.

***

Charles Leroy, Chuck to his friends, had his workshop on the outskirts of town next to a sawmill with whom he had an agreement to buy their waste wood cheaply. That way he remained on good terms with his business neighbors and was able to buy supplies easily. He was a real business man that way.

Mitch had known Chuck for nearly as long as he could think, because he had been a friend of his father. But since Chuck had lived in Fairview all his life and Mitch’s father was born and bred in Hope, they had only met up every two months or so. After Mitch had moved to Fairview himself, he tried to stay in touch with the old man as much as possible. In the four years he had lived here, he and Chuck had become fast friends, sharing memories of Mitch’s father.

Slowing down, Mitch drove his battered pick-up onto a fenced compound with a huge metal hall on the far end, nearly blocking the view over a small pine forest out back. Scattered all over the area were trucks, staples of tree trunks, wooden planks and a lot of heavy-looking machinery Mitch couldn’t put a name to. The air was full with the fumes from the rumbling sawmill but also with the smell of freshly cut wood and crisp autumn air.

Hands trust deep into the pockets of his police jacket, Mitch stepped through the wide gate and into the hall. People clad in overalls operated huge saws, carried large pieces of wood and milled about an unfinished wooden construction that he couldn’t identify.

"Chuck’s in there?" Mitch shouted over the roar and took off his hat.

One of the guys nodded and pointed towards the back, where a metal container sat in the hall, marking Chuck’s office.

"Anybody home?" Mitch hollered as he stepped through the door.

"Jesus, Mitch!" the older man exclaimed and dropped his felt-pen with which he had been about to mark something down on the huge calendar, pinned to the already overflowing wall. "You can’t approach an old man like this."

"Well, I don’t see any old men here," Mitch joked and was pulled into a hug instantly.

"I don’t remember George teaching you to be flattering like that," Chuck huffed, only managing to hide his grin partly. "What brings you here in the middle of the day?"

The man’s face was covered in a salt and pepper beard he kept closely cropped. He was balding on top of his head so when he was at work, he wore a battered old baseball cap, that only revealed
shocking white hair to the left and right. His grey eyes were deeply set in a face full wrinkles that spoke of years of laughter and working in the outside.

"To the point as always," Mitch said and picked up the fallen marker. "I, uh, I have a favor to ask you. But I am not sure if I should."

"Ah, don’t be playing games, Mitch! Here, sit, sit." He motioned towards a frail looking metal chair, facing his cluttered desk. He poured them both a mug of strong, dark coffee from a battered thermos. Mitch accepted the coffee, but didn’t drink, he was too nervous already. "Ok, here’s the thing: A friend of mine desperately needs a job, because he fell on hard times and needs to get back on track."

Chuck grinned, showing healthy teeth, happy that Mitch cut to the chase. "What kind of fellow is he then, that he can’t get a job round here? City’s full of business and part-time jobs."

There was a moment’s silence when Mitch considered his answer, rubbing at his cheek absentmindedly. But he knew better than to lie to his dad’s friend, that man valued honesty over all. "An ex-soldier."

Chuck halted with the mug halfway to his mouth and then leaned forward. "And if you say ex-soldier you mean …"

"Nam war veteran, medal of honor," Mitch explained keeping his face straight. When Chuck didn’t reply Mitch continued. "He was that soldier who took down Hope. John Rambo. He’s been put on probation and I think he has been treated very unfair by sheriff Teasle and I’m just trying to help him. He is a good man, Chuck. I know it."

The silence between them stretched out like resin dripping from cut-up wood. Chuck’s face had become stern, but not rejecting. "So why would you know that he’s a good fella? Put a whole town to the torch."

"I know … And he regrets that too! But you should have seen how Teasle tortured him, how far he had been pushed. But since John’s on probation he went into town every single day to find a job. That’s four months now. And if he’s found a job for the day, he can’t be swayed to keep the money. He’s giving me all of it to pay back for his stay. Chuck, he need’s a job to feel useful again."

"But why work in a carpentry?" Chuck inquired, picking up his mug again.

"He doesn’t have a real profession. He’s a green beret specialized in guerrilla warfare … But this weekend he fixed my roof and that was very well done. He’s good at crafting, building … And he’s not afraid of hard work." Mitch’s brain rattled with all his nervousness and his desire to make Chuck understand why John needed this job so badly and that he would be an asset to Chuck’s workshop.

"You let him fix your roof?" Chuck asked.

"Yeah," Mitch admitted sheepishly.

"Well next time, you call me to do that for you, instead of a green-eared soldier-boy who doesn’t even know the difference between bubblegum and glue." Chuck scolded.

Mitch’s heart sank, but then, he couldn’t blame Chuck for taking a reasonable decision. "Of course, Chuck."

"You don’t have many friends, Mitch, because you’re careful whom you trust … I’ll be expecting your friend John Rambo in my workshop tomorrow at 8 a.m. sharp." Chuck grinned.
When Mitch drove off of Chuck’s yard the thick cover of clouds had slowly broken up and revealed the far off mountains. By now, they were well into Autumn and Winter was just around the corner, so the mountain tops were vastly covered in snow, giving the low buildings of the city a picturesque look.

Mitch checked his watch, as he turned a corner on a busy intersection and drove down a smaller road leading through a more industrial area. Today he had managed to talk John into picking him up after work. For nearly five months that John had already spent in Fairview, he had always refused Mitch’s offers to pick him up in the city, should Mitch’s police schedule allow it. But after yesterday’s events Mitch wouldn’t take a no for an answer and surprisingly, John had complied.

Since it was already well past 5 p.m. the streets were crowded with cars and from every yard or workshop streamed groups of workers and businessmen, eager to get home. Between all that hustle Mitch spied the familiar form of John; dark, shaggy hair, a battered green military parker and his heavy, well-worn boots. As agreed John waited at the appointed pick-up site. Trying to hide his grin, Mitch pulled up his truck alongside the walkway.

"Hullo, John," Mitch greeted the other man, who had already climbed into the truck. John replied with a nod and started digging in his pockets.

"How’s your day?" Mitch wanted to know, still trying to stop his smile spreading over his whole face.

"Was alright. I got a small job loading boxes into trucks. Some sort of insulation material," John explained in his usual rumble and thrust a battered, grey envelope at Mitch.

"Uh," Mitch started and looked at the envelope in confusion. "What’s that?"

"My pay," John answered and cocked his head slightly to one side with an ever so slightly crinkled brow, as if he was unsure that Mitch understood.

"Your … Oh, John no! That wasn’t what I meant when I asked you how your day was. I just wanted to … small-talk. You can keep your pay," Mitch still couldn’t understand that John would just give him his pay like that and that he wouldn’t accept Mitch’s hospitality. Cautiously, he pushed John’s hand and the envelope away. "It’s really fine. It’s your pay, you worked for it."

John wanted to start the old argument again, but this time Mitch was faster and cut in. "Anyways, I’ve good news for you," Mitch exclaimed unable to hide his grin anymore.

The other man’s expression didn’t change much, but by now Mitch was able to see some small differences in John’s mimic or posture that gave away how he felt. John had leaned back slightly and his eyes had taken on a guarded look, he had been caught off guard. "What’re the news?" he wanted to know and let his hand holding the envelope drop into his lap.

"I’ve just visited my dad’s old friend, Chuck. Well, Charles Leroy, actually, but no-one ever calls him that … Anyway," Mitch continued, "I’ve told him how you’ve fixed my roof and everything and that you need a job. He wants to see you tomorrow morning at 8 o’clock." Mitch beamed.

And then a long silence entered the parked pick-up. John just sat there across from Mitch and eyed the younger man. His dark eyes had become hard and not a muscle in his face moved. Mitch’s gut contracted. Had he done something wrong? Maybe he should have asked John first, before making arrangements behind his back.

***
"John, I’m sorry if I …" Mitch croaked, his throat constricting.

"Does he know about me?" John’s voice was even, but somehow Mitch wasn’t sure that this displayed John’s actual temper.

"Well, yes. I told him you’re a Viet Nam veteran and that you’re the John Rambo from Hope …" His heart was violently hammering at the back of his throat, making his voice shaky.

"And still he’ll see me?" The envelope between John’s fingers gave an ominous crackle, as his hand tightened into a fist. He turned his head and looked out of the window.

"Yes, yes of course he will!" Mitch assured John frantically. Without giving it a second thought, Mitch grabbed John’s shoulder. "Chuck is a good man. He judges people for what they do in the present, not for what they’ve done in the past. He’ll give you a fair chance and treat you like any other new employee. And leaving that aside, you’ll do great! You’re an honest and hard working person, John, you’ll proof yourself worthy." The words had just bubbled out of Mitch, driven by his frantic heart. But he couldn’t help it, seeing John in distress like that made him anxious.

"It," John began, his voice a hoarse whisper. "would be the first real job I’ve had for years." And in this simple statement was so much fear and helplessness, that Mitch literally felt sick. He tightened his grip on the other man’s shoulder.

But before he could say anything more, John had laid his own hand on top of Mitch’s, giving it a squeeze in return. In every gesture John had ever extended towards Mitch was so much consideration and gentleness, that Mitch sometimes wondered why anybody would want to make a killing-machine out of a man like this. And silently, he cursed Trautman for that.

John had turned back and looked straight at Mitch. His eyes softened and a small hint of a smile grazed his lips. "Thank you, Mitch. I appreciate that."

Seeing that smile, Mitch’s heart took flight again and he had to restrain himself not to pull John into a hug. So he just grinned from ear to ear, feeling the tension leaving the car. "You’re welcome. And don’t worry, it will be great!"

On their way back home Mitch sensed that this time, John didn’t seem to crave silence too much. So Mitch just happily talked about little anecdotes of Chuck and his father, hoping to take some of the anxiety from John, while overhead the sky turned dark and small stars began to shine.

And in the background, nearly covered by Mitch’s animated talk and the rhythmic clatter of the car, J. B. Thomas sang:

"But there's one thing I know
The blues they send to meet me
Won't defeat me, it won't be long
Till happiness Steps up to greet me"

***

It was well past midnight when Mitch finally turned off the small light on his bedside table and put away an old battered copy of Agatha Christie’s ‘Body in the Library’. Mitch could never figure out who the murderer was and today was even worse, because he couldn’t concentrate. He had read one chapter for two times now when he finally gave up and closed the book.

After he had told John about Chuck’s job offer and they had eaten a vast dinner together, an old thought had started nagging at the back of his mind again. What if John gets the job? Not that Mitch
didn’t wish with all his heart for John to get the job, but he was also afraid of it. If Chuck decided to give John a chance and things started to turn into a long-term employment John would of course move out. No normal adult man would sleep on a couch at a friend’s place for the rest of his life.

*He could sleep in my bed,* Mitch thought defiantly, his hand sliding over his right thigh, before he scolded himself. He should never think like that. John valued him as a friend and that was what Mitch would be. Still …

Mitch sighed and got out of the bed, heading for the kitchen in search of something to drink. He had always known, well feared, that John would eventually leave. But then he hadn’t dreamt of getting attached to the other man so fast. When Mitch entered the corridor he was surprised to see a dim light filtering in from the living room. Was John awake?

Before pushing the door open Mitch said, "John? You’re awake?"

"Yeah, it’s fine. Come in," came a soft reply.

Since John had moved in, Mitch tried to communicate through his behavior that the living room was John’s private space after dinner. Due to the room’s connection to the kitchen and garden, there was no other way. But still Mitch hoped that John understood it was a room he could withdraw to. So he knocked every time before opening the door.

Upon entering Mitch saw that John had turned on the brazen floor lamp next to the couch on which he sat. He wore his by now usual pajamas consisting of a tattered olive t-shirt and baggy sweat pants. John’s dark hair was messy and hung into his face like he had already been to sleep but had tossed and turned the whole time so he got up again. His usual dark tanned skin looked paler in the yellowish light of the lamp and gave him a drawn look. He really was worried.

"Have you too been reading a mystery novel where you couldn’t figure out the murderer?" Mitch joked awkwardly, seeing the stiff set of John’s shoulders. He was unsure how well John would take to direct questions about his feelings.

At his remark John actually gave Mitch a grin so that his knees went to mush. "Yeah, something like that."

Without saying anything else John moved up the couch, making space for Mitch to take a seat. Mitch accepted the silent offer and sat down, folding his hands in his lap, because he knew they were shaking. And not giving it another thought he just blurted out, "You know, tomorrow will be fine."

At Mitch’s reply John nodded, causing more hair to fall into his eyes, obscuring them. But then his shoulders sagged and he buried his face in his hands.

Mitch’s gut gave a terrible twist at the sight and he was lost for words. He could only vaguely imagine what was going on in John’s head and the man had given him only a few touch points so that Mitch was unsure how to proceed.

"After Nam, I couldn’t even keep a job as a fucking park attendant," John mumbled between his hands, the curse underlining the distress in his rough voice.

Mitch pursed his lips in helplessness, but then he said, "I can only guess how strange everyday life must be for you, after years of combat. Every noise, smell or object bearing resemblance to the war … It would terrify me to see the world through your eyes. And I … I can’t do anything," At the last sentence Mitch nearly growled in desperate anger but then controlled himself. "But I believe in you, Johnny. You’ve survived so far, it’ll only get better."
John didn’t move, his shoulders still rigid and his face hidden. For a moment Mitch just sat there and watched the solitary figure of his friend. *But no,* Mitch though, *he isn’t alone.* So he cautiously extended his arm and slung it around John’s broad shoulders, pulling him closer.

The moments went by and Mitch’s arm started to get numb, but he refused to let go. But all of a sudden, John moved.

"Back in Nam," he began, hands dropping to his lap. "The boys and I had this code: You watch my back, I watch yours. This way we survived. Back here those words meant nothing to anybody. Until I met you."

The world around Mitch tilted and the floor swayed sideways. If he hadn’t been sitting, Mitch might actually have fainted. What John had said just now meant so much more to Mitch than even he could put into words. So he just replied, giving John his most heartfelt smile, "Sure thing, partner."

Chapter End Notes

I appreciate every comment, kudos or bookmark because this shows me that there are actually people out there who enjoy Rambo as much as littledozerbaby and I do! <3

**Art**

[Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag](#)
[ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag](#)
Won't defeat me

Chapter Summary

The day has arrived that John can prove himself in Chuck's workshop to get a real job after his service in Viet Nam. Mitch tries not to get carried away by his excitement and starts another research to help John in the future.

Chapter Notes

At first I really have to say again, that nearly 50 percent of all this fanfiction is based on headcanons created by my wonderful beta tattiosala (tumblr). Without them this fic would only be half as good or even worse. I am really glad to share my enthusiasm for John with them and by that extent with you too! So I still hope you enjoy this fic as much as I enjoy writing it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Mitch had woken up today and started on making breakfast he was so excited as if it were his own first day at work. Today nothing could crush his good feelings. Everything would turn out right. Chuck and John would get along and then John would get the job and start to move on. Mitch’s heart gave a twinge.

No, don’t linger on that thought, he told himself. Things’ll be fine.

Behind him John sat at the table and nursed a cup of coffee, which he hadn’t really touched. He even spoke less than was usual and Mitch figured it was the best course to leave John to his own thoughts, he needed to figure things out for himself. So holding back the stream of praise and support that fluttered through Mitch’s head he put down a platter in front of John and announced instead a general, "Here you go."

Mitch took a seat behind an identically filled platter, although he hadn’t taken as much bacon. He was sure John needed it more. Sipping his coffee, Mitch flicked through the newspaper, trying not too hard to stare at John’s methodical face.

All of a sudden John got up, his chair rattling backwards on the reddish tiles.

Before Mitch could say or do anything John had walked over to the cheap kitchen radio next to the sink and turned up the volume. A familiar tune started to fill the room. It was 'Proud Mary' sung by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

"Your favorite band," John explained and on his face was only the finest trace of a smile.

Mitch felt a grin growing on his own lips as he realized what John had done. "Yeah, a great way to start the day."

***
The sky was a clear and shining blue when Mitch crossed the huge concrete parking lot in front of the sheriff’s office to get to work. Today there actually was quite a lot to do because the upcoming winter caused harsh evening frosts which resulted in a lot of car crashes. It seemed that every year anew people were surprised by the ice and needed to vent their bad mood at the police station to accuse the other person for the crash. So Mitch had spent the first half of his working day behind the front desk of the office, conducting the bustling people waiting there.

Mitch had filed about ten such reports before he could finally drop down in his own chair and have a quiet minute to eat something and read. As he bit into his ham and cheese sandwich he turned over a page of yet another brochure he had brought to work.

"Watcha reading?" Thomas wanted to know, busy with extracting an alarmingly huge sub out of its wrapping paper.

Mitch took his time to swallow and answer Thomas because he wasn’t sure if this was something he should discuss with him. But Mitch reminded himself, No more secrets when I’m talking to Thomas. He’s my friend.

"Um, it’s a brochure from a psychological clinic," Mitch stated, fiddling with the paper.

He saw Thomas’ face lightning up in order to crack a joke if all those people today had driven Mitch nuts, but then he instantly sobered up as he understood. "Because of John?"

"Yeah," Mitch confirmed. "I mean, he hasn’t, like, said that he wanted to see a psychiatrist or anything. But I thought it might help sometime …"

"Sure. They’ll know how tohandle people who’ve lived through vile crap like that," Thomas agreed, his brow furrowed as if he was in thought.

"And that’s the thing. I’ve checked the computer recently and there are a lot of incidents listed in which Viet Nam veterans are said to be the aggressors." Mitch elaborated his thought.

"What do you make of it?" Thomas asked, still not having touched his sub.

"Well, I’m not so sure exactly," Mitch continued. "But it somehow makes sense that if all those soldiers have been in Viet Nam and that they also have a hard time fitting back in, are getting violent, take drugs, it’s their memories that are the problem. Like John, they can’t leave the war behind."

"And you think if they’d all talk to a shrink– a psychiatrist that they’d get better?" Thomas didn’t sound skeptical, just wondering.

"I don’t know … not all, maybe. But still it could help to talk with a person who’s specialized on things like the human psyche. It’s not that I don’t want to help him, but I can only do so much. John’s never actually told me anything about how it was back there," Mitch admitted sadly and prodded his half-eaten sandwich.

Thomas looked at him for a moment and then recalled, "A friend of mine, Mike, he lost his wife a few years back and it was like he had become a whole different person. Stopped going to work, picked up a drinking habit, everything. We all talked to him, tried to cheer him up and make him see that life’s going on, yet we couldn’t. Then his sister flew in from Maine, they hadn’t seen each other in years. And she dragged him to a psychiatrist, payed all the bills. And then, after a year he was better. Stopped drinking, got back his old job and now he’s even dating a new girl. So yeah, what I’m trying to say is, when the time’s right, maybe John should give it a try."

Mitch nodded, taking hope from that. It didn’t have to be right now. The most important thing now
was that John got that job, that his life got a new sense of direction. Everything else … They could figure out later.

***

The sky was already tinged a deep blue with only a thin sliver of yellowish green behind the mountains, as Mitch stepped out of the sheriff’s department and got to his truck. He had arranged another pick-up with John today, so he wouldn’t have to walk home after he had spent the whole day working at Chuck’s.

The streets around the industrial area were already deserted and only a few street-lamps shed their orange light. Despite the quiet of the surroundings, Mitch’s heart thumped. He wasn’t sure if it was in happy anticipation or in dread, about the outcome of John’s test-working.

When Mitch pulled up the street where Chuck’s workshop was, he already spied John several yards away from the gate, waiting. Mitch had told himself not to go up to Chuck’s office. The decision to employ John was Chuck’s own and Mitch wouldn’t corrupt that by being present and putting emotional pressure upon the man. Also, this was John’s moment. Mitch might have arranged for the chance to work here, however to accomplish the feat and to win Chuck over, that was John’s job and Mitch wouldn’t take that from him.

The old pick-up rumbled to a halt and John got in, no apparent emotion showing on his face.

Nervous like at the first day of school, Mitch raised a fumbling hand to his cheek and squawked, "And, how’s it been?"

"Fine," John replied, his deep voice even.

Mitch nearly burst from anticipation, yet he wouldn’t needle John with his impatient questions. He would give John the time to tell him everything when he wanted to.

"You’re not gonna ask if I got the job?" John inquired.

"Oh god, yes! I want to know! And did you? Did you get the job?" Mitch burst out, all of his self-control gone as he turned in his seat to face John once more. And then he saw the sly grin on the other man’s face and nearly lost his religion. John was giving him the runaround! He had known all along how impatient Mitch was for the outcome that he explicitly had played for time.

"I got the job," John confirmed, still a smile on his face that made Mitch’s heart explode.

"I– That’s … I mean, wow! I’m so happy for you!" Mitch gushed and nearly forgot himself when he dove in for a hug, but then thought better of it.

Still smiling, John’s arm reached forward and slung around Mitch’s neck, gently pulling him into a hug. For a moment Mitch was so stunned that he actually didn’t know how to respond, but that moment vanished as fast as it came and he threw his arms around the other man. Mitch savored every second, carefully breathing in John’s scent mingled with the spicy tang of resin, cut wood and machine oil. His own heart sang with happiness and he wanted nothing more than to forever hold this man, but he couldn’t.

Mitch sat back from the embrace, that apparently had only lasted some seconds instead of ages. John’s eyes, which always held a hooded, disclosed expression were as warm as his tentative smile. "Thank you, Mitch."

Fumbling for words, Mitch nodded. "Of course, John. We’re partners."
Digging in his pockets, John brought out an battered grey envelope, which strangely enough looked a little bit bulging. He held it out towards Mitch. "For you."

"Oh, John no. Really, you don’t have to give me the money you earn at Chuck’s! That would really be … Weirn," Mitch protested.

A fleeting grin tugged at John’s corner of the mouth and Mitch somehow doubted that he knew that man in front of him at all.

"It ain’t money," John said vaguely and pushed the envelope in Mitch’s unresisting hand.

Skeptically glancing at John and then back at the envelope, Mitch upended it and the content slid into his hand. It was his dad’s straight razor that had broken the day he had surprised John with it.

"Wa– That’s my dad’s old razor … But it broke?" Mitch stammered. He resisted the urge to draw the blade in order not to scare John. But he could see at the pivot, that it was repaired so that the blade sat snugly inside the handle without dropping out.

"It sure did," John confirmed, looking quite relaxed.

"But, where did you find it?" Mitch wanted to know. "I … hid it."

"If I wouldn’t know a thing or two about you by now, all my training with the special forces would have been for nothing," John noted, again with a wry grin on his face.

"Ah, just spell it out straight, I’m easy to read and an un-labeled shoe-box under the washstand isn’t a good hiding place," Mitch joked, feeling elated. He let the well worn horn handle glide through his fingers, still trying to comprehend what John had done for him. "But really, thank you. I can’t say how much it means to me."

"You don’t have to."

The moment John said that, Mitch felt instantly understood. John might not talk much and he sure didn’t ask many questions but he was observant and through that gained a deep understanding of the people around him. Mitch smiled. "When did you do it?"

John looked up from his hands he had folded in his lap. "Hm? Ah, today on break. There’s a small metal works down the street. They’d a day’s job for me some months ago. Guy there owed me a favor."

Mitch nodded happily and tucked the blade back into the envelope.

"So, now that I owe you a favor, what do you say about heading into a nice bar, grab some drinks and something to eat, so we can celebrate?" Mitch suggested. But then he thought about all the people in the bar. How loud it would be, how the people there might behave. He wasn’t sure how John thought about large crowds so he added hastily, "Uh … Only if you like."

John’s face was slightly more impassive as it had been before, so Mitch was sure that John wasn’t fond of the idea.

"No it’s fine. I haven’t been in a bar for ages."

***

The bar Mitch had chosen was one of his favorites called ‘Blue Jay’s Bar’. It was really the only bar
he visited when he did so at all. On occasion he would go there after work with Thomas to have
some beers and even watch football when it was a worthwhile match. Despite Fairview’s small
population, the bars always seemed to attract quite rough or questionable people. A lot of the
workers from the industrial part of town kept to the bars in that area, which were even more run
down and dangerous. The Blue Jay’s in the town’s center was the only one where the customers
weren’t that shady or regularly drunk.

Today the patrons of the bar seemed quite cheerful. There was no yelling bordering on the brink of a
fight and no one was that drunk to spill beer everywhere. Mitch appreciated this because being
known as one of the town’s deputies it was hard to keep a low profile in a bar while a fight was
going on.

Upon entering the bar and stepping into a bubble of smoke, music and banter Mitch was
overwhelmed. The lights inside were dyed a deep yellow and were even further dimmed by the
constant cigarette smoke in the air. Over the volume of the conversation the Allman Brothers and their
song ‘Jessica’ were only barely audible. For a second all eyes turned on them, being the newcomers.
Mitch stiffened and stopped in his tracks when suddenly John got up behind him. As if John had
sensed Mitch’s thought of unease he brought up his hand and patted him on the shoulder. Relaxing,
Mitch blended into the crowd with John prowling close behind like a tiger.

Soon they were both tucking into the day’s special chili con carne and another beer. Now deep in
conversation Mitch didn’t feel watched anymore. Sometimes he tended to get a little self-conscious
with a lot of people around, fearing they might suspect somehow that he was gay. In a small town
gossip traveled fast and he couldn’t ever afford to be found out. That his former colleague Ward had
used the term ‘faggot’ to pick on Mitch had made him careful. Mitch suppressed his dark thoughts.
He had suggested to come here in order so celebrate, so he should enjoy it.

"And how did you like working with Chuck?" Mitch asked over the steady buzz of the other
conversations floating around.

"Was good. He’s a strict but honest man. I can work with that. No sugar-coating everything and then
talking behind your back."

Mitch grinned at the on-point description of Chuck. "Yeah, that is Chuck alright. You know, he’s
been in the Korean war," Mitch added in hope that John and Chuck could find a common ground.
Maybe Chuck could even tell John how he had felt after returning home.

John nodded. "Yeah we talked about it somewhat. That man’s a hero."

Mitch wanted to say ‘You’re a hero! Look at all your medals’ but he managed to refrain from doing
so. John didn’t feel like a hero for having fought and survived in Viet Nam. So instead he agreed,
"Yes, he’s as tough as nails and I hope he stays that way for a long time. Ah, your beer’s empty.
Should I fetch some more?"

With that Mitch slid from the bench and carried the two empty glasses over to the bar, avoiding
dancing and mingling people. While waiting for the refill Mitch cast a glance over the crowd towards
John in the small niche where their table was sat. John wore a bright red woolen pullover that had
seen better days and his usual jeans that were tucked into his boots. Despite drinking and eating like
the other people here John appeared to be different from them all. The way he held his back or how
his hooded gaze that always carried a look of disinterest took in the whole room, gave him away.
Leisure time, fun, chatting and jesting weren’t things that came natural to him anymore. He had
witnessed people dying in his arms, he knew how fleeting life was.

"Mister?"
Mitch whirled around. Behind the bar stood a blonde girl, sporting a ponytail and screaming make-up, who was pointing at the pints in front of her.

"Your beers?" She snapped, impatient to get back to her other customers.

"Oh yeah, sure," Mitch mumbled, handed over some crinkled dollar bills and walked back towards John.

Before Mitch could take the last two steps to their table, someone violently bumped into him, making him spill both drinks all over the floor and the offending person.

"Well," a huge, heavyset man roared, his beard quivering with the volume. "If that isn’t Deputy Fairy, spilling his beer over my nice new shirt."

Mitch’s gut twisted and his face went hot with anger. In front of him stood Derek, local part-time drug dealer known for violent bar brawls, assaulting officers and beating his wife. Mitch had often been part of the squad that had arrested Derek for those offenses that by now he bore Mitch a personal grudge.

"I didn’t spill anything, Derek," Mitch began and bent down to pick up the broken glass. "You pushed me and got beer all over your shirt by your very own yourself."

"Oh yeah? I’m not so sure, I think you’re the clumsy one here," Derek sneered and stepped on Mitch’s hand.

Mitch gagged at the pain that exploded in his hand and a sickening sensation swirled through him when his knuckles crunched and glass dug into his skin. Gladly Derek seemed to be in a good mood, because he lifted his foot again and Mitch used the chance to stagger upright as fast as he could, clutching his hand to his chest.

"Told ya, you’re one clumsy pansy," Derek jeered, rolling his muscular shoulders as if preparing for a fight.

Before Mitch could say anything, someone stepped between him and the bulky man. It was John.

"Ah and who’s this? Your faggoty friend?" Derek’s beard split apart with another filthy grin. "So now you’re biting the pillow for this guy’s protection?"

"Leave him be," John said. His voice was low as always but Mitch heard the steel that was beneath it. John was angry.

"And why should I? I can pick on that little cock-sucker or on you as much as I like. You know why? Because he’s a filthy faggot and you’re apparently one of those baby rapists straight outta Nam. No wonder you’ve been hitting up on that sorry excuse for a man," Derek had gotten close to John, who’s face was an unmoving mask.

"I said, leave him be. Don’t push it."

Panic spread through Mitch like a wildfire. If Derek went on like that, John would kill him. Or at least beat him up so hard that Derek never knew what hit him, but that couldn’t happen. If this incident made it to the police, which it surely would, John’s probation would be cancelled and he would be imprisoned again. For good.

Still not seeing the danger, Derek raised his hand and made one attempt to punch John’s shoulder. His hand never reached John. The other man was significantly shorter than Derek but it was plain to
see that he was fitter. So with next to no effort he caught Derek’s hand in mid-movement and locked it into place.

Derek opened his mouth to reply but suddenly his eyes went wide. John’s hand was slowly contracting around Derek’s, making the knuckles crack. "I said, leave him be. If not, I’ll make sure you do."

Carefully, Mitch stepped up behind John, lying his good hand on his shoulder. "It’s … It’s alright, John. We can leave." Mitch hoped he didn’t sound too desperate. He had to stop John from being pushed anymore than he already had been.

For a moment John remained in the exact same position as before, but then slowly and deliberately he released Derek and let his hand fall to his side. The larger man stepped back, his face twisted with anger and confusion, but one of his pals got a hold on him and pulled him back. "Stop it, Derek! Before he calls the cops! He’s a deputy after all …" With that they vanished in the stunned crowd.

John turned around and threw on his parka. Mitch had done the same and now cast a questioning look at the other man. John’s eyes were unreadable as he nodded and they both headed for the door. Leaving the people behind who already turned their backs on them. If there wasn’t going to be a fight, it was uninteresting.

Outside the freezing night air hit Mitch like a sledge-hammer. But it was a welcome punch, driving the stuffy and smoky air from his lungs, replacing it with a crisp chill. Exhaling, Mitch cast his glance over the parked cars. All were covered in a thin layer of frost making them sparkle despite their otherwise battered appearances.

"How’s the hand?" John inquired, stepping up beside him, the collar of his parker turned up against the cold.

Standing directly in front of Mitch with their chests nearly touching, John reached for Mitch’s hand. John’s palms were still warm from inside as he closed his fingers around Mitch’s wrist, drawing a slight wince out of the younger man.

"Not too bad," Mitch sputtered, trying to keep in another grunt of pain.

John still held onto Mitch’s hand, turning it this way then that. By running his thumb and index finger over every joint of Mitch’s finger he got his own hand quite bloody. "No bones broken or tendons ripped. If it’s swollen tomorrow, you should go to a doctor."

Mitch tried to smile through his pain and the sensation of John touching him, that made him feel disconnected from earth. "Will do. So … I still have some beers in the fridge. Should we drive home?" Mitch offered with a crooked grin and rubbed his nose with his good hand.

A small smile returned to John’s lips as he said, "Sure, why not. But you shouldn’t drive anymore."

"Ah, don’t worry. I know the officer who’s on duty!" Mitch chuckled.

***

Back at home John had insisted on bandaging Mitch’s maltreated hand in order to still any more bleeding and prevent an eventual swelling. Mitch followed John’s quick moves only sluggishly, as white gauze was wrapped around his fingers. He wasn’t a great drinker so the last beers were making their impression and his head went light. Drunk like that it was harder to fight down the urge to just touch John’s face and trace a single finger down his sharply curved face and feel the dark stubble that was forming on his chin.
"That should do it," John announced.

Mitch squinted at his hand and tried to waggle a finger, nothing happened. "Jupp, that looks good."

A small grin flashed on John’s face at Mitch’s remark. "You’re drunk."

"Yes," Mitch nodded. "But that was the whole plan of the evening and I’m not going to stop now." With that he got up from his place on the bathtub’s rim and headed for the kitchen. John followed him as silent as always.

The couch in the living room was still free of John’s blankets and sheets so both men sat down, each with a beer can in their hands. Outside a distant moon and cold stars competed with the soft glow of the floor lamp they had turned on.

"Um," Mitch started, feeling the sudden, drunken urge to say something. "Thank you for stepping in when you did."

"You bet," John replied. "Partner."

At that Mitch’s heart stopped for a second, dropped several inches and then started to pound against his chest. He turned towards the other man who wore a look that was only for Mitch. A slight smile, the dark eyes warm and just a fraction of ease showing in his posture. Mitch smiled with his face starting to get hot.

"Yeah." Mitch didn’t trust himself to say anymore so instead he toyed with the can, then put it aside.

"Can I ask you something?"

Mitch looked up again, taken aback by that formal question. "What? Yes, sure. Of course you can, John. Always."

John nodded then said, "I just wondered why you’ve kept all of your dad’s old clothes. Do you plan on taking in more veterans and homeless people?"

Mitch grinned at John’s sudden dry humor. "Ah no, I think you’re the only veteran for me," Mitch laughed, realized what he said and stumbled on. "Um, anyways … Back in Hope when, when my dad passed away, and my mother, I had to pack all of the stuff in our house. I was lucky that my mom’s sister Elizabeth and her husband George had room enough to take me in, because their daughter Sarah had moved out the other year. But of course, having a whole household themselves they couldn’t keep all of my parent’s stuff. So I just stuck with my parent’s old bed and my dad’s clothes. Figured they’d come in handy sometime."

"As they did," John confirmed.

Mitch smiled. "Yeah. And I think my dad would be grateful for that. He was a practical, but warm-hearted person."

A twinge of sorrow and nostalgia wedged itself in Mitch’s heart. He never felt that emotional when talking to Chuck about his parents. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was John’s presence.

John looked at him for a long silent minute. When he seemed to be satisfied with what he saw or maybe he just had come to a conclusion John asked, "So, how’d they die then?"

Surprisingly Mitch wasn’t uncomfortable with the question, quite the opposite. Somehow he wanted to tell John all about it. "Ah, just a car accident, really. My mom and dad came back from visiting my
aunt and uncle and a snow storm surprised them. They drove off the road and struck another car. Went down a ditch. The words tumbled freely from Mitch’s mouth and his whole body started to relax as if a knot had been untied.

All of a sudden, a warm weight settled over his shoulders and pulled him down. John had wrapped an arm around Mitch’s smaller shoulders and now tugged him closer. Mitch let it happen.

"My aunt and uncle always felt responsible for my parent’s death," Mitch talked over his fluttering heart, as he settled in next to John, breathing in his familiar scent.

"Seems to run in the family, feeling guilty for things you didn’t do," John remarked and Mitch just had to laugh.

When he talked with John it always was like the other man knew when Mitch was in need of a joke and when he was in the mood for it.

"I get that a lot," Mitch replied through his laugh. "But really, they are good people. They never tried, you know, to over-compensate their guilt with spoiling me or something like that. They raised me as their own child, even when I … veered off of the right path sometimes."

"How so?" John wanted to know.

Shame started to bloom in Mitch’s chest as he thought about telling John what he had done. But then again it was good to get it off of his chest. "Well, when my parents died I kinda lost direction. I started hanging around with some guys who weren’t exactly good influence … I stole cigarettes and alcohol from time to time. And then the police caught me while stealing, carrying marihuana in my bag."

"What’d they do to you?" John asked, his arm still around Mitch’s shoulders.

"When the police caught me with the marihuana I was sent to trial in Westbridge. And instead of prison sentence I got a community service sentence, working at the sheriff’s department. And somehow I stayed there," Mitch concluded his story. "Do you think bad about me now?" he prompted anxiously.

"Why would I? Everybody makes mistakes. If I know anything about you by now, you’ve done enough to redeem yourself," John replied with his quiet voice.

After this John was silent. But it didn’t seem because he didn’t know what to say anymore, but because he figured that silence was needed more. A fuzzy sensation of contentment ran through Mitch as he lay cradled in John’s arms and having gotten something off his chest he wasn’t aware he carried at all. Sleep tugged at the corner of his vision.

"What ‘bout your family?" Mitch mumbled, getting sleepier by the minute.

Instead of drawing back, as Mitch had secretly feared, John replied, "I ran away from home quite early. My dad used to beat my ma and she never cared much for me. Now, I’ve only got Trautman … and you."

At the mention of the colonel’s name Mitch tried to battle his tiredness. "But he … didn’t do anything for you, when you came back."

"Can’t do too much around here, there’s laws and regulations. But back in Nam, he had my back. Like you’ve got mine here."
The last words sunk into Mitch’s brain as he slowly slipped beneath the surface of sleep and a smile tugged at his lips.

Chapter End Notes

All the kudos and comments I have gotten so far mean a lot to me. Thank you!

Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
It’s gonna take patience and time

Chapter Summary

John has adjusted to his work at Chuck’s workshop end everything seems to work out fine. But Mitch is getting nervous to how things will proceed now. Will John move out or will he stay a little bit longer until Mitch has gathered up enough courage to confess his feelings. But suddenly things take a sharp turn.

Chapter Notes

I am still very indebted to my lovely beta fattiosala (tumblr) and am glad that they support me in all of this <3 And just to clear things up, I think this fic will run for quite some time, there are plenty unwritten headcanons to be uploaded here yet, so buckle up for a looong ride ;3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mitch was woken by low noises filtering into his bedroom. As the smell of fresh pancakes hit his nose, he sat upright in an instant. At first he was confused as he looked around the dimly lit room before reaching for the bedside lamp to turn it on. Then he saw his bandaged hand and yesterday's events came back in a rush. They had met Derek at the bar, John had bandaged his hand and they had spent the evening talking about their parents on the sofa and then … How had he gotten into bed?

Mitch pushed the thick blanket aside and jumped out of bed. He had fallen asleep in John’s arms and now he woke up in his bed! A hot sensation crawling over his cheeks told him that he was blushing.

Mitch could have cried out loud with embarrassment at the thought of John carrying him into bed. At least he still wore his yesterday's clothes so that was something, but he felt a little bit stupid. Mitch was sure that John had thought nothing of it and so wouldn’t really mention it. But then his thoughts were interrupted by the soft but constant smell of frying pancakes. Without thinking twice, Mitch changed into fresh clothes and walked up to the kitchen.

Upon entering the small room, Mitch beheld a fully set table and John, who stood behind the stove, tending to another pancake.

"Um, mornin’ John," Mitch offered carefully and walked up towards the other man.

"Mornin’ Mitch. How’s the hand?" John replied, his face relaxed.

"What? Oh that! It’s fine, thank you. But … You’re up early … I’d’ve made breakfast," Mitch said somewhat bewildered, rubbing his cheek. "I’m sorry that you had to now. I slept so long and—"

"No, it’s fine," John interrupted Mitch with a small smile. "I was up early and you make breakfast all the time. You fine with pancakes?"
Mitch wanted to protest and tell John that it was Mitch’s responsibility to make breakfast for them but then realization struck. John was happy. He was happy to have the job, to go out and work for a living. And Mitch wouldn’t ruin that.

With a wide grin he answered, "Sure, I haven’t had them in months."

Having settled down at the table both men busied themselves with their breakfast. The companionable silence between them was only broken by the song playing in the radio:

"It's gonna take time
A whole lot of precious time
It's gonna take patience and time,
To do it, to do it, to do it, to do it, to do it,
To do it right, child."

After a time the need to talk about last night’s events arose in Mitch. Especially Derek calling him out as a fag. Mitch’s head swam with anxiety. Yesterday he hadn’t really given it a thought but now it was nagging at the back of his mind. His heart picked up a pace.

"Um, John," He began cautiously.

The other man looked up and gave him one of his normal, hooded gazes.

"About yesterday evening … I mean, at the bar! Not at home … I mean, um, I’m sorry for falling asleep on you," Mitch stuttered through his explanation and not really saying what he intended to.

John’s corner of the mouth lifted a little. „’S fine. Told you, you were drunk."

Mitch gave an awkward laugh. "Yeah, I remember that. But what I really wanted to apologize for was that scene at the bar. You know, with Derek."

John’s face darkened somewhat as he inquired, "That guy who stood on your hand?"

"Yeah," Mitch confirmed. "You didn’t really ask and I never explained who he was, so I thought I’d clear that up." Mitch still heard Derek’s booming voice flinging those vile insults at him that he wanted to cringe.

Something changed in John’s look that Mitch couldn’t decipher and it made him feel nervous. John leaned back in his chair and his posture looked a little straighter.

"It’s not my business, Mitch," John explained, his voice low and even as always. "If you tell me, you tell me. If you don’t, then you don’t. All I need to know is that he threatened you and hurt you and I’m not going to take that."

A warm glow started in Mitch’s chest and he wanted to smile with it, but instead he went on, "I appreciate that! I uh, just wanted you to know that he is like this local crime boss. Starting bar fights, beating his wife, part-time drug dealer. I’ve arrested him quite often on those charges, that’s why he, uh … He hates me so much and hassles me every opportunity he gets."

"I see," John replied, his face still expressionless but thoughtful.

"Just so you know how to take those filthy remarks he made about you and um … me," Mitch stuttered, fear settling in his gut that he might have exposed himself to John as being gay and on the other hand for denying a part of himself.
"Don't worry, Mitch," John explained with a slight smile, seemingly to soothe Mitch, and busied himself with his pancakes once more.

A weird sense of relief flooded Mitch. Apparently John really hadn’t given Derek’s accusations much thought. But then Mitch knew he had just postponed the eventual revealing of his feelings for John, if he couldn’t bottle them up any longer.

***

By now it had been a month that John had gotten the job at Chuck’s. And as Mitch had thought, it did him a world of good. At their shared meals John talked more, his posture was more relaxed and he generally appeared more at ease with himself. For that Mitch was glad, finally it seemed like John had arrived home and that he could go on.

And going on meant leaving Mitch. The whole week Mitch had wrestled this feeling of dread that any time now John would tell him that he would be leaving soon. Getting a flat for himself, starting his own life. Of course Mitch hid his feelings from John. It was more important to him to give John the chance to create his own life, instead of trying to tie him down here with him.

"Mitch?"

Mitch was so deep in thought that being addressed all of a sudden startled him so much, that he knocked his glass of milk off the table.

In a display of deadly grace and swiftness that spoke of years of training John bent over, reached out and caught the glass the moment its bottom had left the table’s edge.

"Christ!" Mitch blurted out, as he also grappled for the glass but was too late.

John set the glass back and looked at Mitch. "What’re you worried about?"

Taken aback by this direct question, which also hit the nail on the head, Mitch fumbled for an answer. "I, um … About nothing really." Carefully he reached out for the glass but then stopped and picked up his cutlery again instead.

John’s gaze was measured as always but there was a small furrow between his eyebrows that indicated that he doubted Mitch’s statement.

Mitch worried his lower lip between two fingers. "I was just in thought, really," he admitted.

"’Bout what?"

Mitch’s breath caught and he looked away. "Just ’bout what you’ll be doing now that you’ve got a job."

John put his knife and fork on the nearly empty platter, still looking at him. "How d’you mean?"

"I– I meant, I don’t want you gone or anything! I just figured that now you’ve got the job with Chuck that you, you know, want to pursue your earlier plans of finding a place to live and such. I mean, there must be a lot of empty flats around here in Fairview, so you really like, wouldn’t leave just, you know, live someplace else. Only if you wanted to go, which I’m not saying you should and, um …" Mitch stopped as he realized what he had done. Instead of calmly telling John what he was thinking about, he had lapsed into a state of panic and just rambled on.

"You’re worried ’bout me leaving?" John inquired evenly.
"I guess," Mitch croaked somewhat. "I mean, sure you have to sleep on a shitty couch and everything … But yeah, I enjoy your company. And this house is quite big for one person, so …"

"After all you’ve been through because of me, you still want me to stay?"

"Sure! We’re friends, Johnny. You can stay as long as you like. Maybe take some time to save up some money for moving out or doing something special," Mitch offered, an unsure smile creeping to his lips.

"If you’re sure about that, I’ll accept," John said, his look intense and sincere.

A jolt of joy crashed through Mitch and he felt giddy. "I sure am!"

John gave him one of his rare smiles in return.

"So," Mitch began carefully, all of a sudden he had become curious. "What would you do with your saved money except buying furniture and moving out?"

Despite sitting very still all the time, John now seemed frozen into place. His eyes had gotten a far away look as he stared at some point behind Mitch. Afraid of having said something stupid or intrusive, Mitch began searching for an apology when John suddenly replied.

"Back in the Forces a friend of mine, Joey, he would always talk about his Chevy convertible and how he would drive it to Las Vegas. So maybe I’ll do that. Buy a Chevy, see Las Vegas," John explained.

For a moment Mitch sat there dumbstruck. This was really the first time John had told him something about his time in the army and about the people he had known there. A flood of questions rushed at Mitch and he wanted to ask them all, but he couldn’t, that would only drive John away and into painful remembering.

So to stay on the save side of conversation, Mitch agreed instead, "Ah, those Chevys really are something. I’d love to have one myself."

Across from him John seemed to have noticed what Mitch had done and a light smile appeared on his face. "That they are. Joey wouldn’t shut up about them, even when he was dying. Maybe getting a Chevy and driving it to Vegas will give his soul some peace."

At this point Mitch was overwhelmed by utter sadness and a strange kind of happiness. John had never before talked so much about his service in Viet Nam and what he had lived through there. Of course Mitch had read the file on John Rambo, but that was nothing compared to what John had actually survived and brought back with him. But maybe now Mitch had succeeded in becoming a person John could confide into, next to Colonel Trautman. And suddenly the words of the song that had played in the kitchen weeks ago came to his mind:

"It's gonna take patience and time, to do it right.
So no matter how long it might take John to talk about his experience and no matter how much or less he would tell him, Mitch would be there.

***

Today had been a quiet day at the police station. By now all people seemed accustomed to the low temperatures and drove more carefully, thus decreasing the complaints filed at the office. As Mitch sorted away some reports the sun outside was shining brightly in a clear sky that spoke of more frost. This morning, like all of the past days, Mitch had driven John over to Chuck’s where he was already completely employed. Chuck had learned of John’s silent determination towards bodily work very fast but also of his aptitude and intelligence when crafting was concerned.
Thinking of John being content at work and with the brilliant rays of sunshine warming his back, Mitch started happily on another heap of papers.

The sudden ringing of the telephone caught Mitch off guard and he jerked upright in his seat. Across the desk Thomas gave him a slightly raised eyebrow, because their phone was seldom rung directly. Shrugging his shoulders Mitch reached for the phone and answered the call.

"City of Fairview, police department. Deputy Mitch speaking," The standard phrase spilled easily from his lips as he swiveled around in his chair to look outside the window.

At first there was a crackle of static before a voice said, "Mitch, it’s me, Chuck."

A burst of panic shot through Mitch and he went rigid with premonition. "Chuck? What, what is it? Has something happened?"

"Something has happened alright," Chuck’s voice seemed to tremble. "It’s John. He has attacked some of my workers. He’s at Saint Michel’s now."

"John?" Mitch blurted out, his heart in his throat with fear. "What– How? How could that happen? Where’re you, Chuck? I’m coming to you now!" Unable to form a coherent sentence, Mitch just stammered something of meeting Chuck at the hospital, as he heard that Chuck was still there.

"What’s happened?" Thomas wanted to know and got up from his chair.

By now Mitch was trying to get into his police parka with trembling hands, not getting the zipper up properly.

"It’s John! Chuck called and told me John’s in hospital. He … He attacked some workers …"

"Oh dear," Thomas mumbled. "Mitch, don’t worry. I’m sure there is a reasonable explanation. Don’t panic." Thomas had gotten hold of one of Mitch’s arms and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

Mitch grabbed Thomas’ hand in return. "I … Thank you, Thomas." He managed with a weak grin.

"And now off you go. I’ll talk to sheriff Hobbs if he should ask where you are. Take care of John, I’m sure he needs you," Thomas instructed with a warm smile and a slight shove towards the door.

"I owe you, Thomas. I owe you big time!" Mitch yelled as he burst through the door and made for his car.

***

After having spent what seemed like an eternity to get a space in the hospital’s parking lot, Mitch was finally able to run up the long drive way to the main entrance. All the while he felt like he was being mocked by the sunny and overall lovely weather, while inside him a cold dread was rising.

It took Mitch some more time to explain to the nurse why he needed to see John immediately, trying to sound in control and making it look as if this had something to do with a police incident. He had a bad feeling about misusing his official power in that way, but there was no other way of explaining properly why he – as a deputy and not a family member – was so worried about some bedraggled wood worker.

Finally Mitch reached the designated floor and found the ward in question. Next to the door on a rickety plastic chair sat Chuck, his base cap clutched between his hands.
"Chuck!" Mitch called, nearly shouting. "Oh God, what happened? Please tell me he’s alright."

Chuck’s grey face lightened up for a second as he saw Mitch approaching. "Ah Mitch, lad, it’s you."

"I came here as fast as I could. But what happened?" Mitch insisted, not sitting down.

"I’m not so sure myself, see … I was in my office when I heard someone screaming horribly. I went outside to check and saw that one of my boys, Charley, had caught his arm in the buzz saw. People where running about, shouting, shoving, trying to help that poor fella. But anyways, somewhere between all those folks must’ve been John. I didn’t see him but all of a sudden a fight broke out and three of my boys were going for him. He knocked them all out …"

"I … I don’t know what to say, Chuck. I’m so sorry! There has to be a reason he did that! I– I’m sure it has something to do with the buzz saw incident … I mean you know John by now, he wouldn’t hit anyone on purpose!" The fluttering of Mitch’s heart drove the words out with such force, that he might as well have been yelling.

Chuck cast Mitch a sympathetic, but sad glance and patted him on the arm. "I know, lad. Maybe you can go talk to him now, the nurse said they only used a mild sedative."

Not trusting his voice and because there were tears already pushing at the back of his throat, Mitch nodded.

"I’ll be down the hall, ward 48, to see Charley," Chuck told him and walked quietly down the corridor, shoulders slumped.

With unsteady hands Mitch reached for the ward door and knocked. No reaction. Swallowing his rising panic he pushed down the handle and entered.

Behind the door was a small but well lit room with a window facing the hospital’s garden. Next to the window was the bed in which John sat, facing away from the door. The back of the bed was raised so he was in an upright position. His working clothes had been removed and instead he wore one of the hospital gowns, leaving his arms bare. From the crook of his elbow protruded a needle and a small tube leading to a drip.

At first John looked alright but then Mitch saw the bruised skin around John’s left eye and the cut above the eyebrow which had already been sewn shut. His heart sped up even more.

"Uh, John … It’s me, Mitch," he mumbled, somehow afraid of startling the other man, but no reaction came.

Mitch moved closer and drew a chair up towards the bed and sat down.

"Chuck called me at work … He told me what happened, just now. I mean … some of it. What he saw, anyway," Mitch stuttered, fiddling with his deputy hat.

Still John showed no sign of having heard anything Mitch had said. His posture was rigid and his gaze was steely and fixedly turned outside.

"I don’t want to be presumptuous, John, but I think I know how you feel right now. And everything’s fine, no one’s angry at you. Mitch soothed the other man, not sure if this was the right way. When this still got no reaction Mitch threw all caution overboard and reached out and grabbed John’s hand. "I’m here for you, Johnny."

"I’ve fucked up."
At these words Mitch flinched. John seldom swore and when he did it was never this harsh. But the thing that hurt Mitch the most was John’s tone of voice which was full of self-hatred.

"That’s not … the right way to look at it," Mitch pleaded, his grip strengthening.

"It sure is," John retorted and finally turned towards Mitch. His normally angular and tanned face was ashen and the bruises stood out in a vivid purple swelling that looked utterly wrong.

"Don’t," Mitch pressed out between pursed lips. "Just don’t tell yourself such things!"

John’s face remained impassive at Mitch’s harsh words but something in his eyes changed, softened.

"This is your first real job after the war and … and you’ve had it for a month now and everything went fine. This … This is just an incident, another step towards getting better, towards surviving back here, Johnny. You can’t expect to take everything in one stride. There will be throw-backs," Mitch explained, his voice getting more pliant again. "But you’ll get over these and will be stronger for it. And if you can’t take it on your own, well … I’m still here, partner."

At that John’s eyes widened for an instant, before he averted them and looked down into his lap.

"I’m not sure I’ll get over this throw-back. It seems like these hands are made for hurting … killing," John mumbled, his voice rough.

"John … you know that this is not true! Those hands have defended me and patched me up. And besides, we all … fuck up sometimes. I did and I got a second chance, too. So, will you tell me what happened?" Mitch wanted to know and cautiously drew back his hand to give John more space.

Suddenly John’s shoulders sagged and his rigid posture vanished and revealed a tired and beaten man. He looked outside again.

"I was carrying some boards to the buzz saw, needed them cut to size for the cupboard I’m working on. Suddenly that guy gets his arm caught in the blade. His complete upper arm just vanished in the saw and jammed it. There’s blood everywhere and the guy just screamed. Screamed his head off. Just like … Just like …" haltingly John’s voice died down and his whole frame started to shake.

"Oh, Johnny …" Mitch breathed and covered his mouth with his hand.

"It was like what happened to Joey all over again. Back in Nam he fell for a wired shoe-shine box. It exploded and ripped his lower body apart and threw it all over the place. I, ugh … I held him while he bled out, all the time babbling about how he wanted to go home, how he didn’t want to die … I was covered in his guts, I–" The last words came out as a hitched sob, as his whole body dissolved into jerking shivers, tears streaming down his face.

Instinctively Mitch got up from his chair and sat on the bed. With a hand on each of John’s trembling shoulders he pulled the other man close. John’s forehead came to rest against Mitch’s mouth, so he placed a small kiss there, like a mother would do with her child. Two tentative hands crept up Mitch’s sides and buried themselves in his police jacket.

The silence of the room was only disturbed by John’s slowly fading sobs. Mitch just sat there and held the other man, giving him as much proximity as he needed. He had told himself it would take time to help John get over his traumatic experiences. Patience and time. And Mitch had both of it.

Mitch wasn’t sure how long he and John stayed that way, but after a while John had sat up and broke the contact.
"What did Chuck say?" John wanted to know rubbing at his eyes.

"Not much really. I think he was more in shock because of Charley getting his arm cut off by the saw than by what happened to you …" Mitch trailed off, a little bit sad that he had to let go of the other man.

With eyes clearly showing the effects of the sedative, John nodded.

"But don’t worry, he’ll employ you again, once you’re back on your feet," Mitch assured with a careful smile, knowing that after this incident something needed to change.

"They said they’ll keep me here at least till tomorrow. But I’ve got to check in with the probations officer by then."

"Ah, don’t worry! I’ll ask one of the nurses later to see about a sick note and then I’ll call in at the probation office in your stead. And when you get out you really should rest some time," Mitch said firmly.

John eyed Mitch for a moment but said nothing and nodded instead.

Mitch gave John a cheering smile and stood up. "If I want to get any of these things done today, I better go now. Will you be fine here on your own or do you need anything? I’ll come around tomorrow and see if they’ll release you by then."

At that John’s strained face lightened up and he smiled his usual small and private kind of smile. "I’m fine, Mitch. And thank you for checking in with me." At the last sentence John reached out and gave Mitch’s arm a light squeeze.

"Sure thing."

Grinning and with a slightly more relieved heart Mitch left the ward and looked around the white hallway, in search of a nurse.

"Can I help you, sir?"

The sudden voice startled Mitch and with a jerk he pulled the door shut behind him. Next to him stood a small but very sturdy looking nurse in her white uniform with tied up hair and cap.

"Oh yes, indeed you can!" he replied.

"Are you here because of," the nurse stopped and consulted her papers. "John J. Rambo?"

Mitch nodded. "Yes, that’s right. I’m here to check … um, what he had to say about the incident with the buzz saw, your other patient in ward 48."

"Ah I see. Dreadful thing to happen to someone that young, loosing an arm. But Mr. Rambo actually looks more like he has been in a fight," her grey gaze settled on Mitch, inquiringly.

At her look Mitch’s heart gave a lurch. That nurse knew what she was talking about so there wasn’t really any use in keeping the truth from her. And after all he wanted her help.

"That’s more or less correct. See, he is a veteran and today the screams of the injured man and all the blood just brought him back to the war. He was so taken up by terror that he couldn’t move. And when people tried to get him out of the way, to help the other man, he lashed out. I think he lost track of where he was at the moment. If he was here or back in Viet Nam," Mitch’s throat constricted as
he repeated what John had told him before.

The professional gaze of the nurse softened at that. "Now I understand. His whole behavior here spoke of a trauma induced disorder. He was quite confused when they brought him in, babbling away about a Joey and death … Yes, there are quite a lot of him," She concluded.

"There are?" Mitch was aghast.

"Oh yes, certainly. We have quite a lot of war veterans brought in. Some are here because they were in a fight, others are just picked up lying drunken on the streets or completely filled up with drugs. They don’t realize that they are suffering from a disease, from a disorder."

For a moment Mitch stood there dumbstruck. What the nurse had said just now aligned perfectly with his idea about the veterans being tied up in minor violent incidents. "So you’re saying that they are … criminal because they went to Viet Nam?"

"Well, not necessarily criminal, but they do have problems getting on with their lives back here. And when they can’t pick up where they have left off and panic attacks start to hit them … Well, they try to drink them away or fight them off. As soldiers they have been told that all kinds of fear and panic is shell shock … Nothing to take serious because they are strong, trained men. They think their nightmares and feelings of anxiety are signs of weakness when instead they are symptoms of a very serious disorder." The nurse eyed Mitch from top to bottom and then added, "Is he your friend?"

At that Mitch’s heart dropped. Being asked that question made him feel called out and his mind started reeling. But then he looked at the nurse again. Her gaze might be practical and intent, but it showed genuine care so at last he admitted, "Yes … I’ve known him for some time now and I really want to help him get better and … You know, get on with life."

The nurse smiled. "That is a very nice thing of you to do. You see, what your friend needs now is a therapy. Heck, all of the veterans need that, but very few can afford the costs. If you want, I can give you some pointers and maybe there’ll be some therapist he could go to. At least for a few session, to start understanding what he’s suffering from."

A wide grin started to spread itself across Mitch’s face. "That would be more than helpful. I really appreciate it!" And Mitch just knew that now, everything might just work out.

Chapter End Notes

A big thank you goes out to all the steady comment-writers and everyone who reads this!

Art

Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
I know that I really can do it

Chapter Summary

Fortunately John has been released from hospital the following day to return to Mitch and his former job in Chuck's workshop. But new problems lie ahead when Mitch suggests that John should go into therapy for his panic-attacks, knowing that John can't go on like that.

Chapter Notes

I don't know if I have ever mentioned that the story is set somewhere in 1976? But don't get too fixed on that, I might be confusing some songs, inventions and happenings and their respective dates. But I try to stay close to the actual facts as far as I am able. As always I am happy to tell you, that this chapter has been beta-read and very much inspired by tattiosala (tumblr) who keeps my interest and motivation in this fandom fresh and full of new wonderful headcanons <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A shrill beep ripped through the quiet dark of Mitch’s bedroom. With a muffled groan he rolled around and swatted in the general direction of the offending clock, surprisingly hitting the off-switch. Yesterday’s events had kept Mitch awake well after midnight, so now he was rather sleep-deprived but still crawled out underneath the heavy blankets of his bed.

After having spoken at length with the nurse about suitable psychiatrists and how best to proceed, Mitch had also managed to catch Chuck while leaving the hospital. They had sat in the hospital’s garden for some time, while Mitch explained what had gotten into John when he had attacked his co-workers.

"So he never came home from war?" Chuck wanted to know after Mitch had finished.

"No, he still carries it around … But, how did you manage? How did you get home?" Mitch asked in return, his heart heavy after re-telling John’s story.

"Well, I was married before I went to war. And when I came home, my Susanne waited for me. Of course I had changed and we fought some times when I felt bad or cross for reasons I didn’t even know. But every time she reminded me of who I was, who I had been," Chuck had explained, his voice quiet with memories.

"You are a lucky man for having her, Chuck," Mitch had told him, taking hope from that story.

Then they had talked about John’s future in Chuck’s workshop. Chuck had told him that he would be more than happy to re-employ John, but that he also needed some time to work things through with his employees. They didn’t know who John was, what he had been through. If it became known that he was a veteran, Chuck would have to see how feelings were among them. If they wouldn’t accept that, chances where very high that they would make John’s work there a living hell.
Mitch had driven over to the public authorities with mixed feelings after he had said his good-byes to Chuck, who had given him a heartfelt hug. Working through the bureaucracy of the official authorities soon aggravated Mitch so much, that he felt like punching the next person who looked at him the wrong way. Mitch only seldom became this cross, but after having witnessed the utter indifference of the probation officer for John’s fate, rage started to boil inside him. He had explained at long length what had happened to John, had handed in the sick note and even told the officer about the nurse’s recommendation of sending John to a therapist, but no human emotion could be extracted out of the man in front of him. The officer only told him that John was excused this time for not reporting back at the office, but was required again to do so the next month. What he did in the time between those reports, he very much didn’t care. After all, Mister Rambo was a soldier, he would fight through it eventually.

Fuming and cursing the whole government for their ignorant behavior Mitch drove home, completely oblivious to the deep pink glow of the setting sun. At home he then phoned the number of the recommended therapist. After the third ring a friendly and helpful secretary answered Mitch’s call. She explained to him how Dr. Diane Philipps worked, what the general fares were and when the doctor had time to take in another patient. Mitch knew that he needed some motivation to tell John about his plans so he just booked the next available appointment for John with Dr. Philipps the following week.

Having done that, guilt settled heavily on Mitch and he dropped into the low armchair, a hand on his right thigh. He didn’t know why, but he felt bad for making that appointment for John without his consent. Of course this was the right action from a medical point of view but from a friendship point of view it seemed like betrayal. But he knew, now that he had that appointment, he would actually have to talk to John, there was no delaying it any further. Mitch would help John, even if it meant loosing him as a friend.

When Mitch had managed to disentangle himself from the tripping emotions of guilt, he started working through his accounts. He knew that John’s first pay from Chuck would only get them so far so he started calculating on how much money he could afford to set aside for John’s therapy. As a deputy he wasn’t really that well off but after his parents had died his aunt and uncle had sold their house and put aside the money for Mitch when he was of age. Up until now, Mitch had only used part of the money to get him through the first years of living alone in Hope and to buy this house when he had moved to Fairview four years ago. He still had some left and was more than happy to spend it on John’s health.

This had taken up Mitch’s whole evening and when his eyes had started to unfocus all on their own and even coffee didn’t help anymore he had stumbled into bed.

Now with a red stubble grazing his pale cheeks and chin Mitch blundered into the bathroom, brushed his teeth and splashed some water into his face to wake up. After having dressed more or less carefully in threadbare jeans and a huge woolen pullover he made himself some breakfast.

The hospital always released the first batch of patients in the morning after the ward round which, depending on the station, already ended at nine ‘o clock. Mitch really hoped that they would release John today. Thinking about the other man having to spend another day at the hospital didn’t sit well with him. To make sure he didn’t get caught in the usual traffic jam, Mitch had gotten up even earlier.

Dread nestled itself in Mitch’s stomach as he pulled up on the hospital’s parking lot and walked towards the main entrance. Today he would have to tell John about the appointment. Well not directly, maybe when they were at home … eventually.
When Mitch entered the hospital’s foyer he already spied John sitting in the waiting area, holding some hospital forms. His heart rose with relief. John was fully clad in his usual clothes consisting of a thick pullover, jeans, his military boots and parka. Seeing him dressed like that made Mitch think back to yesterday, when John was only wearing the thin, startling white hospital gown, that tended to leave the back bare. When he had held him close, Mitch had seen the enticing curves that made up John's shoulders and back. But there had also been the scars that weighed Mitch's heart down like lead.

"Morning John. How d'you feel? Did they already release you?" Mitch asked with a hesitant smile as he stepped up to the other man.

John still looked somewhat maltreated, the swelling had receded but he had a nasty purple bruise on his left face and there were slight shadows under his eyes. Mitch had to suppress the urge to embrace John like he had done yesterday.

"I’m fine. They said there was no use in keeping me here another day. No chances of a concussion anymore," John replied with his usual low voice.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mitch said with genuine affection. "So are you ready to go home?"

"You bet."

***

The drive home was silent and this time Mitch couldn’t tell if it was a good silence or not. It usually was a good silence with John but since he was so anxious about telling the other man about the appointment, the silence appeared ominous.

When they had arrived back at Mitch’s house, his heart was practically jumping out of his mouth with fear.

"Um, would you like a coffee? Or did you have some at the hospital?" Mitch inquired while he hung up his fur-lined jeans jacket and kicked off his shoes.

"Coffee’d be nice. The stuff back there was horrible," John said, a thin note of humor showing in his response.

Mitch actually laughed at that. "Yeah, they really don’t want to spoil their patients. I’ll go and make some."

As Mitch set about preparing the coffee, he heard John cautiously entering the kitchen, too, and taking a seat at the table. Willing down his racing pulse Mitch focussed on his work. Having John here with him was so natural and right to Mitch that only now he became aware that this was only a fragile state of things. If John would go on like he had before, just accepting his burden of panic attacks and nightmares it would wear him out. John might be strong but this was something no-one could live with forever. If he wouldn’t let himself be treated he might some day end up like all the other veterans, drunken, drugged and then imprisoned or dead. John had already been at the verge of complete self-destruction while fighting Teasle. There was no telling how much more he could take.

Setting two steaming mugs on the table, Mitch took his accustomed seat across from John. To steel his nerves he took one shaky sip of the burning hot liquid.

John cradled the mug between his hands and then looked at Mitch with such an intent gaze that he could almost feel it.
"Something’s on your mind," John stated matter of fact, still regarding Mitch.

"I, uh," Mitch’s mind spun with all possible defenses and explanations, he couldn’t seem to form one single coherent thought. "Why’d you say that? I’m just a little … caught up in a thought."

John took a drink out of his mug, his face his usual impassive mask. "It’s fine. You don’t have to tell me." He didn’t sound offended or mad, just understanding. And for that Mitch felt bad. Of course John would know if there was something on Mitch’s mind, that man noticed everything. It was what had kept him alive.

"Well yeah, there’s something I wanted to … tell you, really," Mitch admitted slowly, meeting John’s gaze again and holding it. Everything he did now was for John’s own good.

"Anytime," John said and his response meant so much to Mitch that he got even sicker. John just told him that he could confide in him. Months before he had said that John and Mitch were partners, that Mitch had his back. And now here Mitch was, arranging things behind John’s back, betraying him.

"When I was at the hospital I talked to a very competent nurse after I left your room. She told me about other veterans they had as patients and how they handled their experiences of the war," Mitch voice faltered and slipped so he stopped.

John still looked at him and made no move to interrupt him.

"They all really haven’t come home from the war, you see. They drink, they do drugs to suppress the panic attacks and the recurring nightmares while trying to fit in. John, they … you got a trauma. You’re suffering from a post traumatic stress disorder," Mitch’s stomach turned as he spelled out those words. It was like insulting John to his face, but it had to be done.

Across the table John’s calm façade cracked somewhat, he furrowed his brow as if trying to figure out what Mitch was saying.

"What, what I’m trying to tell you is that you need a therapy, to help you get better," Mitch explained but to his ears he sounded more pleading than anything else.

John’s upper lip twitched. "It took you five months to figure out what the rest of society has already understood, that I’m a nutcase?"

A pang ran through Mitch’s heart at those words. "That’s not what I meant!" he burst out. "I’m trying to tell you the exact same opposite. The rest of society might think you’re a nutjob, just some soldier boy who’s licked blood in the war and now can’t stop beating up other people and enjoying a drinking habit. What they don’t see is that all those horrible things that have happened to you followed you back here. That they make it impossible for you to fit back in. In the military they drilled you to view your panic and fear as inferior character traits, that you shouldn’t act upon. But Johnny, those panic attacks are a results of what you’ve lived through. To get better … you might need to confront them once more … with help."

In a sudden rush John had stood up, the chair making a horribly squeaking noise as it was shoved back over the tiles. His broad chest rose and fell with heavy breaths and his face looked haunted. "If I’ve finally become a nuisance for you, Mitch, just spell it out and I’ll leave. You’ve done enough for me already."

Spurned on by that Mitch sprang up, too. Standing like this, he realized that he actually was taller than John. The other man always seemed bigger due to his muscular frame and brooding air. Of course Mitch still wouldn’t stand a chance against John, but he realized that sometimes he made
himself smaller than he was. Not only in a physical way.

"Don’t say that, John," Mitch pleaded, his sudden anger slowly dissolving as he looked into the other man’s distraught eyes. "Some time ago you told me that back here no one understood your code you had back in Viet Nam. I watch your back, you watch mine. That is what I’m doing right now, Johnny, I’m watching your back. And this consists out of getting you to a therapist. I … I wish I could help you all by myself, to make it all go away … But if even you can’t fight it on your own, how much good will I be? We need help and there’s no shame in it."

Having said all that, Mitch felt empty. His heart had stopped its frantic beating and was now working in a normal rhythm. The twist in his stomach had gone and now he stood across from John, waiting for the other man to make his move.

Suddenly and for the first time John’s whole face slipped. It wasn’t like before when only some small emotion had filtered through a crack in his façade. No, this time his entire expression fell and revealed a completely different face, that of a young, vulnerable man.

John bowed his head and clenched his hands while his shoulders trembled.

"I, Johnny," Mitch began hesitantly but stopped.

"Mitch … I don’t know what to say," John mumbled his face still adverted.

Softly Mitch placed a hand on John’s shoulder and smiled tentatively. "That’s fine, neither do I. But I’ve not been telling you these things to make you go away. I said them, because I want you to stay."

At that John’s trembling lessened and Mitch became aware of what he had said. After Derek had called him out as a fag it was very hard to tell what John actually thought of Mitch and homosexuals in general. Of course Mitch had denied Derek's accusations, but now every move made towards John appeared to be one step too close, one touch too gentle as to be casual friendship. "I, I meant so that you can start over from here. I’ve got all of it worked out! Well, half of it … I spent all evening yesterday to calculate how much a therapy will cost and--"

John looked up, his face revealing so much raw emotion, that Mitch wondered how he kept them locked up so tightly all the time.

"That why you look like that?" He asked, nodding at Mitch’s patchy stubble, with a weak grin.

At that comment Mitch went red and pawed a hand through his unshaven face. "Uh, yeah … Forgot to shave," he laughed, happy that the tension between them had risen.

Still grinning, John shook his head and brushed a hand through his hair. Watching him do that, Mitch noticed that something was off about John’s hair. At first he couldn’t place it but then he realized it was the cut. There was a slight irregularity between the left and right side; John had cut the hair by himself. There was no way that John could have visited a barber shop. Sadness tugged at Mitch’s heart again.

"Look, I’m sorry I yelled at you. But I just can’t accept your generosity. It’s too much to ask," John explained, looking up with a more schooled face now.

"I’m not taking that for an answer, John. After all you did, you deserve to get something back and now is that time."

Mitch took a step closer to John, laid a hand on his upper arm and looked him straight in the eye. Ages ago he had had the same grip on John, but today it meant something completely different.
For quite a long time they just stood there while John gazed back at him. It seemed like he was taking in every ounce of information he could gain from Mitch’s expression. And suddenly Mitch became aware of how bedraggled he must look and how he almost told John that he loved him. He tried to swallow but his throat was parched.

Then with a voice softer than Mitch had ever heard John said, "Thank you, Mitch."

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When John had started with the therapy, Mitch didn’t know what he expected. Of course, deep down, he hoped that there would be an immediate change in John or a slight improvement of his nightly panic attacks brought on by nightmares. But of course no such thing happened. Mitch knew that these kinds of trauma wouldn’t be resolved in a month or even years, but still he had hoped for some relief for John.

After John’s panic-attack at Chuck’s workshop John had stayed at Mitch’s house for about three weeks now. Chuck had phoned Mitch the week after the incident and told him that everything would be fine when John was ready to get back to work. There were no hard feelings about the fist fight, everyone was more shocked about Charley’s accident. Mitch thanked Chuck over and over for employing John once more but he also told him that they should probably wait. It wasn’t like John didn’t want to work again, but something told Mitch that he had to get over that incident first. It wouldn’t surprise Mitch if the sound and look of the buzz saw now would ever remind John of Vietnam. So he asked Chuck to give John some weeks to get better and settle into the therapy.

When Mitch explained what he had planned with Chuck, John didn’t object. And that troubled Mitch. Usually he and John had arguments that John wanted to pay for his lodgings which Mitch would refuse. And in the end Mitch always ended up with a crinkled envelope with John’s pay. So John complying like that seemed wrong.

By now John had been to Dr. Philipps three times, once every week. Before the first appointment John seemed to have been nervous, as far as Mitch could tell anyway. But after the session John was downright gloomy. He spoke fewer than before, there were no conversations where he would reward Mitch with one of those small, endearing smiles that made Mitch’s knees go soft. John was withdrawing from him.

At first Mitch had tried to coax John into talking a little more, not necessarily about the therapy but about anything. No such luck. After that Mitch … gave up? He wasn’t sure about that. Of course he was sad and wretched that all the proximity and shared trust seemed to have gone away somehow, but then he wanted John to get better and a therapy was a step in the right direction.

All the while Mitch told himself ‘patience and time’, reciting a line that had become stuck in his head from a song he had heard some weeks before. But against his better judgement his heart still yearned for John and it was getting even harder to keep himself from confessing his love. No matter how John acted towards Mitch, John’s health came first.

It was the fourth week after John’s stay at the hospital when he finally seemed to be climbing out of his silence. After John had come home from his session with Dr. Philipps he and Mitch ate dinner together, not really talking. When John had finished he announced that he would go outside for some time. At first Mitch just cleaned up the kitchen, one eye always directed at John, who had put on a heavy fleece jacket and was sitting on the wooden veranda. Mitch wanted to give the other man space to think but the he also wanted to be close, to comfort him if John felt bad. Torn between the two emotions Mitch finally gave up, made two coffees and went outside.

"Mind if I join you?" Mitch asked, his breath visible in the cold night’s air.
"Not at all," John replied and accepted the mug with a nod.

Cautiously, as if treading on broken glass, Mitch sat down on the wooden boards, cold immediately seeping into his bones. For a while they just sat there in the dark garden only illuminated by the living room’s light. Mitch watched snowflakes fall out of a dark winter sky until they landed on his face, melting away and leaving only a short cold sensation behind.

Then John spoke in his usual deep voice with a soft slur that Mitch loved so much. "Dr. Philipps asked me if I’ve a wife."

Completely baffled by the intimate statement after the weeks of silence, Mitch didn’t know what to say. Slowly the information of what John had said sunk in and Mitch started wondering if John indeed had a wife. It wasn’t unheard of that young soldiers married before they left for the war but when they got home never returned to their wives. John wasn’t too young that it could be impossible but then again Mitch had trouble envisioning a John before the war. All of this happened in a rush so in the end Mitch just blurted out, "Have you?"

John faced towards the far end of the garden so Mitch could only see his profile cast in shadow when he answered, "No."

That was a weight of Mitch’s mind he cursed himself for, he shouldn’t begrudge John people who loved him. Out of sympathy he wanted to say ‘Me neither’ but he was worried about how it might sound, as if it wasn’t obvious that he didn’t have a wife.

"Girlfriend, sure. But that was some time ago," John continued, undisturbed by Mitch’s silence.

Again Mitch wanted to tell John that he hadn’t had a girlfriend in years just to be able to relate to him. But that would sound even more weird. Especially after the incident with Derek. Instead Mitch tried to imagine how the girl looked liked, what John’s type might be. Maybe if he knew how John’s former girlfriend was like, he could draw some conclusions about a younger John. "Who was she?"

Mitch asked.

At that John looked up and blinked. "Some girl from my hometown," He answered slowly, apparently surprised that he had mentioned her at all.

Mitch gave a careful smile, happy that John was taking part in the conversation. "Small town, was it?"

John’s corner of the mouth twitched as if he wanted so smile. "Bowie, Arizona? Barely more than 400 people’re living there."

With a little more confidence Mitch then inquired, "So, you never ended up marrying her?"

John shook his head and took a sip from his coffee. "Always thought I would. But after the war … Things turned out different."

His earlier elation and confidence dwindled at John’s answer and Mitch looked down into his mug, feeling guilty about making John remember all that. "Ah, I’m sorry," he murmured.

A small sound made Mitch look up. John had laughed.

"Don’t be, Mitch. I told you not to be sorry for things you didn’t do," John explained with a voice that suddenly was so much lighter and happier than weeks before, that Mitch couldn’t do anything but feel happy about it.
"Was a good thing I didn’t marry her. She would’ve lived through another kind of hell with a husband in the war. And then upon returning being responsible for a war veteran, that is too much to ask."

"But surely she would’ve waited and cared for you, if she loved you," Mitch blubbered out, somehow needing to defend that woman because he saw a little bit of himself in her.

John tilted his head, his face not expressionless but relaxed, framed in dark hair weighted down by the falling snow. "I only knew her for ’bout half a year when I was twenty-one. I don’t think that is enough time spent together to make it justifiable to burden that person with a life-time of worry and strife."

Mitch’s stomach turned. He had fallen in love with John after, what, four months of living with him and was now willing to give everything for that man. And here was John, telling him that such a commitment wasn’t possible and that he still saw himself as a burden to the people who cared for him. "Ah, I … But isn’t that what loved ones are there for, to share some of the worry and the weight?"

"That’s what Dr. Philipps said, too," John replied, facing the garden once more which was now finely dusted with snow, reflecting the low moonlight.

"See! So it’s completely fine to confide in your … your, uh," Mitch came to a halt when realization struck, his hand shot up to his face, worrying his chin. "You don’t have a wife. What have you told Dr. Philipps?"

John turned towards him more fully so that one half of him was basked in the warm glow of the living room, pronouncing each and every angle in John’s finely cut face.

"Told her I had you," John replied matter of fact that Mitch nearly lost consciousness with overwhelming feelings. Of course now that Mitch knew that John had had a girlfriend he was quite sure what he would think about gays … But now he somehow felt closer to John than ever.

"Of course I’m here for you John. I mean I l– like to spend time with you and talk to you. You can tell me absolutely everything! But I don’t think I’m as good as a wife could be …" Mitch stuttered through his thrumming heart that sent shivers down his spine. He had almost misspoken again and told John that he loved him just because that statement made Mitch so giddy he couldn’t form a coherent thought. But his joy was soon crushed by the fact that he never could be what a wife would be to John.

At this John smiled his sincere smile and Mitch’s heart instantly settled down. "You ain’t no wife, sure. But you’re my friend and that’s even better."

With his thoughts still in a jumble Mitch asked, "Does that count?"

"Sure. Dr. Philipps said it’s important to have support from another person, no matter who. But it’s also important not too burden them too much," John explained with a relaxed expression as if he had needed all these weeks to form a conclusion of what was being discussed in the therapy and if it was something he agreed with.

"Not too much? Why not? I mean, how could talking to you be a burden?" Mitch asked, getting his thoughts back in order.

John shrugged his broad shoulders and emptied his coffee. "Some sort of passive trauma by telling you … in action details a civilian normally wouldn’t encounter in everyday life."
Mitch thought back to the tv clips about the napalm bombing and then to John telling him how his best friend Joey was ripped apart in front of his eyes. The cold that had seeped through his legs all the while now seemed to have reached his shoulders and he shuddered. Of course it wasn’t nice to hear such things and he had spent some times thinking about those horrid facts too, but Mitch would listen to them all over again if it would only help John.

"So you’re not allowed to talk about … that stuff. But what are you allowed to talk about then outside the therapy?" he inquired, setting down his mug.

"Feelings."

Mitch looked at Johns compact form next to him on the veranda and remembered the times when that man looked like a vulnerable child because he was wrecked by fear and panic. But now he looked vulnerable because his whole posture seemed to have lost some of its stiffness that always marked him a man ready to strike. And only now Mitch understood that John’s week long silence had been part of an improvement. John had needed to come to terms with the new situation, with the new person the therapy revealed him to be.

With a grin Mitch said, "Feelings it is then. How do you feel?"

John smiled. "Good. Might need more coffee though."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks a lot to all the people who keep reading and asking for updates, glad you are still interested in this!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
He'll grow to be an angry young man some day

Chapter Summary

After the unsettling event in Chuck's carpentry, work there for John is starting to wear him down. Next to that the newly begun therapy seems to dig up memories John would rather forget.

Chapter Notes

First off, a big portion of this chapter is a headcanon created by my wonderful beta tattiosala (tumblr), whom I can't thank enough <3 They always surprise me with such bittersweet ideas and scenes for this small ship that I can't help but put them in this fic for all to read. I know updates have been bumpy the last months, but don't be concerned by that, this fic won't be abandoned, life just happened and that's fine ;3 We'll give John and Mitch the ending they deserve, no matter how long it'll take.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a sunny but cold Friday afternoon when Mitch trudged through the thin layer of snow in the garden. After pulling night shifts for almost a week he had two days off and intended to do some more fixing up on the garden. Over the course of a year quite a lot of jumble had gathered there: Broken or retired floor boards leaned against the wooden fence, an old washtub that he had no idea of why he kept it and a table with several metallic chairs still stood in the shadow of the shed and would happily start rusting if Mitch didn’t put them inside soon. Also he should cut some branches from the few trees that grew there, before they could reach into the neighboring plot.

Just as Mitch wiped the snow and accumulated leaves from the second chair he heard a fine screech and the crunch of snow. John had stepped through the veranda door and walked towards him, his hands buried deep in his green military parka. Every Friday the employees at Chuck’s got off early.

Mitch got up and waved. "Hullo, John."

John came to a halt next to him and nodded in return. "You’re fixing the garden?"

"Yeah, I need to put those chairs into the shed, otherwise next year I’ll have no more chairs,” Mitch laughed.

John was silent at that, which wasn’t unusual, still Mitch turned slightly and eyed the other man. Again, John’s hair had grown longer, the miss-cut strands still showing although they were now less visible. It could have been the time of the year and due to a lack of sun, but John looked pale. Normally there was a sun-tanned touch to his skin that spoke of his indian-descent but today he looked pasty.

Gauging the situation, Mitch casually asked, "How’s your day?"

For two weeks now John had been working at Chuck’s again. After the first therapy sessions John
seemed to settle into the new arrangement and wanted to work again. Of course Mitch couldn’t say no but secretly he feared that it wasn’t a good idea. The first week was fine, John came home every day around 7 pm, often in time to eat dinner with Mitch, who came home earlier. But now on the second week he came home a little deranged and looking tired.

John nodded again. "Was good." Then he hunched down, grabbed a spare towel and started working on a third chair.

Mitch rubbed a hand across his cheek, trying to downplay his anxiousness. John wasn’t telling him the whole truth but Mitch knew better than to pry too far. So with a troubled heart he knelt down too and continued to clean his chair.

"That’s good to hear. Are you still working on that cupboard?" Mitch knew that it was the same cupboard John had worked on when Charley got his arm caught in the buzz saw, but John had been determined enough to go back to work so he wouldn’t like being doted on.

Unperturbed John worked on. "Yeah, but it’s slow going."

"Glad you still work on it," Mitch replied, casting a careful glance through the gridded back of the chair at John. "Chuck was really satisfied with your work on that."

A nod. "Yeah."

Rubbing his nose in a nervous gesture, Mitch leaned back and willed his beating heart to relax. He needed to ask John what was wrong but at the same time he wasn’t sure if it was a good idea. The other man had become much more outgoing towards Mitch but it was still a very fragile state of things.

"Um, say, John," Mitch began, kneading the dirty towel between his hands, spreading the smell of cold earth and dead leaves. "Is something wrong? You don’t look too well. Is it the workers at Chuck’s?"

For some time John didn’t react and just kept on toweling the chair. When he was done he regarded the object closely and when he seemed satisfied with his work, he set it down.

"No. They’ven’t done a thing," he replied, looking up with his almost black eyes which always held a slight melancholy that made Mitch want to reach out and cup his face.

"Oh, ok. I just thought … you looked pale," Mitch succumbed, tried a grin and continued working.

"It’s just a little hard to concentrate when the buzz saw’s on. Is all," John said still looking directly at Mitch.

Mitch’s gut tightened at that and only then did he notice the slight tremor in John’s hands he had hidden before by pushing them into the parka and working on the chair.

Trying not to pressure the other man or make him feel patronized Mitch inquired, "But is it a good idea to keep on working at Chuck’s then? I mean, it’s not that I wouldn’t want you to work, but if you feel bad?" Only with an effort was Mitch capable to keep the shakiness out of his voice.

At that John shrugged his shoulders and sat down on the ground, his legs pulled up a little. Around him hung an air of fatigue.

"Could be worse. And we … I need the money for the therapy and to pay you back for some of the lodging," John explained in his sombre voice, apparently oblivious to his slip of tongue or
Mitch, copying John, also sat down in the snow, wetness immediately spreading through his rough jeans. He kept the towel in a firm grip to avoid fumbling around with his hands too much.

"But won’t you be on edge the whole time at work? You can’t deafen yourself to the sound of the buzz saw or what it makes you feel. It’s cruel to yourself. And right now we’re not so badly in need of money," Mitch argued, keeping to the ‘we’ because it made him feel closer to John.

Next to him John toyed with the towel in his hand, folding and unfolding it, as the sun sank lower in the sky and small grey strands of clouds started to cover the ice-blue sky.

"Maybe. Still, Dr. Philipps said it’s good to confront some parts of the trauma. To desensitize," John explained.

"But surely not like this," Mitch interjected, turning more fully towards the other man and halfway getting up on his knees with fervor.

John looked at him and slightly raised an eyebrow, but not in a mocking way, more like a question at Mitch’s sudden burst of emotion.

Feeling hot in the face Mitch coughed and settled down somewhat. "I mean, what did Dr. Philipps actually say? Did she recommend that?"

Again shrugging his shoulders John answered, "She spoke of small trauma resolving. Getting over stuff step by step."

"What did she suggest was a good first step?"

John turned away and eyed the snowy garden and the long dark shadows that slowly crept towards them from the house. The sun was starting to set even earlier, autumn was nearly over.

"Visiting a national cemetery," he eventually said.

A pang of grief exploded in Mitch’s heart as he heard that. How horrible it must be for John to stay on a field amidst the thousands of graves of fallen comrades. Every cross a grim reminder of all the young lives spent for nothing. Mitch himself felt wretched every time he visited his parent’s grave in Hope. It reminded him of the unfortunate and unnecessary death which had made him an orphan at 15. It also made him wonder how life would have been if his parents hadn’t died. Would he have come out to them, would he ever have started working at the police? Maybe he wouldn’t have and then he never would have met John. If those things unsettled Mitch, how must John feel, trapped in all his memories and pain.

With a parched feeling in his mouth Mitch cautiously ventured, "There’s one in Westbridge, since it’s the biggest city around here. But …" he stopped, fearing that it would be too much for John but the other man hadn’t moved a muscle. "Would anybody you know be buried there?"

"Doesn’t really matter, they’re all the same."

John’s voice had gotten thicker and more hoarse and Mitch could see the strain in John’s posture. Thinking about that John might actually have died in Viet Nam made Mitch sick. He was glad that John had survived, but then, was John happy about that too?

Before Mitch could say anything along the lines ‘you’re not like anybody else’ John went on, "If anyone would be buried there, Delmar would."
After nearly seven months Mitch had learnt of another of John’s team mates. Sure, Mitch had read a little about the Baker Team, but the files he had nicked only held so much information. Most of the Baker Team’s operations were classified. Except for some names and dates Mitch didn’t know much. Recently he had learnt of Joeys gruesome fate. Why had Delmar died?

"One of your team?" Mitch asked.

"Yeah, engineer and explosives expert. Before I came to Hope I wanted to visit him. He lived some miles out of the city. When I got there I met his mother. Told me he had died of cancer a year ago," all that was delivered in a flat voice, but by now Mitch could hear the slight differences in John’s tone. He was devastated.

At first death by cancer didn’t sound like it had anything to do with Viet Nam but then Mitch understood. Agent Orange. Delmar must have been in such close and constant contact with the substance that it had made him sick. He had been lucky enough to survive Viet Nam, but actually he hadn’t been lucky at all. Only now Mitch fully understood why Teasle had managed to push John so far so easily. When John had walked into Hope he had just got the news that one of his friends had died a terrible death. That he had lost another comrade in the war.

"I’m truly sorry to hear that, John," Mitch husked, carefully putting his hand on John’s shoulder, gauging that this would be an alright gesture.

John’s mouth twitched as if he was trying to force a smile. "Was my best friend I had on the team. Shit, my whole life that far. The only one except me who got outta Nam."

And there was the rest of it. It hadn’t only been John’s closest friend who had died, but the last one. John had entered Hope without a single person in the world to turn to. Uncaring parents left behind a long time ago, closest people he fought with, lived with, had all died. No one was left who understood what he had been through. Except Trautman, but that person was too wrapped up in the machination of the military to actually visit John, although John apparently didn’t mind.

By now the sun had vanished completely behind the house and the garden lay in a cold, bleak twilight and only a sickly yellow streak in the sky spoke of the dying sun. Mitch shivered.

"If you want to visit the cemetery I can give you the directions and lend you my car, I don’t need it for the weekend," Mitch offered with his voice still held low. The connection between John and his team mates must have been a very intimate one and Mitch didn’t want to intrude on that.

For a moment John didn’t reply but then he looked up, his face barely visible in the dark. "Would you come, too?"

Mitch’s heart missed a beat.

"Sure thing, partner."

***

The next morning after breakfast they drove to Westbridge. Like yesterday it was a sunny but cold day and everything was covered by a thin layer of snow, glittering in the cool sun beams. The ride to Westbridge wasn’t that long, it always took about one and a half hours, often depending on the weather, so there was no need of getting up as early as they had, but somehow it seemed appropriate.

Driving along the snowy streets in the morning light was a strange reflection of the first time Mitch had met John. When they had driven home on the day of the trial, the whole landscape was covered in night, bright stars shining and leaves still clinging to the trees. Now the land looked grey, having
Reminiscing like that, Mitch became aware that he and John had actually spent about half a year together now. It was a funny thing how time had slipped by and Mitch couldn’t say if John found it odd to be staying at Mitch’s like that in a quite uncommon state of affairs. And what were his neighbors thinking? As a small town Fairview was of course prone to gossip, so what was a strange man doing at Deputy Mitch’s house every day for the past months? Mitch shook his head, wanting to discard the bad thoughts starting to rise inside him. He and John had done nothing wrong. Mitch hadn’t done anything, he had never acted upon his feelings. If there ever should arise a rumor that Mitch had taken a gay lover his reputation in Fairview was in ruins. They would lynch him.

Exhaling a shaky breath Mitch tried to calm down. Why was he thinking about stuff like that? With eyes fixed pointedly on the road he tried listening to the radio.

"People, don’t you understand
The child needs a helping hand
Or he’ll grow to be an angry young man some day
Take a look at you and me,
Are we too blind to see?
Do we simply turn our heads and look the other way?"

The warm, deep voice of Elvis soothed Mitch’s jumbled nerves somewhat and he cast a quick glance at John. Since their shared breakfast John had remained quite silent. He sat in the passenger seat, slightly leaning against the door and looking out of the window. He was more sunken in thought than usual and emitted an air of sad contemplation. Not daring to disturb the other man Mitch remained silent and watched the trees and snow-capped peaks pass by.

After passing several small towns clustered at the feet of the mountains they finally reached the far border of Westbridge. Since the cemetery was located on the outskirts of town, they didn’t have to drive into the city center which made it much easier to navigate the bigger city’s traffic.

In a smaller street John suddenly roused himself and said, "Can you pull over here?"

Without asking why Mitch did as John had asked and drove the car onto the unfortified side-strip next to the road, untouched snow crunching under the tires.

The second the car came to a halt John undid his buckle and left the car. Unsure what to do Mitch remained seated and watched the other man walking towards an array of small, poor looking houses completely plastered in small billboards. Like a lot of cities here in the mountains Westbridge had some poorer parts of town with bad street maintenance and run-down housing. People who lived here tended to forget that despite Westbridge’s size – in comparison to their capital Olympia – it was a backwater town not even worth the mention, so there wasn’t enough money to fulfill all of the municipal needs.

Slapping one hand on his upper thigh Mitch waited nervously. What was John doing? Maybe he just needed to step out for a second or … But then the other man reappeared between the crumbling fronts of two houses carrying something bulky in his right hand. As he got closer Mitch could make out the wrapping of the object, it was a newspaper. And then as John finally reached the car Mitch saw that it was a bouquet of white roses. John had bought flowers for Delmar’s grave. His throat tightened.

"We can drive on," John said, putting the flowers carefully across his legs.

"Yes, right you are," Mitch stuttered and made for the road again.
It only took them ten more minutes of driving to arrive at the huge parking lot in front of the cemetery. The whole area was fenced and the entrance was marked by two military looking brick houses with two flagpoles on either side, carrying the star-sprangled banner. There even were two soldiers on patrol, apparently to dissuade any anti-war protestants to defile the graves. Despite the empty appearance of the cemetery the parking lots were meticulously cleaned of all the snow.

Carrying the bouquet of roses in the crook of his arm, John passed the two soldiers without a single look. Mitch followed John closely, still unsure if he was intruding or not, despite being invited. When Mitch passed the soldiers he couldn’t help himself but to look at the heavy weapons and grim uniforms they carried. Of course being a deputy he was used to fire-arms but he didn’t carry them regularly and somehow this made him feel queazy. He couldn’t imagine how it must be to have this as your day in day out wear for years of your live.

And as if he knew exactly where Delmar lay, John moved through the rows upon rows of white crosses, never hesitating once.

The cemetery was huge and so was the amount of crosses marking the graves. It was an eery atmosphere. The sky above them was a cold, teal blue by now, here and there speckled with a grey cloud. The trees had lost nearly all of their green during autumn and everything around looked rather pale and dismal.

After five more minutes of walking John stopped in front of one cross, his head bowed to look at the badge on the cross. Delmar Barry. Unsure what to do, Mitch halted a step behind John, giving him space.

For a time John just stood in front of the grave, the flowers still in his arm. Then he hunched down and carefully laid the bouquet at the base of the cross into the soft snow, his hands lingering on the shabby newspaper for a while longer before he stood up again. With his now free hand he rubbed across his face and through his dark hair, tousling it. There was so much pain and strife in John’s posture that Mitch just wanted to step up, wrap his arms around John and hold him tight. But he didn’t dare.

"That’s him," John suddenly said in a hoarse voice, as he unfolded a small crinkled piece of paper.

Taking this as an invitation, Mitch stepped up and looked at the old photograph in John’s hands. For a moment, his heart stopped. The photo was taken in black and white and a lot of creases ran across it, but it was still recognizable. In the photo were eight young men, all in varying state of military dress. Some wore their full uniform, others, like John only wore their camouflage trousers and a white undershirt. John knelt in front next to a slighter, fidgety looking young man and in the back, pointed out by John, was Delmar. He looked like he was about 7 feet tall, but there was a friendly cast to his features and Mitch understood why he and John had become friends.

Despite the occasion Mitch couldn’t focus on Delmar all too long, his eyes wandered down towards the younger John again. His hair was shorter, face clean shaven and his eyes held a sparkle that spoke of good humor and laughter. There was only the slightest hint of melancholy in his eyes, that was ever present today.

"He’s huge," Mitch breathed out, his head still swimming with the emotions he felt by being shown this picture.

There was a rough noise and Mitch realized that John had laughed.

"Yeah, he was. Had to put him in the back for every group-shot or he’d covered us all up," John explained, his tone lighter now.
"It’s a nice photo. You look like a great team," Mitch commented a little insecure about what he could say without opening too many old wounds.

A wry grin appeared on John’s face. "We were."

***

Mitch wasn’t sure how long they had stayed at the cemetery after John had shown him the picture, but when they had driven about 15 minutes out of Westbridge Mitch got hungry. He had asked if John wanted to eat something too and the other man had just nodded and said ‘sure’. So Mitch took the next road off of the highway in search of some kind of small town diner.

When they had found a suitable one Mitch had announced that he would treat them both for lunch, for old time’s sake. That earned him a very thin smile from John and Mitch’s heart sank. He wasn’t sure how much visiting Delmar’s grave had helped John overcome some of his problems because he seemed even sadder than five weeks prior when the therapy had started. So both sat down, ordered a burger and a coke each and ate in silence.

Back in the car John leaned against the door again, this time he had twisted so far around that Mitch only saw a sliver of John’s profile. He really wanted to be alone and Mitch understood. He kept the radio turned off, his mouth shut and silently followed the winding roads. Ahead the sky had turned a dusty pink despite it being only half past three. Mitch battled with himself. He knew how much the other man needed to be alone right now after being so open and letting in all of the past sadness and memories. But still Mitch felt compelled to help. To say a word of comfort, to hug the other man, anything to make it all a little less awful.

After some time of his own silent brooding Mitch cast a careful glance aside towards John. The other man sat rigid, facing away but in the window’s reflection Mitch could see John’s gaze and was heartbroken. John had pressed a hand in front of his mouth, apparently to stop him from sobbing because there were tears streaming down his face.

That was enough. Not caring what would happen, Mitch seized the next opportunity of a small road and pulled the pick-up over. They had been driving over low hills on the foot of a huge mountain range for some time now and left and right of the road were only fields upon fields.

As if on cue, John got out of the car as soon as it came to a halt. The door shut behind him with a dull thud and Mitch winced. Taking his time, he remained behind the steering wheel and let his thoughts wander. Some times it was easy to approach John, there was a certain set to his shoulders or a tone to his voice that showed that it was fine. But on other times he was made of steel, not a single muscle or sound betrayed that he actually cared for human contact. Back when John was in the hospital and blaming himself for having lost control had been one of the occasions when Mitch hadn’t dared to approach him at first. But then Mitch had had enough and an inner fire had started to rage in him, spilling forth all of his concerns and cares for John. Because he did care. Because he had fallen in love with John. And maybe they could never be together but that sure as hell didn’t mean that Mitch couldn’t be there for him.

With newly found fervor, Mitch undid the buckle and got out of the car. Outside a fresh but welcome wind brushed against his skin and tousled his hair. Behind the car a wide field spread down into a valley that lay low enough to have been spared most of the year’s first snow. It was green and everywhere wild autumn flowers bloomed still. There was solanum, common ragwort and autumn aster. It was a huge display of violets and yellow. Behind the valley was a small dark pine forest and behind that a small town only visible because of the sparkling light’s. It was the epitome of nature’s grace and tranquility.
Mitch walked around the car’s cowl and found John leaning against the loading area of the pick up. His arms were crossed over the open fur-lined suede jacket Mitch had given John. It had been Mitch’s father’s and held dear memories and seeing John in that jacket was a bittersweet sight. He walked up to the other man and too leaned against the car, facing the valley.

The wind picked up and whirled John’s hair around his drawn face and red eyes. Regarding John like that Mitch saw that he held the old photograph in one of his hands.

"You miss them, don’t you?" Mitch asked quietly.

John gave a small nod.

"I miss my parents, too," Mitch said. But not to sound egoistic and to bring up his own troubles. No, he wanted to show John that he knew how loss felt, even if he hadn’t lost brothers in arms, he had lost people he held dear. And he knew that John would understand.

Mitch reached out and put his hand on John’s shoulder, gradually turning his touch into a stroking motion, rippling the soft suede. Then without saying anything, John turned, closed the already small gap between them and Mitch put his arms around the other man. John’s weight eased against him and Mitch lightly brushed his cheek along John’s head, breathing in the familiar smell.

Suddenly a strange sensation tingled along Mitch's waist and settled onto his back. John was returning the embrace! As often as Mitch had held or hugged John, this was only the second time he had actually returned that gesture and Mitch was sure he would burst with happiness. Releasing a steady breath, he settled more comfortably into the embrace, taking as much comfort in it as he wanted to give through it.

John’s touch was very light and careful but it was enough to make Mitch forget all of the dark thoughts he had had over the day and he hoped that John would feel some of the same kind of alleviation. Around them the cold wind picked up even more and the flowers and grasses in the fields rustled, softly breaking the silence. The light grew dim and the air chilly but neither man gave it much thought. Entwined in that embrace they couldn’t feel the cold at all.

***

That evening Mitch’s sleep was very troubled. When he had climbed into bed, his whole thoughts were still focused on the events of today. How John had knelt in front of that grave, how they had embraced in that small valley, how lost John had looked. When they had stood close to each other after their initial hug, Mitch just couldn’t stop himself from talking, from assuring John that whenever he needed someone to listen or just someone to sit close beside him, Mitch would be there.

The instant after Mitch had said that he was afraid of having revealed too much of his emotions. His heart sped up in wary anticipation of John’s reaction and in anger at his own stupidity. John had just watched him closely for a second, before he nodded slightly and thanked Mitch for the offer. Not declining but not accepting either.

His mind went over and over that situation when he had lain down to sleep. Had that been too much? Maybe that offer had built up too much pressure and now John thought Mitch was desperately trying to force his way into his private space. While dropping off into an unruly sleep, Mitch cursed himself.

Weird dreams followed him into his sleep and he tossed and turned and every now and then woke up to his silent and dark bedroom. One dream was particularly aggravating: He stood across the road from John who called out to him in need. Mitch wanted to reply, wanted to shout back, run over the
street to meet him, but he couldn’t. Some invisible force kept him frozen on the spot and contracted his lungs so that no sound came past. Cars and trucks sped by and obscured his vision of John, who in return couldn’t seem to see Mitch at all. Desperation pumped through Mitch’s veins as he fought the power that locked him into place while all the while he heard John’s plaintive cry, *Mitch? Mitch?* "Mitch?"

The last call had sounded so real and full of pain that Mitch’s eyes flew open and he again faced the darkness of his room. For some seconds he remained motionless and listened to his own rapid breaths. That dream had felt so real that some of its desperation had followed him and now he was sick to his stomach.

Suddenly there was a small creak that Mitch knew only too well. In an instant he shot upright and turned towards his bedroom door. And there, slightly illuminated by the dimm light of the moon filtering through the hallway window was John’s broad figure retreating. The creak that Mitch had heard was that of the door being drawn back into its former position. "J– Johnny?" Mitch called into the darkness and fumbled to get out of the bed in a rush. Maybe something had happened.

In the hallway John had stopped and turned. His hair was tousled and his threadbare t-shirt looked extremely wrinkled as if he had … yes, as if he had tossed and turned, too. On his face was an expression of shock and insecurity Mitch had never seen so plainly before.

"Did you call me? Did, did something happen?" Mitch asked and took a cautious step outside his carpeted bedroom and into the hallway and its wooden floorboards.

John’s expression took on an even more pained look and his whole posture seemed to crumple into a state of helplessness. Mitch’s heart started to ache but he just knew that he couldn’t do anything, he would just scare John away.

"Yes. No … I mean, everything is fine," John replied, his voice sounding thick.

"You sure? You don’t … look so well," Mitch went on, absentmindedly worrying the hem of his shirt.

John’s arms hung awkwardly at his sides as he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Just a bad dream."

Never before had Mitch seen John in such a state of distress. Of course he had witnessed two of his severe panic attacks but in those situations something had triggered all of his horrible memories and he got confused of where he was and overwhelmed by everything. Now he just seemed unsure of how to explain what was wrong with him, because something just deeply troubled him and was on his mind.

"You wanted to talk about it?" Mitch ventured and took another slow step over the cold floor.

John’s lips tightened and he drew in a harsh breath and squared his shoulders.

"Just thought … you might be still awake," John murmured and looked away.

Mitch had caught a glance at his alarm clock on the way out of the room, it was 3 a.m. and Mitch was sure that John was aware, that Mitch would normally be asleep at that time. But Mitch knew where that lie came from and he didn’t mind.
"I didn’t sleep too well either. You want to come into my bed, to talk a little?" Mitch offered and suddenly he became aware of what he had said and how it must have sounded. A blush rose from the back of his neck and washed over his face and he started trembling with embarrassment.

At first John seemed more taken aback and lost than before. But then he looked up through his tousled fringe of black hair and there was a glimmer of relief in his eyes, as he gave a cautious nod.

Hoping his smile would show in the dimness, Mitch nodded too and went back inside the bedroom, waiting for John’s quiet footsteps.

Silently, they both climbed into the bed and settled under the heavy blankets Mitch always used. The mattress gave a slight tilt towards John, because he was heavier.

This situation was a completely new level of proximity that they shared. The hugs and embraces they have had before were only short interactions in which Mitch was allowed into John’s private space. Trying to focus on comforting John, Mitch rolled carefully to his side and gathered some of the blanket in his arms.

For a moment there was silence between them. Mitch watched John who lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling, looking out of place.

But suddenly John whispered more than said, "I thought about Delmar."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Mitch said to show that he was listening, but he knew, that it was far more important to let John talk his burden of off his heart.

"The first time I met him, before we were even on the Baker Team, he was bullied by some imbecile soldiers, who thought it was alright to pick on somebody with a different skin color," John explained and contentment seeped into his voice.

Mitch felt sick as he heard that. He had always thought that people who were shut in together in such a horrible situation would stick together, not turn on each other.

"Did you help him?" Mitch asked.

John made a sound Mitch couldn’t place at first. But then he realized it had been a sad laugh.

"Wanted to help him, but Delmar was huge. He took good care of himself. It wasn’t the physical abuse that hurt him so much, it was the racism coming from his own brothers in arms."

All the while John still looked straight ahead but now he turned his head away and Mitch heard a distant rustling. John had pulled one arm out of the blanket and rubbed a hand over his face. Tears, Mitch thought.

"Was that what brought you together as friends?" Mitch went on, expecting that John would be grateful if he didn’t remark on the tears.

"Yeah, stepped up to him after the incident to see if he was alright. We just got along. No matter through how much shit he’d gone because of other soldiers, you could rely on him. Even when he was sent home … he offered me … he told me to come visit him, the minute I got outta Nam," John’s voice had turned brittle and he broke off.

"John," Mitch whispered, his heart contracting in sadness for the grieving man in front of him, because he knew what had happened when John eventually returned and started his search for his former comrade.
At that John rolled over, now facing Mitch, but he had buried his face in one of his hands while silent sobs made him shiver and he cried.

Unsure of what to do, Mitch scooted a little closer, reached out a hand and just carefully held John’s shoulder. After a while the sobs evened out and John stopped his shivering.

"Thank you for taking me to his grave, Mitch," John mumbled behind his raised hand.

"Of course! No need to thank me for it," Mitch said with a little more vehemence than he had to. "I’m … I mean, we’re …"

"Partners?" John asked and there was only the smallest hint of a smile in his voice as he lowered his hand.

"Exactly!"

Chapter End Notes

Recently I've read through all the comments that this fic has received and I am so glad people actually read this ... thank you!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Do we simply turn our heads and look the other way

Chapter Summary

After having visited Delmar's grave John feels strong enough to tackle more of his traumas; He will let Mich cut his hair. But in the dingy bathroom events start to unfold that can't be averted anymore.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I am posting this, but this is the tenth chapter of WDIGFH, it is already one year old and we're still going strong! I am so utterly grateful for tattiosala's (tumblr) constant support as first and foremost good friend, headcanon-supplier and beta for this fanfiction <3 I am constantly overwhelmed that WDIGFH has people who read it and wait for it to update, you folx are the best!

Happy First Birthday <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"To get back home
Where my childhood dreams and wishes still out number my regrets"
Get back to a place where I can figure on the odds
Have a fighting chance to lose the blues
And win my share of bets"

PAUL WILLIAMS – Where Do I Go From Here

Mitch turned another page in a well worn paperback novel and settled more comfortably against the cushions of the arm-chair. It was a clear Sunday and rays of winter sun fell through the huge windows in the living room, making Mitch sleepy. But he didn’t complain, as a Deputy he often had to work on weekends so a day off on Saturday or Sunday was very welcome.

Turning another page in his book he slowly lost track of the story and his mind wandered back to the past week when he and John had visited Delmar’s grave. How they had embraced in that small valley where everything had seemed far off as if they had found shelter there. Sadly the embrace hadn’t lasted forever but what had been wonderful about it was how John had reacted afterwards. There hadn’t been a single sign of embarrassment or regret for having hugged Mitch. In fact they had been standing close to one another for quite a while afterwards. Mitch’s hands on John’s shoulders and John’s hands on Mitch’s waist. Then with a voice that was very soft and low after the crying he had said “Thank you, Mitch” and they had gotten back into the car and driven home.

And then at that same evening John had knocked at Mitch’s door but had been too insecure to really say what he had wanted. It had taken Mitch some time to coax the information out of the other man, because it was obviously hard for him to express his feelings or needs when he needed to rely on other people. Mitch closed his eyes and remembered how John had slowly told him about Delmar and how much he had meant to him. After John had calmed down Mitch was ready to withdraw again, to give John his accustomed space, but instead of letting him do that, John had reached for Mitch’s hand and held it fast. It was a very chaste and tender touch that resulted in Mitch blushing furiously, but also happily accepting that trusting gesture. After a while of companionably shared silence they had fallen asleep. But the next morning, when Mitch woke, he found the bed next to him empty. Battling his sadness he told himself that it was alright. John just needed his space and Mitch would give him that.

In the days that followed their visit to Delmar’s grave John was more talkative and smiled often. So it had helped to re-open the old wounds of having lost Delmar in such a tragic way and now healing could begin.

A smile worked itself upon Mitch’s face as he thought about it and then once again remembered the hug.

The sound of a closing door brought Mitch back to the here and now. Apparently John had come out of the bathroom. As every other employee at Chuck’s, John had the weekends off and it seemed like it was a concept he needed to adapt himself to. In the first months John had been ‘spared’ weekends because he had gone out looking for a job every day. There were a lot of companies in Fairview that ran 24/7. But now that John had a regular job, he had a regular weekend too. At first he had asked Mitch if there were some more things that needed fixing up around the house, then he had repaired some old wiring in Mitch’s truck that had been causing a flickering warning light and then he had cleaned out the rest of the garden.

Today was the first day John hadn’t found anything to do with his spare time. So at first he had joined Mitch in the living room and sat down with a rather worse for wear paperback novel to read. But after a while he had announced that he would go take a shower.
Mitch wondered if John would cut his hair today, since it had grown longer again. Not that he wanted John to cut his hair, in fact Mitch liked the soft, black curls that looked so shaggy. He always wanted to run his fingers through it.

Again trailing off in thought Mitch didn’t hear John enter. So when the other man walked around the arm chair into Mitch’s vision he sat up with a jump.

"John," he exclaimed. "I didn’t hear you, too deep in thought." Mitch laughed but stopped as he saw that John was unchanged, no new clothes, no wet hair or new hair cut.

"Can you cut my hair?" John asked. His face as he said it didn’t betray any emotion. It looked quite calm, a little nervous, maybe?

Mitch sat thunderstruck and just stared back at John, the book in his hand forgotten.

"Your hair," Mitch echoed in disbelief. John feared every razor or scissor wielded anywhere near him, Mitch knew that by now. Why would he want him to cut his hair? His heart picked up a pace.

"Yeah," confirmed John.

"But … But why I mean--" Mitch stuttered, rubbing a hand across his nose in nervousness.

"It’s too long," the other man explained.

Completely lost for what to do, Mitch got up from the arm-chair, managed to drop his book, picked it up again and now stood awkwardly across from John.

"It’s not … that’s … Uh," Mitch began but then pulled himself together. "Won’t you be uncomfortable?"

John shrugged his broad shoulders lightly. "Gotta find out."

Unconsciously Mitch’s hand crept over his thigh, settling on the scar. It had started to twinge with Mitch’s emotion in upheaval.

"You mean you want to try how long you can bear it?" Mitch wanted to know.

"Yeah, Dr. Philipps said after the cemetery I could try the next step. And besides, last time I cut it, it looked awful."

***

Back in the bathroom Mitch rummaged through the several drawers of the washstand in search for his scissors. Still a little challenged with the whole situation his hands shook. Noticing the trembling he took a deep breath and exhaled evenly. John trusted him with this, shaking hands would ruin everything now.

"Okay, I’m ready," Mitch announced as he procured the scissors from the drawer and maneuvered awkwardly around the small chair he had put in front of the mirror. Mitch’s bathroom wasn’t huge, so two people could only barely get along in it at the same time. But now there was a chair in the room too and a pair of scissors in his hands, Mitch wasn’t sure how long it would stay that way.

John nodded and stepped in front of the chair and after a moment’s hesitation, he plucked the red sweatshirt from beneath his jeans and drew it over his head, undressing. Under the shirt John wore a white, close-fitting undershirt that revealed his muscular arms.
Mitch swallowed tightly and adverted his eyes when a soft jingle drew his attention. He looked back and saw the dog tags around John’s neck. It was the first time since the events in Hope that Mitch had seen those. He remembered quite vividly how he had grabbed for the tags and how John had stopped him with a determined but gentle grip. Back then Mitch had already seen that John was different, but no-one wanted to hear him out, so the events had unfolded. John must have kept them hidden beneath every shirt or pullover that he wore. Not wanting to part with them, but also not letting them show.

Focusing on the task at hand Mitch began, "Right. How do you want your hair?" Mitch felt stupid for asking, but the question just slipped past.

"Shorter," John replied, taking a seat.

A slight twitch to his lips and the set of his jaw told Mitch that John was already on edge. Mitch stood behind him with the scissors at waist level. Gradually Mitch moved forward so he stood more fully in John’s line of view.

"I’ll just give it a go then. I’ve never done this before …" Mitch murmured. And stopped. This wasn’t gonna do. If he wanted John to keep calm throughout this he had to talk him through.

Mitch reached out but John’s hand shot up instantly and grabbed Mitch’s wrist. It wasn’t a bruising grip, but steady enough to stop Mitch in his tracks. He flinched and tried to draw away but couldn’t.

For a second John’s face was a mask of panic with no recognition in his eyes.

"Sorry, John," Mitch managed to say through trembling lips.

And from one second to the next John’s expression changed. He blinked and looked at Mitch’s scared face in the mirror’s reflection. He drew his hand back instantly.

"No, I’m sorry," John said. "Go on, it’s fine now."

Mitch swallowed and nodded. Reaching out again with his free hand, careful to stay in the view of the mirror, Mitch explained, "I’ll start with your bangs first," His hand came down and combed through the hair. It was silky just like he had imagined. "I’ll just hold them like this … And cut off half an inch, here …" Slowly Mitch raised the scissors and he saw John stiffen but he made no move to object again so Mitch drew the blades apart, closed them and clip a whisp of hair floated down.

"How’s that?" Mitch asked, meaning John’s constitution in general, but made it sound like it was directed at the cut.

"Good," John answered with a slight strain in his voice, but otherwise steady.

"Then’ll go on here," Mitch announced and combed, cut and chatted through the rest of the bangs.

When he was done, he let the scissors down and took a step back as far as the bathroom allowed. John’s face had paled throughout the cutting and his face was wet with perspiration.

Mitch eyes darted around the dingy room, unsure if John needed support or space right now. Then his eyes fell upon the sleeve of John’s undershirt where a gnarled white scar worked itself towards the shoulder, barely visible in the bathroom light. Sadness settled in Mitch’s heart as he remembered when he had seen the scars the first time, how they had shocked him. But not because they looked ugly, because they spoke of John’s innumerable pains and burdens he carried with him.

"We can stop, if you want," Mitch offered with a quiet voice.
"No, it’s just, I need a sec," John murmured and drew a hand over his face.

Mitch watched John’s face through the mirror and smiled encouragingly and clasped the other man’s shoulder. John returned the touch and nodded. Go on.

"Then’ll move on to the sides. At first …" and so it went on. Mitch emitted a steady stream of commentary, explaining what he did, what came next and how long it would take. All the while John sat there like a statue, his shoulders rigid but his wary eyes following Mitch’s every movement.

At the end and quite naturally, Mitch grabbed the comb and drew it through the thick black hair. "It should be better now," Mitch explained in a low murmur, lost in his task. He had the urge to comfort John after the strain of everything so he combed his hair with a little more attention than was necessary.

Looking at John like this Mitch wondered if the other man knew how attractive he was. If John ever let his guard down and smiled openly he would charm every girl in town. Mitch wondered if John indeed had ever done so. In their conversations he had mentioned just one girlfriend before the war. And when he had come into Hope, straight out of Viet Nam there had been no girlfriend to speak of. But Mitch couldn’t believe that John only ever had had one girlfriend, he looked too stunning for that.

But then again John didn’t care. He took no particular concern in his clothing or his looks, except a more or less decent haircut and a shave now and then. No matter where he was or with whom he talked he never seemed self-confident about his appearance or showed a particular ego or macho. He was just himself.

"Looks fine, thank you Mitch."

The rough voice brought Mitch back from his reverie and he blinked. His hands had come to a rest on John’s shoulders after having combed and straightened the hair. He drew them back instantly.

"Oh yes, right you are," he said hastily, put the comb away and wrapped the scissors in a small towel to keep them out of sight. "How do you feel now?"

John got up from the chair, shook his head and rolled his shoulders to get rid of the cut-off hair clinging to him.

"Better now that’s over," he replied and his tone was less strained. Then he looked up with his dark, melancholy eyes and said, "Thank you for doing this, Mitch. Feels good to trust someone."

Mitch grew hot all over. The way John looked at him was completely different from before, it was like he saw the whole of Mitch’s being for the first time. Every inch of himself was observed and he became more self-conscious. His mind rotated trying to find words to answer, his emotions were sending his heart reeling.

"Of course! I’d never hurt you," he sputtered. "I love you far too much to–" Mitch clamped his mouth shut and a hand flew up to cover his mouth.

He had done it.

Across from him John’s eyes widened only a fraction, his face a mask.

"I, oh God," Mitch choked out, his trembling hand pressed against his chin. "I, I didn’t mean to, to make it sound like that …" Mitch fumbled for words as the floor beneath him made a vicious side sweep and he lost all his bearings. Now he had finally done it. He confessed his love for John, in a
situation where the other man was most vulnerable and had just communicated his trust.

John made no move or sound at all, he just stood one step away from Mitch, his arms resting at his side.

All the past events, touches, conversations between him and John stormed back at Mitch, crashing through his brain. He hadn’t meant to say it. But he had wanted to say it for so long. It had been a growing desire inside of him since the moment he realized he had fallen in love. Mitch had been perfectly fine to keep this part of him shut away from society and family. Nobody needed to know that he was gay. But after having gotten to know John better and better, it became clear that he was the only person in this world he could, he wanted to confide into. He wanted John to know who he was and how he felt.

Withdrawning his hand that had become stone cold from panic, Mitch stood up a little straighter. He wasn’t as small as he always made himself out to be.

"I’m sorry, John. I never meant for this to happen, but I can’t possibly take it back now. I love you," Mitch said with only a slight catch to his voice, but full of determination.

Again John didn’t react, he just looked at Mitch with those same, sad eyes. Slowly his brow furrowed and he angled his head. "How d’you mean that?"

Unconsciously Mitch had started to rub a hand over the scar on his thigh as he answered, "Just like, like I said, really. I’ve fallen in love with you. I, I see more in you than just a friend." His last words came out as a whisper as if he was confessing to a crime. A sin.

John’s schooled expression changed from blank to dismay. And even panic? He adverted his head, hands clenching and un-clenching at his sides.

"I could never do that," his voice hard.

A sickening sensation settled in Mitch’s stomach like a clump of mud. Of course he knew that John would react that way. That he would draw back from him. Mitch had always feared the destruction of their fragile friendship through his love, but deep inside he had still hoped.

Hanging his head with tears pressing behind his eyes he murmured, "I know you must be disappointed in me … disgusted with me for being gay. I never would’ve done anything to you, John, I swear!" His voice cracked. "Not that I could anyway. I’m just a hapless pansy, like Ward always said."

Crushed by sadness and defeat Mitch took a step back, to give John space, but he just bumped into the wall and let out a whimper. He really had ruined everything now.

Suddenly there was a featherlight touch and Mitch’s head jerked up. John had stepped up to him and grazed Mitch’s shoulder with his fingertips. For the first time in months John’s face looked openly troubled. He withdrew the hand.

"No, Mitch. I’m not … disgusted with you," he explained in a quiet voice, his eyes searching Mitch’s face.

Mitch’s heart fluttered at the prospect of hope. "You’re … not?" he breathed.

A head shake. "No, course not. It’s just …" he stopped, his face a little more pained. "I can’t be with you."
"I … don’t understand" Mitch stuttered.

In front of him John looked lost and helpless and Mitch had to suppress the urge to embrace him.

"Being close is …" John’s mouth twisted into a grimace, apparently being uncomfortable explaining. "Being close scares me. It’s like losing control. Makes me vulnerable."

Thinking about what John had been through, all the pain, death and maltreatment, understanding dawned on Mitch. "Oh … Oh, I see! I’m … sorry John." The tears had stopped burning but he could still feel them lingering. He pawed at his eyes. For John there never was the prospect of a relationship. Had Mitch only thought further about his feelings for John and how they could work out, he might have realized that they never had a chance. He had ruined their friendship with this confession for nothing. "I didn’t mean to destroy our friendship like this."

"You didn’t destroy our friendship. I did, too," John said, now sounding more apologetic.

"What?" Mitch was confused.

A sad smile appeared on John’s face. "Of course I care for you, too, Mitch. More than anything I’ve ever held dear. We’re partners. But I just can’t be …"

Mitch’s heart contracted out of fear for the next sentence.

"… I can’t be close. That would be cruel to you. You’ve done more for me than any other person. You’ve reached out to me, brought me back home. I can never fully repay that."

Tears slipped freely from Mitch’s eyes, his fumbling hands held awkwardly in front of him, his whole body shaking. He wanted to say something but he couldn’t, John’s confession had broken the last bit of restraint that had held the tears back.

Silently John took a step forward and very gently put his hands on Mitch upper arms. A hitched sob escaped Mitch’s throat at the unexpected contact. He rubbed a hand across his nose.

"But I’d be fine with this, Johnny," Mitch fumbled. "Like the way we are. I’d be fine with anything you want … I just don’t want to lose you." He looked up through a teary veil.

John’s face was a mixture of happiness and pain. It was the very first time John had revealed so many emotions, making himself so vulnerable.

"I wouldn’t want to lose you, too." John’s hand tightened slightly. "And I don’t want to die alone, Mitch. Nearly everyone on the Baker team did, I’ve only been with Joey. But I don’t have much to offer you for this relationship," his last words were husky, his head bowed.

"That isn’t important to me, I … I don’t need anything from you that you can’t give. I just love you the way you are. I’ll always be at your side. No matter what, I got your back, partner," Mitch intoned, putting his hands on John’s chest.

For some time they just stood across each other, neither saying a word. John’s dark eyes roamed Mitch’s face, his expression equally lost, insecure but also hoping, longing. And then as if some final piece of a jigsaw had fallen into place, Mitch leaned down and John raised his head and they brought their foreheads together. Closing his eyes, Mitch reveled in the intimacy and trust of the contact. He could feel the heat of John’s body and the evenly exhaled breath on his face. Never before had he been so close to the other man, physically or emotionally. Then their noses touched, their heads turned and their lips met.
The kiss was something Mitch couldn’t put into words. John’s touch was tender and chaste, unlike anything Mitch had imagined it to be. His movements were so very soft that Mitch melted away beneath them. Mitch’s hands brushed across the stubble on John’s cheeks as he cupped the other man’s face before combing through the freshly cut hair. At the first contact of their lips John had let go of Mitch as if shocked, but now he gradually held Mitch’s small of the back.

Elation and happiness cursed through Mitch, drowning him with longing, but he had himself under control and when John drew back, Mitch reciprocated.

Still with their foreheads touching, John drew a thumb across Mitch’s cheek, brushing away a stray tear. His hand lingered on, caressing his cheekbone as if it were something new and delicate.

"I really do love you, Johnny," Mitch whispered, completely taken over by relief and joy.

John looked at him, a thousand small expressions flickering across his face. "I know, it never felt like anything else to me."

Mitch smiled, another tear spilled from his eye.

"I love you too, Mitch."

***

After they had broken the contact Mitch gave John a shy grin, who in turn smiled his usual private smile that gave him an even younger look now that the last restraints had disappeared.

John grabbed his red shirt form the rim of the bathtub while Mitch made for the chair. Somehow it was like nothing had changed and everything was different. Their interactions were the same as before but now Mitch had a place in John’s personal space. Before he had just been tolerated around John, sometimes invited, but never fully integrated. Now he had crossed a final border and stepped into that very secluded bubble that made up John’s life. Mitch wanted to tread as carefully as possible.

"I–" Mitch began as he took the chair out of the room but was interrupted by his stomach giving a tremendous rumble.

John stepped up behind him and closed the door. His face wore the usual calm expression but now there was a touch of ease and his lips seemed to carry a very small half-smile. "You hungry?" he asked.

Mitch wanted to die with embarrassment. How could his stomach ruin such a perfect moment? "Yeah … apparently," he laughed awkwardly.

"It’s nearly 5 p.m. We could start to cook," John offered.

After a moment’s thought Mitch agreed, "I can make us some stew like my mother always used to cook for me and my dad. It’s the perfect weather outside."

"Sounds good. Care to show me?" John asked.

Surprised, Mitch looked at John who calmly returned the gaze.

"You want me to show you how to make stew?" Mitch wanted to confirm, as if he hadn’t understood the first time.
"Yeah. Can’t help to know a thing or two around the kitchen either," John explained.

"But, I am not even a good cook, I–" Mitch stopped as he saw the look on John’s face. It looked quite taken aback.

"You’re a good cook, Mitch. I like all your meals," John said that with so much conviction that Mitch could have burst with pride.

 Barely even able to hide his grin he answered, "Ok. Then I’d love too!"

With that they walked into the kitchen, replaced the chair and started cooking. It was a very natural back and forth; Mitch gave instructions, John asked questions and they split the work load between them.

***

Mitch hid his yawn behind a lifted hand. The cooking had taken quite some time and after eating the stew he and John had talked over a mug of coffee each. There Mitch had found out that John had never learned to cook and he only really knew how to hunt, kill, gut and prepare game over an open fire. Or eat it raw. Now Mitch understood why John had appreciated every meal so much and sorrow overtook him. Pushing his dark thoughts aside he swore that he would cook as often for John as he could. Another yawn brought him back from his wandering thoughts and he checked the watch on the kitchen wall. It was only 9 p.m. but he felt very tired after the events of the day.

"You’re tired. You should go to bed," John suggested and finished his coffee.

"Yeah, I think so, too," Mitch mumbled.

With that they cleaned up the kitchen. John went to the bathroom while Mitch picked up the novels from the living room table and locked the veranda and the front door. When he returned from the bathroom himself, he found John already setting up his bed on the sofa. Guilt overcame Mitch as he watched John preparing his usual sleeping place. Even now he wouldn’t presume that he could move around the house as if it was his.

"Um, John," Mitch began and leaned against the doorframe a little awkwardly, not knowing where to put his uncertainty.

John looked up from his task.

"If you, if you want … only if you want you can … sleep in my bed," Mitch offered with a shaky voice.

As soon as he had said the words Mitch felt inadequate. He knew that John needed his space, particularly the physical one, and that everything between them was new and fragile, but he couldn’t stop the question from slipping past.

"Ah, I shouldn’t have offered that. You don’t have to feel obligated to accept, I just …" he trailed off, lost for words.

"It’s fine, Mitch," John soothed. "I’d love to."

As natural as working or talking with John had become, as strange and a little embarrassing it was to climb into bed with him. Again. The first time they had shared a bed hadn’t been that awkward, because Mitch had focused solely on comforting John, when he was still troubled by the death of his best friend. But now sharing a bed seemed to have a lot more purpose after their confessions this
Pulling up the blankets to his chin, Mitch turned off the light on the nightstand. Lying in the dark like that Mitch felt the slight dip in his mattress due to John’s weight.

"It’s funny," Mitch said and an uneasy laughter escaped his lips.

"What is?" John wanted to know after a moment’s silence.

Mitch toyed with the blanket. "I … I was afraid that you’d be disgusted with me." He admitted quietly.

There was a huff and Mitch realized that John had let out a small laugh.

"I could never be disgusted with you Mitch," he replied and there was a slight jingle of the dog tags. John had turned his head towards him.

"I just thought, you know, with being in the army and everything, it was something you looked down upon. And then Derek called me out that evening at the Blue Jay’s Bar … I really feared that you might feel the same if you knew," Mitch went on, getting a little uneasy.

John was silent for a while and Mitch feared that he had offended him by making such presumptions.

"You know," John began. "I don’t give a damn about what that guy said. The war makes you realize things. What’s important, what isn’t. To love is. Whom you love isn’t. That you’re a man makes no difference to me."

At that Mitch was stunned. He had learnt a lot about John in the past months but he had never explained so much of his mind set. A small glow began to spread from his gut, flooding his body with warmth. Mitch rolled around to face John in the dark. But before he could say anything, John brought his forehead flush with Mitch’s, ruffling both their hair.

"Night, Mitch."

"G’night, Johnny."

***

Something woke Mitch up. He couldn’t quite put a finger on it, but he slowly rose out of the depths of sleep and opened his eyes to utter darkness. The room was silent and Mitch lay unmoving for several heartbeats and tried to focus on John’s breathing. But it wasn’t there.

Shock pulsed through his system as he sat up, a shout beginning to form on his lips. But then it died. John sat next to him, his legs covered by their shared blanket, his shoulders bare. To Mitch’s dismay John’s head was bowed and he had buried his face behind trembling hands.

Mitch didn’t need to ask what was wrong. He knew. So he pushed out of the blanket and huddled closer to John.

"Didn’t mean to wake you," John mumbled between his hands.

"You should’ve done so earlier," Mitch said and put his arm around John and they both sat through the night in shared silence.

Patience and time.
THANK YOU! <3

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
For once in my life I won't let sorrow hurt me

Chapter Summary

Some time has passed after Mitch's confession of his love for John. Now everyday life is upon them and they have to tackle obstacles and fears as they come.

Chapter Notes

I can't say it often enough how amazing it is that this little ship continues to live on! They are such a pleasure to write and a joy to talk about! Especially with my wonderful beta tattiosala's (tumblr) who is full of headcanons and ready to talk some lovely nonsense about those two <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A fierce pink streak of sunlight illuminated the otherwise bleak, light grey sky. It had truly become winter now and when Mitch had driven to his routine shift at the police station it was still dark out. Now the sun fought its way up towards the sky to shine through an undoubtedly clear winter’s day.

Mitch hummed silently under his breath while typing some report or other Sheriff Hobbs had asked of him.

"Hm, Stevie Wonder … For once in my life," Thomas stated as he turned around in his swivel chair to face Mitch.

Surprised, Mitch looked up and couldn’t hide his grin. "Yeah, you’re right."

"You're very chipper today," Thomas remarked and raised a thick eyebrow. "What’s the occasion?"

Of course now that Mitch had confessed to Thomas that he had taken in John Rambo he had kept his best friend up to date. Thomas knew that John had a job, that he had gone to the hospital, had gotten out of it and right into therapy. There weren’t any more good news to justify Mitch’s apparently very prominent happiness. Only the news that he and John had finally taken a first step together. But that was something Mitch couldn’t tell. Maybe never.

Mitch shrugged to downplay his nervousness. "Nothing special really. It's just that John’s making … progress in the therapy is all." It was a rotten lie. Well, not necessarily a lie, yet not the truth either but Mitch couldn’t risk Thomas’ friendship.

"You know, I’m glad to hear that. After all you’ve told me he’s been through. Soon he’ll be able to make his own way again," Thomas said cheerfully and gave Mitch a warm smile.

*His own way.* Mitch lingered on that sentence. After yesterday’s events he hoped that John would never make his own, his *lonesome*, way. Mitch would do everything he could to stay at that man’s side, what ever the costs.
This night Mitch had woken up to find John already shaken awake by his recurring nightmares from Viet Nam. Together they had sat in silence and darkness. Due to the season the light outside didn’t change with the rising morning, so Mitch wasn’t sure how long he sat with John. He only remembered that he had just wanted to close his eyes for a second … and then he woke up to find the bed empty.

This time the room wasn’t entirely in dark. A very thin sliver of orange light fell through the door which stood ajar. Mitch rolled over and onto the empty space that John had left behind. For a moment Mitch was disappointed that John had risen so early, but then he thought better of it. Maybe John needed some time alone. Maybe sleeping at such close quarters with Mitch wasn’t something that sat well with the other man. Maybe—

No, Mitch thought. *I shouldn’t kick myself for something I haven’t done.* He inhaled deeply and found that the pillow still smelled of John’s shampoo and his own, unique scent. Mitch smiled and relaxed a little more. They would both take it step by step.

So without any hurry Mitch got out of bed, collected his uniform and went into the bathroom. While crossing the lightened corridor he saw that the kitchen door was also open and a smell of freshly brewed coffee and toast wafted over to him. John had made breakfast.

After brushing his teeth and a careful morning shave, with a tightly locked door, Mitch entered the kitchen and found that he was still somewhat nervous.

"Morning, Mitch," John greeted him with his usual low voice.

The other man sat at a completely laid out table, a half-eaten toast with scrambled eggs on his platter accompanied by a cup of coffee. Next to his hand was also the very battered copy of the thriller John had read yesterday. A tingling started in Mitch’s gut.

"Good morning, Johnny," Mitch replied and took a seat on his accustomed place. "Thank you for making breakfast. Didn’t … didn’t you sleep on well anymore?"

John’s move toward the pot of coffee halted for just a breath before he picked it up and poured a mug. His face wasn’t closed off as it used to be and now an exhausted expression flickered across it. "Not really."

Mitch accepted the mug and nodded. "If I did—" Mitch started but was cut short.

"No," John said firmly, then more softly, "It’s nothing to do with you."

They both shared a smile before tucking into their breakfast.

Mitch remembered the moment vividly again, as he had done the whole morning. He knew that with their confessed love for each other they had only taken their first step, but nonetheless it made Mitch more than happy.

Slowly Mitch focused back on the here and now and realized that Thomas was waiting for some kind of reaction from Mitch.

"I … Yeah, that makes me very happy, too! You know … I have been playing with the idea of, ah, of working myself up to become sheriff someday," Mitch admitted with a blush rising to his cheeks.

Thomas’ face lit up and a wide grin appeared beneath his mustache.
"Really? Where does that notion come from? I though you only joined the department because you had to and just stuck with it?" Thomas asked with a mocking tone at first but which got more serious in the end because he would never laugh Mitch off.

Another shrug from Mitch. "I don’t know … I mean, I do! It’s just hard to explain. You know, some time ago I realized that I wasn’t that helpless and meaningless I always took myself for." Before Thomas could protest Mitch went on. "Not in that depression kind of way. But in general, like … what can we actually change in the world? I thought it was nothing, but now that I see John’s progress I really want to progress myself. Does that make sense?" Mitch laughed awkwardly and ran a hand over his nose.

"Yes," Thomas put forward hesitantly. "Well yes, actually it does. I never fancied myself as a sheriff, but I admire your ambition."

Mitch gave a shy grin. "I just thought the world doesn’t need another Teasle," slight venom dripped into Mitch’s voice, which was very unlike him, but he couldn’t help it. After all this time with John, the devastating expanse of Teasle’s actions grew more and more apparent. "I want to be a fairer and more just sheriff. Maybe I could even use that position to … to change something for more Vets. Or finally catching Derek Johnson red-handed! That guy is giving me the creeps."

Thomas looked at him long and silent, as the usual bustle of the police station flowed around them. Then he grinned even broader. "You know, Mitch, I actually think you’ll make your very own way, too! And if that involves finally getting Derek behind bars, I'm all for it."

Mitch smiled but thought in silence: \textit{John and I will make our way.}

***

Now that Mitch had confessed his love for John and found that the other man felt the same about him, Mitch realized that there were still a lot more barriers to work through. When they had just been friends their way of interaction was clear: Mitch knew how close he could come, when it was best to stay silent and when the other man needed human contact. But now everything was different.

Granted, John was still himself but Mitch knew how difficult it was for him to be close with anyone and loving each other didn't change that. Not so fast anyway. So being together didn’t mean that every previous precaution could be put aside all of a sudden. Instead of reaching out towards John, as would be natural for any other couple, Mitch kept to himself. He didn’t go in for daily wake-up or good-night kisses. In fact they hadn’t kissed since the incident in the bathroom. However that was nothing Mitch was disappointed about. He wanted for John to settle into this new situation at his own pace, even if that required years.

The first week seemed a little awkward for Mitch because he was trying to figure out how to behave in this relationship. John on the other hand seemed the same in his manner. He showed no signs of uneasiness for the new situation as if nothing between them had changed.

Well nothing had really changed between them, but now they both knew how the other felt and that made Mitch nervous. He had begun to weight every one of his actions against this knowledge and tried to gauge if it would affect the other man. He had to admit to himself that he was even more scared of hurting Johnny by being too inconsiderate than before.

But after a time Mitch’s initial fear simmered down and just lurked at the back of his mind, keeping him wary. As everyday life went on there were only slight changes in John’s health. It was very rare for him to sleep undisturbed, instead he woke up every night and kept awake for the remainder of it.
On some nights John’s awakening was brutal. He sat upright in a tangle of limbs and a muffled shout. On other nights Mitch just woke to a silent, trembling John who’s whole shirt was drenched in sweat and clung to his body like a second skin. Each time John would murmur a strained excuse for waking Mitch and that he hadn’t meant to, but Mitch wouldn’t hear any of it. He told John that it was completely fine and that he would be there for him. They were partners.

It was on those occasions that Mitch knew exactly how to behave around John. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them and Mitch just put his arms around the stockier man and held him as long as he could stay awake. John was always silent through those bouts. He never told Mitch what he had dreamt of and Mitch never asked. But he really didn’t need to ask, he knew. Instead John just accepted Mitch’s caress with a silent gratitude that radiated from him like heat. John leaned ever so carefully into Mitch’s touch and Mitch did his best to comfort the other man to make him feel safe.

One time Mitch had nodded off while he was combing through John’s clammy hair to calm him down. Suddenly John had roused himself and said, “You should go to sleep, Mitch.”

If Mitch had answered he had forgotten about it. Instead he remembered strong, gentle arms wrapping around him and pulling him into a tender embrace. He had mumbled something incoherent and settled against John’s chest, falling asleep. Mitch wasn’t sure how long John had kept him in his arms, sometimes he surfaced from his sleep, still being held by John and then drifted off again. Maybe holding onto Mitch through the rest of the night helped John to focus on something more pleasant than his nightmares, so Mitch didn’t object. In fact, it was a welcome touch.

There were other everyday life situations that made it unmistakably clear that John was still fighting a heavy burden. Sometimes when they cooked together John’s posture would switch from relaxed to nearly frozen when Mitch used a knife. It wasn’t that Mitch swung the blade about in an exaggerated manner, it was just the plain presence of a knife in another person’s hand that set John on edge. But he never requested Mitch to put the knife away, nor would John quit cooking. He just stood there for a second or two, his jaw clenching and unclenching before he regained his posture and went on. Guilt gnawed at Mitch when that happened but John always assured him that it was fine, that he wanted to get accustomed.

Between reporting back at the probation office each month and his regular working hours John had taken up reading as a hobby. When he and Mitch were done with the chores for the day they would settle into the living room to read. It wasn’t that John had taken up that kind of free time activity because he was much of a reader, but he couldn’t watch TV. The last time when Mitch had turned on the TV John had suffered from a heavy panic attack, Mitch just never would take that risk again. The news channels were full of Viet Nam footage and reports of suspected POWs which were bound to evoke more traumatic memories in John for certain.

But Mitch didn’t mind. He enjoyed the silent afternoons when the sun would shine low through the windows, basking the living room in a golden light and the only sound was the rustling of turned pages. On one afternoon the warm sunshine had made Mitch so drowsy that he had fallen asleep over his novel. When he woke up again it was to the rhythmic stroking of his hair. He had nodded off and somehow curled up in John’s lap who had let him.

"Boring book?" John wanted to know before Mitch could start on an endless stream of apologies.

For two seconds Mitch was caught off guard. He had wanted to apologize to John for falling asleep on him and that he didn’t want to break into his personal space like that. But the way John asked the question and the way he quite naturally let his fingers run through Mitch’s hair told him that it was fine. He shouldn’t worry.
Mitch managed a rough laugh after his sleep and then replied, "Very." After that he had settled into a more comfortable pose and dozed off again for the rest of the afternoon.

On his weekends off Mitch always ran errands that tended to get left behind on a normal working schedule, so every now and then he would drive into the town and shop for groceries. After a while John had asked Mitch if he could come too and help. Of course Mitch had tried to keep every other obligation away from John if he could. He knew that working at Chuck’s still weighted heavily on John’s mind because of the buzz saw and that the weekly appointments with the therapist always left him raw and tired, battling his old memories in order to overcome them. Letting him walk into town on his own to run errands seemed heartless to Mitch so he never offered to share the work. But now that John had asked, he couldn’t refuse.

When John and Mitch walked side by side up the snow crusted pavement to the local supermarket chain a small twinge of unease started creeping up Mitch’s back and made him shiver. Once or twice he looked over his shoulder to see if they were watched. Of course they weren’t but Mitch just couldn’t battle his paranoia. Now that he and John knew that they loved each other, it seemed like the whole world knew and judged them for it. The only reason he and John were given a side eye occasionally was because of John’s jacket. In the force of habit John had put on his military parka which still sported the US flag and the other official military insignia which marked him for what he was, a soldier. Mitch ground his teeth at the hostile glances but held himself back.

While shopping he managed to relax and focused on the task at hand. They made their way through the heavily packed and brightly advertised isles and it felt like it had always been that way. Longing stirred in Mitch just to reach out and take John’s hand like all the other couples around them. But he couldn’t. They couldn’t. So forcing down his agitated emotions Mitch shook his head and followed John who had wandered down the row of canned goods.

Just as they wanted to pack the groceries onto the loading area of the pick-up Mitch spied a clothing display in one of the shop windows.

"Oh John, look! They are having a sale," Mitch exclaimed and pointed across the street at a small shop.

John turned from where he was heaving the brown paper bags into the pick-up and eyed the store. "Sure have."

"Let’s go have a look. Maybe they have some pullovers we can get you," Mitch suggested with a bright smile.

John’s brow furrowed for a second before he said, "Should I stop wearing your father’s?"

A gush of sadness washed over Mitch at the question.

"No, no, that's not what I meant! You can still wear them, but you know … that way you could have your own pullover and have something smart to wear out!" He smiled shyly and brushed the lapel of John’s parka.

A tentative grin tugged at John’s lips as he gave in. "Alright."

As soon as they stepped into the store they were greeted by a portly woman who at once started to praise her goods and made offers to help. Behind Mitch John tensed and took a shuffling step back, hiding the flag patch on his jacket behind Mitch’s shoulder.

"Thank you, Ma’am," Mitch cooed in his sweetest son-in-law-voice. "But we’re fine." And with that
he evaded the woman, got a careful hold on John’s elbow and maneuvered him through the coatracks and mannequins. After a few seconds John relaxed in Mitch’s grip.

"So, let’s have a look, shall we?" Mitch asked enthusiastically.

And to Mitch’s surprise John nodded and started browsing through the racks, his fingers carefully trailing over cashmere pullovers, woolen sweaters and flannel shirts. Smiling to himself, Mitch took out one pullover after another, looking for a specific color he had in mind.

The store was very well visited and every few minutes the bell rang and another customer came in and was at once besieged by the overly helpful owner. Despite the amount of people in the store it was a quiet and cozy atmosphere. The floor was laid out in a plush, moss-green carpet and the ceiling was paneled in dark cherry wood. The mannequins wore the latest fashion consisting of turtle necks and bell bottoms but that was something Mitch couldn’t envision John in. He snorted.

After a time he had found two pullovers that would suit John perfectly; One was rust-red with a heavy plaid pattern and the other was a plain one in olive-green.

Mitch spied John in front of a rack with checkered flannel shirts and joined him.

"Here, would you like to try those on?" Mitch asked and held his findings up for inspection.

"Sure," John nodded.

When they had reached the changing rooms Mitch turned to John to hand over the pullovers but he stopped in mid-movement. Next to him John was rooted to the floor. His forehead was beaded in sweat and his breathing came out in ragged gasp.

At first Mitch was too startled at John’s constitution that he didn’t know what to do.

"John," Mitch ventured and grabbed the other man’s cold and clammy hand.

When Mitch got no reaction he looked about frantically. Searching for any hint of what had distressed John and for any people who might be observing them. Fortunately the changing rooms were located at the back of the store around a corner so they were well out of sight. Then Mitch’s eyes fell on the heavy velvet curtain drawn aside to display the cabin. The cabin which wasn’t more than a four by four feet box. With just one tiny square window.

"Oh no," Mitch cursed silently, then turned to John in a calming voice, "It’s fine, Johnny. You don’t have to go in there. Let’s get out of here … It’s fine, I’m here."

Mitch was kneading John’s hand in his own when the other man finally came to and looked at Mitch with a taut expression. Without hesitating once, Mitch cupped John’s face and brushed his thumb over the cheek bone.

"Let’s go, Johnny," Mitch soothed.

But before John could give any response a woman came around the corner and gasped.

"Christ, what are you two doing?" Her voice already bordered on hysteria that would definitely draw more attention to them.

Snapping to action, Mitch grabbed John’s unresisting arm and pushed past the woman, towards the front door.
"He’s just nauseous," Mitch managed to grit out between his teeth as he thrust the pullovers into the next rack he passed, before fleeing the store with John in tow.

Back at the pick-up truck Mitch cast an irritated look back across the street. He should have known …

Cutting through his rising self-hatred Mitch walked over to John, addressing him. "How … How do you feel?"

John leaned against the far side of the car facing away from the street, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Fine. Just … fine in a minute," was his ragged answer.

"I’m so sorry, John. I should’ve–" But Mitch never finished his sentence. John had put a hand upon Mitch’s shoulder and gave him a weak smile.

"You couldn’t’ve. Let’s go home, yeah?"

When the last of the paper bags had been dumped onto the floor of the hallway, Mitch shut the front door with more vehemence than necessary. He leaned against the wooden structure as if to brace himself for an enemy attack from outside. His whole head was buzzing with feelings, sensations and memories from today that he couldn’t focus right. An indescribable anger and sadness surged through him and made him tremble.

The whole morning in town Mitch had battled his growing desire to just reach out and hold John’s hand. To walk side by side through the streets to show everyone that they belonged together and that there was more to John than his army insignia could tell. To keep John grounded while getting back into a civilian life. But the fear of being assaulted and lynched out of the city kept him from doing so.

Not only that but Mitch had also managed to lead John to another panic attack just because he hadn’t–

"Mitch?"

Startled, Mitch looked up and found John right in front of him. His brow was furrowed and the brown eyes held worry and sadness as they searched Mitch’s face.

"Don’t kick yourself like that," John said with a soft voice.

Still racked by his emotions Mitch just stood there while tears spilled from his eyes. Not thinking he gently took John’s face between his hands. The other man didn’t flinch, he just kept very, very still.

Mitch’s fingers lingered on the finely carved cheekbones and rough jawline before he chocked out, "I– It’s just so … unfair … I," Mitch never knew where he wanted to go with this explanation so he just stumbled to a halt.

"It’s alright," John breathed and tilted his head so that Mitch’s left hand was flush with his face. "You can’t always be the one carrying both our burdens. We’re partners, remember?"

Unable to say anything Mitch’s bottom lip trembled as he smiled cautiously. And then he tugged John forward, leaned down and brought their lips together for a kiss.

A calloused but tender hand carefully held Mitch’s neck in place, as John answered the kiss with such endearment that Mitch’s mind was swept clean of all the negative thoughts and a sweet calm
took their place instead.

The kiss broke and their lips only lingered on a moment longer before Mitch buried his face in the crook of John’s neck. John ran a soothing hand up and down Mitch’s back. Then it settled onto his neck once more and caressed the fine strands of hair behind his ear.

"I just wished I could show the world who you really are. What you mean to me," Mitch breathed against John’s neck, the familiar scent calming him down.

"I know," John replied. "But right now this is the way things gotta be. Don’t take it on all by yourself."

Mitch nodded.

"I got your back, Mitch."

***

A few days later Mitch had recovered from his initial distress following the events of the clothing store. Still it remained a sore spot in his mind, but he knew that John was right. There was nothing they could do against societies mind-set, they were more or less forced to abide by their rules and hide their relationship. Granted, Mitch had lived this way before and never felt remorse for keeping his sexuality hidden, yet being with John had awoken the urge to show everybody that they belonged together. To make them see that they were mistaken in their assessment of John.

John on the other hand didn’t seem to be bothered that much. After his return from Viet Nam he was forced to hide different aspects of his person in order to fit back into society. However at some point he had been too proud to hide and Teasle had spotted him directly for what he was.

_Had been_, Mitch told himself.

Mitch heaved a sigh as he turned the page in the recent music magazine he always bought at a dingy kiosk just two blocks away from the sheriff’s department. The last days at work had been hard for him because he had finally talked to sheriff Hobbs about working on a career to become a sheriff himself. As it turned out sheriff Hobbs was quite enthusiastic about the idea since his retirement was up ahead and he preferred to leave the department to someone he knew and maybe even trained. Now Mitch’s work load had doubled with more paperwork, going on more patrols and even take up appointments that were initially sheriff Hobbs’. But Mitch didn’t care, he liked his work and he knew that after half a year he could ask for a pay rise that would take John and him another step further.

Relinquishing the thought, Mitch closed the magazine and leaned back, just to jump back out of the seat with the ringing of the telephone. Next to him John gave an involuntary twitch too and looked up from his novel.

"I wonder," Mitch murmured as he got up to answer the call. "Hullo?"

"Hello, Mitch my dear, how are you?" said a sweet feminin voice on the other end of the line.

"Aunt Lisa!" Mitch exclaimed happily as he recognized his aunt Elizabeth but then his feelings sank with a sudden dark premonition. "I, I’m fine! How are you?"

"Well that’s nice. I’m fine, except that you never call," his aunt chided him but only with mild reproach in her voice.

"I know and I’m really sorry. It’s just … work has been quite busy these days and I forgot," he
explained and eyed John out of the corner of his eye. But John didn’t seem to notice and had picked up his book again.

"Don’t think about it, Mitch. I know you’re working very hard," aunt Lisa assured him and went on, "And that is more or less why I am calling. When will you come home for the Christmas holidays?"

And there it was. Dread froze Mitch’s heart as his thoughts began running in circles to find an excuse, an explanation why he couldn’t come.

"Um, I haven’t given that much thought for the last days …"

"That’s what I expected, dear. So I’m calling to remind you. See, Sarah and Amber will be coming home too and you know how eager Amber is to see you," aunt Lisa told him, mentioning his cousin and her daughter.

Mitch was torn between his love and regard for his relatives and his love for John, whom he wouldn’t leave alone on a day like Christmas. He fiddled with the telephone cord.

"And I’m very eager to see you all again, too. But I … I have to check in with work first, to see if they’ve given me a shift or not," he explained.

"But surely they’ll give you off on a day like that! You’re a deputy and not the sheriff, they’ll find someone to take your shift," aunt Lisa said that with so much affection, it was hard for Mitch to feel bad about being called ‘just a deputy’.

"Actually, I haven’t told you yet, but I’ve started working on a sheriff’s career, so there might be work for me on Christmas," he interjected with a feeble laugh.

"Oh but Mitch, that are wonderful news! Why haven’t you told us earlier? Henry will be ever so proud. But in that case, go and check with your work and call me back if you know when you’ll come for Christmas," she intoned with so much conviction that the option of him not coming was non-existent. But Mitch couldn’t blame her. He always came home for Christmas and it was something he really enjoyed, however this year had turned out to be different.

"I sure will, aunt Lisa. Call you back soon!" Mitch said and hung up.

Slowly desperation and panic rose in him and he stood unmoving in front of the dingy telephone table, staring at nothing. A small rustle behind him told Mitch that John had set his book aside.

"Your aunt?"

"Yeah," Mitch whispered, still unable to figure out what to do.

After that John didn’t say anything more. He never pushed or probed Mitch for answers he didn’t give willingly and Mitch was sure that John could read his whole posture and tell how stressed he was. John would give him space.

Mitch turned around and explained, "She … she asked me if I’ll come home for Christmas. To Rosswood that is. They don’t live here."

"Will you get a shift on Christmas?" John inquired with his usual calm.

His mind buzzing, Mitch’s fingers tapped a nervous rhythm on his thigh and he nearly overheard John’s question.
"Um, I don’t know … I mean, well I do … I think I won’t have a shift," he explained and only now found the courage to walk back to John. But instead of taking his former place on the sofa, Mitch sank onto the floor in front of it, one arm resting on the seat.

John regarded him with his steady, dark brown eyes before he said, "Then you should go."

Agitated, Mitch rubbed a hand over his face and then through his hair, shuffling it.

"It’s not that I don’t want to! It’s just I can’t. I won’t. Not when you’re back here," Mitch fumbled for words. "See, I haven’t … told my relatives about … me. And, and if I just tell them that you’re a good friend of mine I wanted to bring along I still have to tell them something about you and … you know how people are." Mitch looked up pleadingly.

John’s expression was grave but also understanding. "Don’t worry about me, I’m fine here. Family is important and you should go."

Mitch’s heart grew heavy as John said that because he was right. John would be fine alone and not angry at Mitch’s going, but that was something Mitch wouldn’t do. He had sworn to himself to be by John’s side, no matter what came. This was simply another obstacle on their shared way they would have to work through. And maybe he did have to work on Christmas, then everything would be alright.

Feeling downcast, Mitch bowed his head and rested it on John’s lap for support. Sensing his distress, John started brushing his fingers through Mitch’s hair, soothing him.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you for every read, kudos and comment, they mean so much!

Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
As long as I know I have love I can make it

Chapter Summary

Everyday life has been going smoothly for a time and the only obstacle ahead is the upcoming Christmas celebrations with Mitch's relatives. But until then the police of Fairview is called to action with Mitch at its midst.

Chapter Notes

I don't know what so say any more than those two still mean a lot to me and have a special place in my heart. And of course I can't stress it often enough how wonderful it is to have tattiosala's (tumblr) as my beta! Their feedback, headcanons and overall enthusiasm for John and Mitch keeps me focused on writing on. I am forever thankful for that <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day Mitch walked up the dingy and soberly furnished hallway leading to sheriff Hobbs’ office. Nervously he adjusted his shirt cuffs and lapels before he knocked on the wooden door.

"Come in!" boomed a deep and direct voice.

Mitch stepped through the rickety door and shut it behind him with a considerate clatter, making him cringe.

"Ah, deputy Mitch. On time as always," sheriff Hobbs said as a matter of greeting and continued scribbling away on some form, never looking up.

Fumbling with his hands Mitch looked at the old sheriff. Despite being seated you could see that he was huge, even half a head taller than Mitch and despite his age still very fit though heavy set. His salt and pepper beard was shaved into an impressive mustache that sometimes bore the resemblance of a walrus and Mitch had to shake his head to get the image out of it.

"Of course, sir," Mitch replied with a little unease. It wasn’t that sheriff Hobbs frightened him, but that man evoked respect. He would never treat his officers and deputies rough and heedless, like Teasle had done, but if he was discontent with anything, he made sure the person in question was held accountable.

Sheriff Hobbs looked up and inspected Mitch intently with his grey eyes. "What’s the matter, Mitch?"

Breaking his frozen posture with a jerk, Mitch replied, "I just wanted to ask, sir, if you’ve already filed the schedule for the holidays. I think the boys back in the office would like to know, to plan their vacations."

The other man set his pen aside gruffly and got a piece of paper out of his drawer. "Very good of
you to think of that. Here’s the schedule.”

Mitch accepted the paper with a nod and his eyes roamed fervently over the tiny print and saw what he dreaded to see. He had no shift on Christmas.

"Sir, I think there could be a small problem with the schedule," Mitch ventured, trying for confidence.

"How so?"

"Officer Anderson told me he wanted to drive home for Christmas but now he has a shift on the 25th. Would it be alright if I traded my shift with his?" Mitch offered and looked the sheriff straight in the eye, knowing that the man valued that.

"No that won’t be possible. Anderson had Christmas off last year and at the moment he doesn’t seem to take his job seriously and I want to teach him a lesson," the other man replied matter of fact.

Mitch’s stomach contracted as the inevitable made itself clear. Somehow he would have to deal with his family now.

Apparently his feelings must have shown on his face because sheriff Hobbs went on, "You are a very good deputy and future sheriff to think about your colleagues like that, Mitch. It shows team-spirit and that’s the most important trait to have in the police. A man’s not an island. But you also have to learn when to discipline your fellow officers. And anyway, you earned the holidays off. You’ve worked very hard and I expect great things from you."

A defeated pride wormed itself through Mitch, dread and settled in his breast. If he had done anything, he had assured sheriff Hobbs of his assessment, that Mitch needed to have Christmas off. There was nothing to be done now.

"Thank you, sheriff Hobbs. I appreciate it!" Mitch managed to choke out with a half-hearted grin, before he turned towards the door.

After pinning and announcing the holiday schedule on the board he had to explain to Anderson at long length why he hadn’t gotten Christmas off. Finally, after about fifteen minutes of discussion Mitch slumped into his chair.

"What’s the matter?" Thomas wanted to know. "I thought you had Christmas off?"

Mitch forced himself into an upright position to face Thomas over the stapled of folders and files that had accumulated on his desk over the week.

"That’s exactly the point. I don’t want Christmas off," Mitch whispered over the rising bubble of conversation near the announcement board.

"What, why not?" Thomas sounded incredulous.

"I don’t want to go home– to Rosswood, because of John," Mitch explained with a strained face.

Thomas furrowed his brow in confusion. "But you go home every year! And each time to bring back tons of food."

"Yeah I know, but I can’t because of John. You see, I’d want to bring him along, but I also know how my aunt and uncle are gonna be," Mitch answered.
"Hm, I see what you mean, but … Just tell your aunt and uncle about him. Explain them what happened like you explained it to me. It’s not … that unreasonable."

"I don’t know, Thomas," Mitch nearly wailed as he let his head drop onto the desk in despair. He wasn’t sure how his family would react, how he would handle bringing John back home and how John would feel, being surrounded by so many people he didn’t know but might feel the need to interact with on Mitch’s behalf.

"Now listen, Mitch," Thomas intoned, his voice somewhere between pep talk and reprimand. "If you want to become sheriff you have to face such situations. Tell her about John, that he is a good friend of yours and what you’ve done for him. I’m pretty sure your aunt will do the christian thing."

Mitch looked up and rewarded Thomas with a feeble smile. That was exactly what Mitch was afraid off, that his aunt would do the christian thing and judge John for what he had done.

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That evening Mitch lay in his bed, reliving today’s telephone call with his aunt. Luckily John hadn’t been around when Mitch stumbled through an explanation how he had come to meet John, taken him in and provide for him until he was able to live on his own again. All of the time Mitch was sick for lying to his aunt like that, and even worse to himself. But now wasn’t the time to come out to his family and so he was forced to keep up a false front when Christmas finally came around.

At first his aunt had been aghast and shocked that Mitch had done such a thing. That man was a criminal, without conscience who would live off of Mitch’s savings until nothing more was to be found and then move on. A person who had killed people for a living wasn’t someone you invited to your table and support in such ways as Mitch had done. He should get rid off him as soon as he could.

It had taken Mitch quite sometime and self-control to explain his reasoning and that John was in fact a civilized human being and not the cold-hearted mass-murderer she made him out to be. Mitch loved his aunt dearly, just like he loved his mother, but he couldn’t accept John being slandered like that. After he had finally made her see that John wouldn’t do them any harm, she reluctantly had agreed to do the christian thing and invited John for Christmas, Mitch hung up. He felt filthy, sick and downright gutted. He was disgusted at himself for lying and angry at the world in general who treated John so unfairly.

When John had come home, Mitch at first wasn’t able to tell him what had happened but when he finally told him, a stream of apologies poured out of Mitch, that he had arranged everything like that, without taking John into account and if he wanted this at all.

But John had just taken one of Mitch’s hands, one that wasn’t rubbing at his crying eyes, and kept it in a steady grip. "It’s fine. We’re partners, remember?"

Now Mitch had buried himself deep into the thick winter blankets of his bed and pressed his face into the pillows. He was trying to shut out everything.

Suddenly there was a shift in the mattress as John sat on the bed, having returned from the bathroom. But before Mitch could turn around, the blanket was lifted for an instant, the bed dipped a little more and he was tugged into a gentle embrace.

For a heartbeat Mitch was overwhelmed with emotion. His whole back was flush with John’s broad chest while his arms slung around Mitch’s slighter waist, keeping him close. A tingling sensation spread from the base of his skull all through his body as John rested his head in the crook of Mitch’s
After a shaky breath, Mitch eased into the embraced and savored every second of it while his dark thoughts scattered, leaving him exhausted but content.

"Don’t worry, Mitch," John soothed in his dark voice while his lips brushed against the sensitive skin of Mitch’s neck. "We'll manage."

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Some days had passed and Mitch had buried himself in his work, trying to forget about the phone call with his aunt and the upcoming Christmas. He couldn’t stand thinking about it too long so tackling his work was a good way of venting his anxiousness but he also managed to get a hang on organizing his huge amount of daily tasks.

Despite the forms and papers piling on his desk, today had been a quiet shift. It had snowed steadily the past weeks and by now Fairview was covered in a white blanket, muffling all sounds and confiding most of the cars to their garages. But now the snowing had abated and only a few scattered clouds drifted through the sky. But those slack periods where expected in the winter times so sheriff Hobbs had sent a lot of deputies back home or given them an early holiday. So now only Thomas, Anderson, Mitch and four other officers were currently at the station, while Mitch had to work the radio. On behalf of sheriff Hobbs he had sent the rest of the officers in the station to pick up the forgotten paper work and tidying up the office before nearly everyone went home for Christmas. The sheriff himself had driven out to Rosswood, to help the local police find a hit and run driver, apparently hailing from Fairview.

Sighing deeply, Mitch filled out one form after another, proof-read some reports and checked old files to see if they could be closed, while keeping an eye on the radio. The whole morning there had been nothing but static crackle. As much as Mitch had suspected.

"Hey Mitch, where should we put–" Thomas began but was interrupted by an incoming radio call.

"Police car 48-5 calling in. Do you copy? Over," the voice over the radio asked and Mitch fumbled to get the equipment back in line to answer.

"Fairview Police HQ, Deputy Mitch reading. What's the matter?" Mitch spoke into the microphone and got out the standard notepad and a pencil, taking the police cars registration number.

"We got ourselves a speeder on highway 97 heading due Westbridge. We'll take up pursuit, but it looks like we'll be leaving municipal territory. Over," the officer explained.

"Copy that," Mitch replied. "Stay on his heels as long as you can, I'll call in on Westbridge police to see if they can take over. Please confirm."

"Alright, Fairview HQ, we'll stay in pursuit until we hear from you again. Over and out." There was a crackle and the connection was cut off.

Noting down the last details, Mitch fiddled with the dials to get the other frequency. When he finally reached Westbridge police department he explained the situation and they agreed to help. After that he got back in contact with police car 48-5 and instructed them. All of that only took about ten minutes and when Mitch put the headphones back on the table, he was as bored as ever.

"Figured out where to put the files," Thomas announced and put a cup of coffee in front of Mitch who accepted it happily.
"Ah, thanks. That's just what I need. Very quiet today, isn't it?" Mitch asked over his steaming mug.

"Yeah, I wish I could've stayed home. But as it turned out, I've apparently taken a lot of days off."

Thomas laughed and Mitch joined in.

Just as Mitch was about to say something along the lines, that it showed around Thomas' mid-section that he had been lazy the past months, the radio crackled to life again.

"Police car 48-8 calling! Do you copy?" The voice sounded agitated and was even worse to understand due to the static noise of the connection.

"Fairview Police HQ, Deputy Mitch answering. I read you. What's wrong 48-8?" Mitch recited the standard communication phrase, but somehow something felt off and his heart picked up a pace.

"This is officer Robson speaking. We have a shoot-out to report in residential area around Park Lane crossing Oroville Drive. Five shooters suspected to be barricaded in one of the empty houses, number 2100. We've taken position on the far end of the street, officer Clarke is evacuating the civilians. Over," the police officer on the end of the line sounded rather distressed but there still was a hint of professionalism about his report.

Completely taken by surprise Mitch froze and stared at the radio. A shoot-out, how could that happen? Such things never happened in Fairview, expect when … Mitch shot to action.

"Officer Robson, can you confirm the identity of the shooters? Over," Mitch spoke into the microphone hastily.

"Eye witnesses seemed all to be in shock and confused, but someone said something about a … Johnson? Over."

"Derek Johnson? Over," Mitch asked with more vehemence, his fingers trembling on the dials.

"Confirm, Fairview HQ. Derek Johnson is part of the shooters but we haven't intervisibility yet. Please advise. Over."

Now Mitch sat thunderstruck. Sheriff Hobbs had given him whole jurisdiction of the police department today, no matter if desk work or officers on patrol, Mitch had to organize them all and take responsibility for it. His hammering heart made his head pulse and he felt sick. Thomas still stood in front of him, as frozen and overwhelmed as Mitch was.

"Fairview HQ, please advise. We hear continuous shooting. Over," officer Robson was getting more agitated by the minute and Mitch knew he had to react.

"R– right. Police car 48-8, stay where you are, evacuate all civilians if you can and try to set up a perimeter as best as you can with two people. I'll call in police car 49-6 and 49-1 to come join you. I'll join you with all available officers from HQ and meet you at Park Lane crossing Oroville Drive with full armory. Keep up intervisibility but stay out of danger. Over and out," Mitch had nearly shouted the final sentences as he ripped the headphones off and stood up. His knees were mush and he wanted to puke. But there was no time for that. Something told Mitch that Derek was up to something and if he even had started shooting in the middle of the day, something was bound to happen.

"Alright guys, you heard it. We've a shoot-out on Park Lane crossing Oroville Drive with officers Robson and Clarke securing a perimeter. Thomas, you'll stay here and monitor all incoming radio calls and when we're gone, call in 49-6 and 49-1 as I've explained. The rest of you, follow me. We have to get out there now!"
And surprisingly no one objected but they all stood and stared thunderstruck before Mitch paroled them into action.

Mitch had never lead an operation and only ever read about it while training to become deputy. He knew that it was most important to secure the civilians and after that his fellow officers. But how to run an infiltration party into a house with five suspected shooters shut in, Mitch didn't know how.

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When they arrived at the scene Robson and Clarke had already set up barrier tape and had stationed themselves in front of a run-down wooden house, hiding behind their car, the snow on the street worn down to a hard crust.

"What's the situation?" Mitch inquired as he got out of the car, buckled his gun and crept over to the waiting officers with the snow giving a low crunch under his boots.

"We've heard some more shooting coming from the upper floor. It seems like they are shooting at themselves now, but we couldn't make out any of it," officer Robson explained, nervously fingering his gun in his holster.

"If it's really Derek Johnson I wouldn't put it past him to try to run some fishy drug deal and getting into a fight with his suppliers," Mitch mused, trying to stay focused and planning on what to do next based on this information.

He looked up and the sky was a leaden grey. By now the clouds hung deep and thick over Fairview, so none of the mountains could be seen from afar. If it started to snow they would have to be really careful not to turn this operation into a shambles. Adjusting his bulletproof vest more securely he squatted over to his own car, from where he instructed his officers.

"Listen. What we'll do now is, call out to them, explain the situation and offer them to surrender their guns in exchange for a non-violent solution to this problem," Mitch had to fight hard to keep his voice under control because every pair of eyes burned a hole through his skin and he felt naked and vulnerable. Those people relied on him, he wanted to become sheriff, now he had to proof his worth. "Despite our hope for a non-violent solution, we still will have a back up plan. We split up into two groups. Group A will stay here and take the house into focus, should any of the shooters come out. Group B will go down the street heading towards Burn Street and under cover of the alleyway will go through the gardens and station themselves at the back of the house."

Mitch looked around and saw only grim, but nodding faces. So far, they were with him.

"Right, group B will only go in if I give it a go. So long, you'll stay undercover but be ready. Got it?"

The officers nodded, let themselves be split into two groups and took their position as explained.

Mitch crouched behind the front door of his car, speaking into the radio, "Leader group B, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Deputy Mitch," officer Clarke answered, sounding strained but he made no further comment.

With that Mitch nodded to the officer next to him, telling him to cover Mitch as he slowly got up and spoke into the megaphone. "This is the police force of the Fairview police department. The building is surrounded and we advise you, to give up your guns and come out in a civilized manner." Mitch repeated his instructions several times, beseeching the shooters to come out but to no avail.
Suddenly, Anderson to his left piped up, "There! I see him! In the upper left window!"

Mitch followed the outstretched arm and indeed made out a shadowy figure behind the glass.

"Very good Anderson, but stay down," Mitch hissed because Anderson was halfway on top of the car's cowl. But before Mitch could go on, something wet hit his forehead. He looked up and it started snowing. At first it were just thin flakes he cursed under his breath but then they became thicker and heavier, obscuring their vision.

"Anderson, I told you to stay down, it's too snowy! You can't see properly," Mitch hissed over towards the next car, to make sure the officer stayed put.

"No way!" Anderson shouted in return and got out his gun. "I can still see him right there! I'll take him out from here, no problem." With that he cocked his gun, stood up behind the car and before Mitch could shout at him once more, a thunderous crack split the air. As if in slow-motion, Anderson spun sideways and toppled backwards while a crimson spray erupted from his shoulder, staining his clothes.

For a second Mitch was stunned. His ears rang with the gun shot, his vision was obscured by the heavy snow and his brain didn't seem to process all informations that stormed in on him. As if in trance, he grabbed for the radio and bellowed, "Group B this is a Go! I repeat, this is a Go!"

Mitch threw the radio aside and pushed himself from the car fumbling blindly for Anderson. His fingers found the soggy material of Anderson's blood soaked uniform, as Mitch tried to stop the bleeding. The instant his fingers found the sticky wound and warm blood spouted from underneath his fingers Mitch got sick. He turned his head and vomited on the street.

Suppressing his nausea he shouted blindly, "Get me an ambulance! I need an ambulance right now, officer shot!"

Around him the other officers got into motion, but Mitch payed them no heed at all. He pressed his fingers down into the warm and soft flesh, all the while blabbering some nonsense in order to keep Anderson conscious. Everything blurred together, Anderson's moans, the warm blood underneath his fingers, the icy snow and Mitch's hammering heart that kept him going and going.

***

When Mitch finally returned home it was well past 9 p.m. After the shoot-out Anderson had been taken into the hospital by the ambulance and Mitch had joined them, giving the paramedics all relevant information. After Anderson was out of danger, Mitch drove back to the police department to organize how to proceed further. As it turned out, there was no sight of Derek Johnson in the building, but there were only four shooters, all of them dead. One of his officers reported having seen a person, similar to Derek's description vanishing through the window and over the roof of the porch but due to the snow storm nothing could be said for certain.

Mitch told one of the other officers to write up a short general report while he himself made notes of his own, so he could write the primary report in the morning. Now it was more important to get the bodies to a coroner and secure that everything on the crime scene was in order and no civilians got hurt.

Shuddering in his damp clothes, Mitch fumbled with the keys, trying to make them fit into the old and scraped lock. When he nearly managed to put in one key, the door swung open.

In the threshold stood John. His face was a rigid mask as he had one hand on the handle and one on
"Johnny," Mitch was able to croak out, his throat feeling raspy. "I'm ... I'm sorry I'm so late but ... I ... had ..." All of a sudden Mitch's whole body released the tension it had held through the operation and now hot tears spilled down his face and his shoulders started shaking with silent sobs.

Without a single word or caring about being seen by the neighbors, John put a hand on Mitch's neck and pulled his head down onto his chest, while his other hand was placed firmly on Mitch's back, keeping him in place. Against Mitch's icy skin John's body felt unbelievably hot, but Mitch didn't care. He buried his face as deep down as he could while he grabbed the back of John's shirt for support.

For some minutes Mitch didn't say anything and only unintelligible noises left his lips as his initial breakdown washed over him and ebbed away. John had gradually started to massage Mitch's neck and kept running his finders through the damp hair.

"I'm here, Mitch," John murmured soothingly and Mitch gave a weak nod. "You're freezing," John stated and with that pulled Mitch inside and shut the door. Everything else afterward happened at once. With a methodical precision John had relieved Mitch of his heavy uniform jacket and shirt. He even had taken off Mitch's boots and the socks. With a firm but tender grip, John had lead Mitch into the living room where he sat him down on the couch and wrapped him up in one of the spare, woolen blankets laying around. For some minutes he sat next to Mitch and held his hands in his, rubbing some warmth back into them. When he made sure that Mitch wouldn't fall unconscious John got up and fixed him a mug of tea.

Mitch took a tentative sip of the steaming liquid and was instantly catapulted into the here and now. The tea was so sweet it made his teeth ache.

"Ugh, that's sweet," Mitch burst out without a second thought.

"Yeah, honey to keep your blood sugar level up. You seem to be running low," John explained and brushed a hand over Mitch's forehead feeling for the temperature.

Gathering his wits about himself, Mitch nodded and breathed in the soft steam rising from the mug. It smelled of peppermint and honey and he already started to relax. While Mitch drank up his cup, they sat in silence. But that didn't mean that there was a lack of information conveyed. Quite the opposite. John had looked Mitch up and down several times, had looked into his eyes, had held his hand, had seen the washed out blood stains on his uniform and Mitch's overall behavior. If only in broad terms, John knew what had happened.

"I don't know where to start," Mitch admitted after a while.

"You don't have to," John replied and Mitch knew that he meant it, but still there was a worried streak running through John's expression.

"I was called to a shoot-out today," Mitch began slowly as he battled the onslaught of memories so he didn’t talk head over heels. "Sheriff Hobbs wasn’t in today so I was in charge. I ... I didn’t know what to do but somehow I managed to get all of the officers and other deputies in order and we drove over to the place of the shooting. One of the officers there told me that they suspected Derek Johnson to be the one of the shooters, he always has some fishy drug deals going on ... Well I figured if we managed to catch him red handed today, we would finally make some progress with his delinquencies. But anyway, I split the boys up in two groups, one was to charge the house from the back if something should go pear-shaped," Mitch stopped as his eyes started burning and his fingers
contracted around the fabric of the blanket.

Next to him John watched him very closely with his dark, melancholy eyes. Only the slight furrow to his brow and the way he bent his head towards Mitch spoke of the concern he felt but kept to himself in order not to pressure Mitch.

Mitch swallowed and went on, "But then it started snowing … and Anderson said he saw one of the shooters. I– I told him to stay down because it started snowing. And … the sight … but he didn’t stay down and then there was this shot and …" Mitch couldn’t control his trembling lips any longer as hot tears spilled over them anew. His whole body started trembling as he felt the sickly warm flesh of Anderson’s wound under his fingers once more and he–

Suddenly Mitch’s vision tilted and he was pulled down into John’s lap. The other man had curled his arm around Mitch’s shaking frame and held him close. Mitch pressed his eyes shut and buried his face into the fabric of John’s jeans, trying to shut out the sounds and sensations from today.

"I know, Mitch," John murmured and rubbed Mitch’s shoulder in soothing circles."I’m here."

And for a while Mitch just lay across John’s lap and listened to the sound of the other man’s voice, vibrating through his chest as John talked on. And ever so slowly Mitch lost himself in the rhythm of the strokes and the deep voice and his body relaxed.

"I told him … to stay down," Mitch breathed and freed one hand from the blanket to run it over his tear streaked face. "He wouldn’t listen … Now he’s in the hospital– his family … I–"

"It might feel like it, but it’s not your fault," John cut in gently and Mitch could hear all of John’s own guilt over comrades shot while under his command. He knew how Mitch felt.

"He was my … responsibility," Mitch went on sobbing, staring at nothing while simultaneously seeing it all happen all over again.

"He was. And he still is. He survived because of you and that’s what matters," John’s voice was firm but not uncaring.

Mitch didn’t respond. He knew that John was right and that John really understood him but still he felt wretched and sick to the stomach and he didn’t know what to do.

"Are you getting warmer?" John wanted to know and got hold of one of Mitch’s hands. They were still freezing.

"A little bit," Mitch lied and held onto John’s hand to get rid of the sensation of Anderson’s wounds under his fingers. "I feel dirty," he admitted in a thin voice.

All of a sudden a dark fringe of hair tickled Mitch’s brow as John bent down and brushed his lips carefully over Mitch’s forehead and suddenly he went very, very still. It was seldom that John was the first to initiate any form of more intimate contact and Mitch couldn’t do anything against his heart’s acceleration. He closed his eyes and leaned into the touch as the last tears dried away on his cheeks.

"You should take a shower, you’re not warming up properly," John whispered against Mitch’s temple, as he rested his head next to Mitch’s.

Mitch nodded carefully. Although he didn’t want to leave, a shower sounded great. He really felt like washing everything off of him under a stream of hot water.
Slowly and with a little help from John Mitch sat up, disentangled himself from the blanket and went to the bathroom. Once inside he peeled himself out of the last parts of his soggy uniform and just let it topple to the floor.

The instant hot water crushed over his skin Mitch heaved a deep sigh and the last bit of the tension constraining his body melted away. He braced both hands on either side of the shower head and closed his eyes. *It hadn't been that bad*, he told himself. *No civilians were hurt and Anderson is cared for.* Slowly Mitch shoved his dark thoughts away as a thunderous clap made him jerk away from the wall. He frantically cast his eyes about the dingy, orange tiled bathroom, but there was nothing. He had just reimagined the shot that had … No!

Mitch pushed away from the wall and gave the faucet a forceful twist to shut it off. He really shouldn’t linger on that. Everything was fine and there was nothing he should blame himself for. He had done the best he could.

Dripping wet and with fiercely blushed skin Mitch got out of the shower and rubbed himself dry with one of the flowery towels his mom had loved so much. Wrapping that towel across his slight waist he set out for the bedroom. There he haphazardly managed to put on some boxers and his threadbare Fairview t-shirt. Defeated and utterly lost he flopped onto the bed and sat there, staring at nothing. He had only switched on his small bedside lamp and the whole room was cast in a low light.

The first tentative knock on the door was completely lost on Mitch but at the second knock his head jerked upright and he tensed. But calmed down immediately, of course it was John.

"Come in," Mitch called with a little enthusiasm and rubbed a hand over his face, not knowing where to put them.

John entered the room with another cup in his hand and a platter in the other. The smell of toast filled the room. He silently walked over to the bedside table and put everything down, then turned to Mitch. But instead of saying anything or asking how Mitch felt he just knelt down in front of him and looked up searchingly.

A weak smile blossomed on Mitch’s face as he looked down into John’s eyes and suddenly felt more at ease and everything that had happened today went far away.

"It’s better," Mitch answered John’s unvoiced question and began kneading the already frayed hem of his shirt between his fingers.

A fine, but very sincere smile appeared on John’s face at that. He reached out and carefully placed both of his hands on Mitch’s bare thighs, spreading warmth. "You should put on something more—" John began but stopped abruptly and his face went rigid and his eyes focused on some point on Mitch’s right thigh.

At first Mitch didn’t know what happened and he just stared at the dark head, slightly illuminated by the small light. But then Mitch eyes followed John’s line of sight and settled upon the accustomed white line that spread from the outer side of his thigh over to the front. Since it hadn’t any ragged edges the scar wasn’t easy to identify as thus but when it became clear what it was, it was even more impressive.

"Johnny …" Mitch husked, because he just knew what John was thinking now. Since the day they had met and even after they began their relationship John had never seen Mitch dressed in less than a pajama. And Mitch had never told John about the scar, fearing that the man would beat himself up over it. As he did now.
"Is that …" John began but his voice broke. With a trembling finger he carefully ran along the length of the scar. It was nearly five inches in total and against Mitch’s steam blushed skin it stood out even more.

"Yeah … but it’s fine!" Mitch confirmed in a low voice and he cautiously put his hand over John’s lying on his left leg. "It doesn’t hurt anymore. It did back then … but now it’s fine."

John raised his head and looked at Mitch with so much inconsolable guilt and pain that Mitch nearly choked with it. The only time Mitch had seen John’s face so open and vivid with emotions was when John had feared that Mitch had finally had enough of him to sent him to a therapist. It was on those occasions that John’s youth and vulnerability was most plain on his face. The dark eyes that always looked so remote became desperate with fear and his mouth that most of the time was shut in a seemingly stubborn silence now trembled with unsaid fears and apologies. Mitch could feel John’s whole being crumbling and slipping though his fingers.

"I did this to you," John’s voice was now a teary, hitched whisper that barely carried over to Mitch. "Yes you did," Mitch replied softly, because he knew John wouldn’t accept anything else. "But I deserved it! You see, we hunted you like an animal … so you did the same to us. I learned my lesson. And … for the four years I searched for you, it reminded me of you."

John pressed his lips together and looked down again. His hand rested just below the scar and set like this against Mitch’s paler skin, John’s dark tan was even more prominent.

"I … I deserved it," Mitch explained again and his grip on John’s other hand tightened.

"You didn’t deserve it!" John’s voice was raw with emotion as his head shot up and tears streamed down his face.

Mitch flinched, but still held onto John’s hand which started trembling.

John went on, "You were just doing your job. What happened to you because of it isn’t your fault and not something you’ve deserved."

At that Mitch sat unmoving and looked into John’s pained expression. The dark eyes were full of guilt but also anger. Anger at himself that he couldn’t vent. Anger he couldn’t put into words. Slowly, Mitch reached up and brushed one tear away that clung to John’s cheekbone.

"Can you believe in that for yourself, Johnny?" Mitch asked and tried to will down tears of his own.

John’s eyes widened a fraction before he adverted them. For a moment they sat unmoving in the dim light of the room. Mitch’s bare arms started to shiver as he finally realized the cold that he had suppressed all the while. But suddenly John moved. His hand slid down Mitch’s thigh and lifted it up ever so carefully. Then he leaned forward and warm lips brushed over Mitch’s scar and the cold skin. Mitch’s breath caught in his throat as John’s tender kisses worked their way from the bottom of the scar to it’s highest point, nearly reaching the seam of Mitch’s boxer short. It was such a surreal moment that Mitch felt disconnected from his body. His limbs went fuzzy and his stomach did cartwheels, while his mind rotated.

"Can you forgive me?" John asked and his voice had gotten so low that Mitch had to lean forward to catch his words.

"There’s nothing to forgive Johnny," Mitch replied and ran a hand through the dark hair but he got no response. John needed his absolution. "I … Of course I forgive you. Everything, no matter what," Mitch pleaded. It was the truth, he would never hold a grudge against John.
John now rested his head fully on Mitch’s lap and his arms came up and curled around Mitch’s waist. He looked like a tiger that had realized its fighting wouldn’t do anymore good and that it was time to surrender. Instantly Mitch bent down and put his arms around John’s broader frame, savoring the warmth from the contact.

"I’ll never hurt you again, Mitch," John sobbed.

"Oh, I know, Johnny. I know that," Mitch reassured him.

"We’re partners … right?"

"Yes, we are. Nothing will ever change that."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to anyone who still reads this fic!

Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
Together, forever, that’s how it must be

Chapter Summary

The shoot out weights heavily on Mitch's mind and Christmas is getting nearer every day. All that fear and stress lead Mitch to a decision he soon regrets.

Chapter Notes

Today is already New Year's Eve and I can't believe that I'm still writing on this fanfiction ... Those two have accompanied me through a whole year in which I've met the amazing tattiosala (tumblr) who is my trusted beta and a very good friend. I can't thank you enough, partner <3 Also I am ever so grateful for all the people who keep reading AND commenting, you are the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning after the shoot-out Mitch woke up to the cold feeling of apprehension sitting in his stomach like a pound of lead. Today he would have to face the whole team that had gone on the mission with him and sheriff Hobbs himself. Mitch would have to explain, write a report and talk to his colleagues, reliving that dreadful day over and over. He hadn’t done anything wrong. No one could have handled the situation any better. But still, he feared what was to come. Maybe he wasn’t up to it.

"You know I can hear you thinking," a low voice behind Mitch said.

Against his dark feelings, Mitch couldn’t suppress the laughter that was bubbling up in him after his initial state of surprise. John always knew when Mitch needed some cheering up, even when Mitch wasn’t aware of it himself. The dry humor of the other man tended to show in the most unexpected moments so Mitch couldn’t even brace himself for it.

Still laughing, Mitch rubbed a hand though his tired face.

"You’re awake," he said. It wasn’t a question because Mitch knew that John never slept through the nights. Sometimes he managed to coax and console John so far, that he would lie down again. Then Mitch would reach out and soothingly brush through John’s hair or run his fingers over the trembling arms. But after some time Mitch would fall asleep again and John would stay awake till the morning rose.

Now it was 5 a.m., still another hour for John to get up and another two hours for Mitch. The darkness in the room was deep and inky and the sun would not be up for another three hours.

Before Mitch could roll over to meet John, the other man had already moved closer and hugged Mitch. John rested his face against the base of Mitch’s neck and gave the soft skin a small kiss. No matter how dark Mitch’s thoughts had been, he could feel them dissolve instantly as he leaned back against John’s chest and into the warmth. Mitch wasn’t sure why, but John loved hugging him like this. Maybe it made him feel safe and in control of the situation or maybe it gave John the feeling of
having a purpose, protecting Mitch from his own thoughts. Mitch smiled, which ever reason it was, he loved it.

That John actually sought Mitch’s proximity after the events of the night before relieved Mitch incredibly. When John had found out about Mitch’s scar, he had been devastated. It had taken a lot of time and soft words to make John understand that everything was fine. Nothing had changed. And after a while John had crawled into bed with Mitch huddled close and they fell asleep.

Before Mitch could delve any deeper into his reminiscing he said, "I don’t want to go."

Behind him John kept silent. He knew how Mitch felt and he would never ask redundant questions like ‘Do you still feel bad?’ or ‘Why don’t you want to go?’. John understood what went on in Mitch’s head and Mitch appreciated the silent comfort radiating from the other man.

"But I will go … I have to," Mitch finally sighed.

"What do you fear the most?" John asked quietly against his neck.

For a moment Mitch had to pause and ponder the question. Right, what was he afraid of? After a minute’s thought he explained, "I’m just … afraid that the other officers will hate me, because I got Anderson shot. Because I lead the mission." The dread in his gut started to heave and made Mitch want to throw up.

"If you’re the leader of a group and if you want their respect, you’ve got to respect yourself first," John told him, his voice soft but firm.

"But … but it was my fault," Mitch croaked and felt the tears welling up again. He freed his hands from the blanket and started wiping through his face.

John’s embrace tightened slightly. "Mitch, you were in command. You made the decision. They have to accept that and they will."

Mitch pushed his face deeper into his hands, shielding it from what he didn’t know. "Maybe I shouldn’t’ve had the command! I … I only started a sheriff’s career two months ago …" He trailed off and a small sob escaped his lips.

"When I was in ‘Nam," John began and Mitch instantly froze. "I lead the Baker Team on a recon mission into enemy territory. I planned everything, main strategy, back-up plan, all of it," John went on but drew to a halt. As Mitch heard him take a shaky breath he wanted to turn around and tell him, that he didn’t need to do this, but John continued, "We went in, something went wrong and Ortega got shot. We managed to get outta there but still, Ortega was wounded. When we made up camp I tended to his wounds and apologized … but Ortega said it was fine. I might have made the plans and had command, but in the end everybody has to look out for themselves. You can only do so much, Mitch."

After that Mitch remained silent and focused on the slow beat he picked up from John’s heart. His fingers still hovered over his face.

"Tell your officers what went wrong and why. Respect yourself Mitch, respect the others and don’t take any shit," John intoned once more, his voice deep and soothing.

Slowly Mitch turned around and tried to make out John’s face in the darkness of the room, but couldn’t. Then he felt soft lips pressing against his forehead and he let out a sigh.

"Thank you, Johnny," Mitch breathed with the last of his tears drying away.
"Sure thing."

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The days leading up to Christmas started to blend into one another. A heavy snow had begun to fall for weeks now and covered the whole city in a white blanket. Flat topped roofs of the buildings grew in height with the accumulating masses of snow, the sky remained a washed out, sad grey.

At the police station Mitch battled the onslaught of his work, having managed to overcome the bump left by the shoot-out, supposedly involving Derek Johnson. Sheriff Hobbs was quite satisfied with how the mission had gone down, despite the most important shooter getting away. Still, the case remained open and Derek Johnson was put on the wanted list, but so far no further evidence had shown up.

At home Mitch tried to relax as far as he could but the looming holidays made him tense all over and often times he only sat in the living room with a book in his hand in which he hadn’t looked into for hours. Instead he watched the lazy snow outside drifting down, burying his garden and its plants.

One evening Mitch was so devastated that he couldn’t focus on his chores anymore that he went to bed quite early. He knew that he couldn’t sleep, so he had kept on the light on his bedside table and looked out through the window into the gloomy dark, but seeing only the orange reflection of the bedroom.

He had only been in bed for about five minutes, when the door opened and John came in. It had taken Mitch some time to get John to stop knocking every time he wanted to enter the bedroom. Mitch had told him that this was his room as much as it was Mitch’s and that John could go in and out however he pleased. So when Mitch heard John enter like that, a small glimpse of happiness rose in him.

"Sorry I went to bed so early, I just don’t feel so well," Mitch apologized while he turned around to meet John coming up to the bed.

A soft and understanding smile played on John’s lips as he drew the blankets aside and crawled into the bed next to Mitch.

"'S fine," John said.

"I … I’m just so anxious how Christmas will turn out," Mitch admitted, his voice low.

Next to him John studied him with his deep brown, melancholy eyes. His dark hair was a tousled halo that caught the few beams of amber light. Cast in that glow he seemed like a renaissance painting and Mitch wanted to just look at him forever. A deep longing started to bubble up in Mitch and a slow heat pulsed from his chest and washed over his body. Trying to stay focused on the here and now, Mitch rubbed a hand through his face, his fingers were tingling.

"I can still stay here," John offered, sounding sincere.

"No," Mitch gasped. "No … we belong together no matter if we can show it or not. I won’t have you sitting here all on your own on Christmas." He sounded like a sulking child.

John’s smile widened slightly and his eyes took on a softer look, almost … Longingly? Unable to hold back any more Mitch moved closer and brought his forehead flush with John’s. Tentatively he put his hands on John’s chest and could feel the relaxed beating of the other man’s heart. John’s hand came up and cupped the back of Mitch’s neck, running his thumb up and down carefully.
Shivering with elation and desire Mitch leaned forward and kissed John full on the mouth. At first John didn’t react, but then he slowly opened to Mitch’s tender licks and their tongues met.

A jolt of pure lust erupted from Mitch’s spine, making him dizzy. It was very seldom for them to kiss intimately like that so the sensation overwhelmed Mitch completely. All his fears for the upcoming family reunion, his desperate need to be close to Johnny and his confusion on how this year would end, sent Mitch’s mind reeling. He craved for some security, for some warmth that told him everything was going to be fine, he just needed to be close, to be held.

Driven by that need, Mitch pushed further forward and John let out a shaky gasp while Mitch moaned as their tongues met again more fervently. With growing confidence Mitch’s hands brushed through John’s thick hair before sliding downward over his chest.

John’s hand around Mitch’s neck had tightened while the other got a hold of Mitch’s thigh, covering the silvery scar.

Mitch could feel each and every knot his anxiousness had tied in him popping free and leaving him relaxed and unwound. He pressed more fully against John’s warm body, as his hands slid from John’s strong chest over his flat stomach and towards his hip.

For an instant John broke the kiss to catch a breath and Mitch brought their foreheads together into another loving touch and his hand slid over the front of John’s pants.

And then the world stopped. Mitch heart dropped several inches at once, while all of his desire, lust and happiness evaporated within an instant. John hadn’t any reaction at all to their heated kissing, while Mitch felt his own erection pressing painfully against the seam of his boxer shorts.

"I …" Mitch croaked and sat up in a flash, getting away from the other man, the blanket folding around him awkwardly.

On the bed John had rolled onto his back, one hand pressed over his mouth and his face rigid with panic. And despite the warm light, it had turned an ashen color and a sheen of sweat covered his face. The broad arms were drawn back shakily and crossed in front of his chest, as if to protect himself.

Mitch’s hand flew up to his own mouth. "Johnny, I … I’m so sorry, I …"

Mitch fumbled for words that wouldn’t come while his heart beat painfully against his chest, driving guilt and panic even deeper into his system. He wanted to pull John into a hug, he wanted to give him space, knowing that both actions wouldn’t do any good.

Very slowly John pushed himself into an upright position and ran a hand through his weary face. He looked as if he was going to be sick on the spot. Mitch’s gut heaved in sympathy and in shame. What had he done? Why hadn’t he controlled himself. Anger burned as a fierce blush on Mitch’s cheeks. He felt filthy.

"Johnny …" Mitch ventured. "I, I never meant to …"

"’S fine," John mumbled in reply in a more slurred speech than usual, his voice flat.

"No, it’s absolutely not fine," Mitch protested, the anger directed at himself flowed into his words, making them harsh. "I– I mean, look what I did to you!"

John’s hand left his face and tugged absentmindedly at his shirt which was clammy with sweat.
"No it’s just … I feel a little sick,” he explained and tried to lift the corner of his mouth into a vague smile, but failed.

Mitch stared at John in disbelief. He had just put John through one of his biggest fears; being so close and getting so worked up with emotions that you lost control, that you made yourself vulnerable to another person. And now John told him that he just felt sick? He must feel miserable: His body drenched in sweat, his gut contorting in anxiety and his head swimming with thoughts and memories of events he wanted to bury. What had Mitch done?

A single tear worked itself free from Mitch’s eye and slid down his cheek. "Johnny, don’t …" Mitch whispered. "I know what I did. I shouldn’t have pushed you like this. You weren’t comfortable. I was too … too caught up to notice."

John looked up, his eyes a little calmer, but his face still pale.

"No, Mitch. I’m sorry I couldn’t …" John began then halted and made a vague movement with his hands. "That I couldn’t …" he continued but then started to sob.

He bowed his head, the mane of shaggy black hair covered his face and his shoulders hunched over. John was withdrawing and there was nothing Mitch could offer to console him.

"John …" Mitch whispered.

Suddenly John extended one shaky arm and took Mitch’s hand in his, holding on fast. His hand felt cold and clammy on Mitch’s skin, but he didn’t mind.

"Can … Can I come over?" Mitch asked quietly, grasping John’s hands in both of his own, stroking some warmth back into them, as John had done to Mitch weeks before.

John gave a small nod and Mitch carefully huddled over, sitting next to John. The other man was still completely drawn in on himself, but suddenly he leaned towards Mitch and their shoulders touched, like they used to do so many months ago. Leaning into the touch and this considerate display of trust, Mitch exhaled shakily.

"Please, John," Mitch intoned and pressed John’s hand in emphasis. "Don’t blame yourself. You haven’t done anything wrong, ok? It’s alright for you to feel like this. It was my fault, I got carried away."

Next to him, John didn’t move or reply in any way. He just sat there, one of his hands held by Mitch, the other was used to bury his face into.

"It’s just …" John sobbed. "I wish …"

Mitch’s heart twisted with pain and sorrow, John sounded more than devastated.

"It’s alright, Johnny, we’ll manage," Mitch assured and leaned closer still.

After a while the tension in John’s whole body subsided. The hand he had used to prop up his head fell into his lap and the weight leaning on Mitch increased. Very carefully, Mitch put a hand around John’s shoulders and the other man slid down across Mitch’s lap like a giant, beaten dog. Afraid of hurting John once more, Mitch only rested one hand on John’s shoulder, the other on his head.

"I love you, Mitch," John murmured.

"I love you too, partner," Mitch answered and squeezed his shoulder gently. It was going to be
alright.

***

It finally had stopped snowing and a steel blue sky appeared out of the murky clouds. Despite the persistent sunshine, the temperatures were freezing and the snow wouldn’t budge. Now it truly was winter and Christmas had come.

It was the morning of Christmas Eve when Mitch ran through the house in a disoriented way, procuring items from here and there, gathering clothes, cleaning the kitchen and readying everything for their departure. Today was the day he and John would drive up to Rosswood to meet Mitch’s family for Christmas. While packing his clothing and John’s Christmas present into an old, faded blue weekender bag, various scenarios of how events would work out played in his head. With a deep sigh and a fervent wrench, Mitch zipped his bag shut and braced his shoulders.

"It’ll be alright," a soft voice said behind him and a hand settled on Mitch’s shoulder.

Mitch sighed again and leaned back against John who had come up to him without making a single noise.

"I want to believe that," Mitch answered and laughed shakily.

Stepping outside of the house Mitch was greeted by a crisp cold and shining bright snow that actually cheered him up. It was such a lovely winter morning, the whole street was hidden beneath the snow, only the streets and the pavements had been cleared, as far as it was possible anyway. People milled about on their front lawns, getting the last bit of Christmas decoration done, digging more snow out of the way and freeing their cars of the white burden.

A whisp of joy started to rise in Mitch. Actually he loved Christmas very much, the bright yellow, green and red lights that set the whole street aglow, making the snow sparkle, was something he couldn’t take his eyes off. Still, this season was something special and he prayed for it to go over smoothly.

After locking the door securely, he and John walked over to the rusty-red pick-up truck that had been covered in snow over night again. They worked in companionable silence and when they had finished clearing the snow away and scraping the ice from the windshield, they flung their bags onto the loading area and climbed into the truck. Since John only had his huge sleeping bag in which he carried the few belongings he owned, Mitch had procured an old duffel bag from his dad which John had accepted gladly.

In the car their breath hung about them in white clouds and Mitch fumbled frantically with the heating, which still would take about half an hour of driving to fully function.

With a last glance at the wood paneled house that stood silently in front of them, Mitch started the engine and drove out to the street, headed for Rosswood.

As predicted, the heating started after half an hour when Mitch and John already had left the city’s boundaries and had entered the long and empty roads, winding through the mountains and their valleys and fields. Every tree, rock, slope and river seemed to be covered in ice and snow, giving it a quiet, picturesque appearance. Only once in a while they met other cars and when they did it were mostly SUVs or pick-ups like they drove. The road maintenance in winter was something that didn’t work all the way through which always reminded Mitch of his parents.

To take his mind from the dark thoughts arising, Mitch focused on the radio. The magnificent voice
of Aretha Franklin carried very well over the metallic clatter of his car:

"Forever and ever, you'll stay in my heart
And I will love you
Forever and ever, we never will part
Oh, how I love you
Together, forever, that's how it must be
To live without you …"

"Would only mean heartbreak for me," Mitch joined in and tapped his fingers on the front wheel.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Mitch saw that John wasn’t looking outside the window anymore, but had turned towards Mitch and on his lips was the most tender smile Mitch had ever seen. His whole face blushed and his heart skipped a beat, before he managed to look back on the snow-crusted road up ahead.

"Sorry, I get carried away sometimes," Mitch laughed and rubbed a hand over his nose to hide his embarrassment only a little bit.

John gave a small chuckle, which sounded good natured. "Don’t worry, I liked it."

At that Mitch nearly choked while breathing in. That John would say something like that in such a direct way had taken Mitch by surprise.

Grinning like a fool he replied, "That’s a relief to hear. I can’t help but sing if I hear my favorite songs on the radio! Do you have any favorite musician or band?"

"Not really," John replied, his voice casual. "Never given it a thought."

"Just you wait when we’re at my aunt’s and uncle’s house! I’ve a huge record collection there I never took to Fairview. I’m sure we can find something that you’ll like."

John grinned, "You bet."

The rest of the way Mitch talked about his aunt and uncle, telling John things that might be good to know so he wouldn’t run into any embarrassing situations. But then again, Mitch couldn’t imagine John in an embarrassing situation. Ever.

"Aunt Lisa is the sister of my mother, Joselin. And my aunt and my uncle actually used to breed appaloosas as stock horses, years ago. Now they have retired and sold the whole breeding to Richard, their protégé. But they still get part of the income and now and then take on one of the horses that don’t really qualify for the breeding purposes," Mitch summed up his aunt’s and uncle’s business as best as he could. Although he had spent a considerate amount of his life with them, he never got the hang of horses.

"Really?" John said and sounded genuinely interested. "My uncle used to breed quarter horses back in Arizona. I used to work at the farm sometimes."

"You did?" Mitch asked, astonished. Of course he knew John’s rough background by now, but only things John revealed willingly. Mitch wouldn’t press him for anything. "In that case I think you’ll be getting along with my aunt and uncle perfectly! What did he breed quarter horses for?"

"Mainly for ranching. Arizona is full of cattle farms," John explained, his face lost in memories. "I enjoyed working with the horses, they are very intelligent animals."
And suddenly there was one glimmer of hope, that the holidays could actually be good for something and not the mine-field they appeared to be.

"Well, then I’m sure you’ll get the chance to take one of the horses out for a ride. I’ll ask my uncle when we get there. I’m sure he’s thrilled to meet another horse-enthusiast," Mitch laughed.

John smiled. "That’d be great, yeah."

The drive to Rosswood took about two hours. Since they were driving higher up the state and deeper into the mountain ranges the snow was even thicker and the roads considerably more crusted in ice than they had been in Fairview.

Mitch’s aunt and uncle didn’t live in the city directly, but on the far outskirts. To get to their house and accompanying farm grounds, they had to take a small gravel road, branching from the mountain highway. On the path Mitch only dared to drive the car at around 20mph so the tires wouldn’t spin and loose their grip on the snowy ground. Left and right of the road was thick forest that now had lost all its leaves but still stood close and gave the impression of complete wilderness. Further on, the path started to climb a rise on top of which was a long, white fence, centered by a huge gate. The whole farm lay on what was more or less a natural plateau in the foothills of the mountains.

Ahead loomed a big, white farm house that had huge windows and one prominent oriel to the right hand side. At the front the house had a wide porch with carefully decorated balustrade. Left of the main house were the stables, which were a breathtaking construction, considering the size and maintenance. In front of the stables was a spacious paddock, which stood empty.

Mitch headed for the right side of the house towards the garage, following the gravel driveway. When Mitch pulled the car to a halt, John got out and opened the gate so Mitch could park the car inside.

After shutting off the engine, Mitch jumped out of the car with his heart up in his throat. The instant he breathed in the cold air, mingled with smells of damp wood, turpentine and horse Mitch felt at home. Now he couldn’t avoid meeting his family anymore. From this moment on he had to keep himself in check so he didn’t accidentally give John and him away. He knew that the emotions would be running high just because he had brought a stranger, a war veteran with him, so it was even harder to evade all possible opportunities for a fight.

"I got your bag," John stated and put the object in question next to Mitch’s feet. Mitch swirled around.

"Oh … oh, yeah, thank you. Let’s … let’s go up, shall we?" he asked and felt his voice tremble as he fumbled with the hem of his jacket.

John didn’t answer and only watched him closely, his eyes searching, his brow furrowed slightly. The light in the garage was very dim and gray so Mitch couldn’t really make out the whole of John’s face. To evade the close scrutiny he looked around him. Behind another two cars parked in the huge garage were shelves that were packed with horse and farming utensils, all arranged in an orderly way. He really had come home.

"Mitch …" John breathed and brushed his hand carefully along Mitch’s cheek and came to rest on his upper arm.

Grabbing John’s hand, Mitch smiled. "I know … it’s fine. Let’s go."

With that they grabbed their bags and left the garage and went up the front porch. All this felt to
Mitch like he was bringing home his prom date to introduce to his parents. And some of that actually was true.

Chapter End Notes

Here's to an exciting 2017 and to an amazing 2018 you guys!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Forever and ever we never will part

Chapter Summary

Christmas has rolled around and Mitch has to face his family, accompanied by John, disguised as a mere casual friend. Now every move they make has to be thought through or otherwise they will be found out.

Chapter Notes

I'm still grateful to have tattiosala (tumblr) as my amazing beta and that this fanfiction is still going strong!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A strange mix of apprehension and joy to see his family propelled Mitch forward, as he and John walked up the small stone tiled path leading up to the front porch. Now there was no turning back for them, they had to maneuver through three days of family and holiday with emotions running high. Focussing, Mitch pressed the doorbell. All of a sudden thundering footsteps approached the door, which flew open in an instant.

"Mitch!" a high voice exclaimed and a small brown haired girl appeared in the threshold. She made to run into his arms but then spied John and stopped.

"Amber! What did I tell you about opening the door all on your own?" came a second voice from inside and a women stepped up behind the girl.

"Hullo Amber," Mitch greeted his cousin’s daughter and waved cheerfully. Then he turned to Sarah. "Hi Sarah, good to see you again."

His cousin smiled and drew him into a hug. She was a small and very slight woman with brown hair and dark eyes. She mostly had the looks of her father, his uncle, but her height and her character was like a mirror image of her mother, his aunt.

"Hello Mitch," she said upon releasing him and instantly Amber sped over and grabbed her leg.

"Mitch, finally you’re here," his aunt called happily and also came out to the porch with her husband in tow. Aunt Lisa was a short but very sturdy woman, with a sober haircut and a friendly face. Her husband Henry was a tall man, even taller than Mitch and had a thin, weather beaten face, but eyes gleaming with humor.

"It’s good to see you again, Mitch," his uncle intoned and gave him a good handshake and a clap on the back.

When they had all exchanged greetings Mitch finally could take a step back to get level with John, who had remained silent and a polite distance behind.
"Aunt Lisa, uncle Henry, this is John Rambo. Whom I mentioned on the phone," Mitch introduced John and tried to make his voice sound as casual as he could.

Uncle Henry instantly took a step up and extended his hand, which John took with a straight back. "Well, nice to meet you John. I’m Henry, Mitch’s uncle, as I guess you already know."

John nodded, his face showing a mild expression. "I do. Good to meet you, sir."

"Oh there is no need for formalities here," his uncle explained with an easy smile. "You can call me Henry."

When his uncle stepped back, Mitch saw the expression in his aunt’s eyes, she was appalled and Mitch could guess very well why. Since John hadn’t any civilian clothes of his own and their shopping trip had ended in spooking John with a far too narrow dressing room, he wore the clothes of Mitch’s father. Of course his aunt recognized them.

Nonetheless she stepped up and extended a rigid hand. John took it and shook it carefully.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Rambo. I’m Elizabeth Burton, Mitch’s aunt," she intoned and Mitch nearly didn’t recognize her. He never knew her to be so cold.

"Nice to meet you, ma’am. Thank you for the invitation," John replied, his voice even and sincere.

Aunt Lisa gave a curt nod and then vanished inside the house again. Uncle Henry had a somewhat apologetic look on his face as he followed her.

"Um … and this is Sarah, my cousin. And her daughter Amber" Mitch explained, indicating the pair of them still standing in the threshold.

"Nice to meet you," John said and gave her a nod since Sarah didn’t extend her hand and instead kept it on the head of her daughter still clinging to her leg. Amber had one half of her face hidden behind her mother’s thigh while she eyed John with the other half, eyes wide.

"How do you do," Sarah answered, the same tone of voice as her mother. "Why don’t you come inside, Mitch. It’s freezing."

"Yeah, sure," he agreed weakly and followed them inside. The interior of the house was made up of warm wood, rose patterned furniture and plush carpets. On the walls were countless of pictures, paintings and memorabilia that had been there for as long as Mitch could remember.

From the main hallway a huge two double-door lead into the living room with its white washed walls, a fireplace in the back and a roomy bay window lined with thick pillows overlooking the snowy fields. The room had a pleasant atmosphere but still Mitch could pick up his aunt’s displeasure at John’s presence. After getting out of their thick jackets Mitch and John took a seat on the couch, since everyone else had sat down to their previous occupations. Being so close to John woke the urge in Mitch just to reach out and hold John’s hand. To make him feel loved, to ground him if his feelings should overwhelm him. But there was nothing Mitch could do, so he caught his hands between his knees.

Then his aunt returned with a small tablet, carrying tiny cups with steaming coffees which she handed round. When she reached John, Mitch saw her hesitation but she quickly covered it and returned to her seat afterward.

"You must be parched after the long drive. And your pick-up doesn’t really look like it gets warm enough," she chided, her usual, motherly self again.
"Oh, it’s alright," Mitch said and rolled the warm cup between his hands, happy to have something to do. "It just takes a while for the heating to kick in, but when it starts to work, then it’s warm enough."

"What were you saying, darling?" Sarah asked her daughter. Amber sat on her lap and had turned towards her mother, her hand raised in order to whisper into her ear.

Mitch had to grin. His cousin’s daughter was a shy, albeit sweet girl, that had a head full of mischief one wouldn’t expect.

Amber whispered again and suddenly Sarah’s eyes widened and her lips became a thin line.

"Amber … I don’t think that is appropriate to–" but Sarah didn’t get any further when Amber slid off her lap.

In two quick steps she walked up to John and grabbed his knee for support, her ponytail bouncing left and right. John’s eyes widened as he looked down with helplessness written all over his face.

"Hey, Amber," Mitch laughed. "Do you want to say hello to John?"

Sarah had leaned forward in her chair, torn between keeping up appearances while simultaneously wanting to get her child away from John. Mitch’s heart twinged. Why wouldn’t they just look.

"Amber dear, don’t annoy Mr. Rambo," aunt Lisa cut in and made a move to sit up.

"Up," was all Amber said with her arms raised high and her face gleaming with delight.

For the first time since Mitch had known John the other man seemed thunderstruck. His face was a sole expression of insecurity and awkwardness while his hands were placed rigidly on each of his knees. At first he looked up at Mitch schooling his face a little, but still desperate.

Mitch cast a glance at Sarah who gave him a defeated nod. She knew how stubborn Amber was and denying her now would make her sulk through all of Christmas.

"Go on, it’s fine," Mitch assured John and to diffuse the tension he turned towards his uncle and asked, "And how’s Richard doing?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Mitch watched how John bent forward and carefully picked up the small girl and sat her across his lap. In comparison to John, with his broad build, dark hair and deep tan, Amber looked like a porcelain doll. But sitting there made her grin all over her face and she started swinging her tiny feet to and fro. John, surprisingly, looked very much at ease by now and watched the little girl carefully, in case she might fall.

For some time the talk centered about Richard and how the breeding went. Then it turned to more general topics of local news and gossip. Aunt Lisa tried to get back to her knitting, but failed because every once in a while she cast a nervous glance at John, who kept out of all conversation except for the instances he was addressed directly. Mitch understood that she didn’t feel good about John being here, but why couldn’t she trust Mitch? Trust Mitch to be a good judge of character and not bringing someone dangerous into their midst. His uncle on the other hand didn’t seem to be put off by John’s presence at all. They even exchanged some words of conversation.

Putting her knitting aside for good and righting her white cashmere cardigan, aunt Lisa eyed John and Amber once more before she said, "Mitch, you know we don’t have anymore spare bedrooms. You and Mr. Rambo will have to take your old room. Henry put in a camping mat."
“Yeah, sure. That shouldn’t be a problem,” Mitch agreed and turned to John.

The other man looked up, his eyes calm, happy even. "No problem at all, I had worse," John replied with a small smile meant for Mitch.

Rubbing a hand over his face to hide his blush Mitch announced, "Then we’ll go up now and put our stuff in place and ready the beds."

John exchanged some low words with Amber, who nodded and jumped off his lap and walked over to her mother, grinning.

The instant Mitch left the living room behind some of his tension vanished already. Indicating the stairs, Mitch and John got their bags and went up to the next floor. There the same display of decorations and memorabilia cluttered the walls, giving Mitch a feeling of suffocation. In the past he had loved to run through the lovely furnished hallways, to look at the old, black and white photographs of his parents, his grandparents and other ancestors he couldn’t name. But now it seemed hurtful to remember.

"Here we are," Mitch announced, trying to sound happy, as he pushed open a slightly more battered door.

Mitch’s room looked exactly the same as it had been when he left for Hope. It was a long narrow room with the left side of the ceiling sloping down. The only light sources were the small bay window to the left and a normal one to the far side. Mitch’s single bed stood in the far left corner, facing an old, wooden wardrobe. All over the walls were poster and newspaper clippings of bands and movie celebrities Mitch had looked up to when he had been younger. But they couldn’t hide the fact that his wallpaper pattern was made up of light blue stripes and flower wreaths.

When John had stepped through the threshold, Mitch closed the door and leaned against it. A heavy sigh erupted from him and the last bit of tension in his muscles dropped and he felt drenched.

In front of him John had put his bag next to Mitch’s and now eyed him closely. After a time it had become even easier for Mitch to read the posture of the other man and he could tell that John felt as relieved as Mitch did, maybe even more so. Only small, inconspicuous lines on his face spoke of his battle to keep his composure and every single one of them pained Mitch.

"Nice room," John stated and a wry grin tugged at his mouth.

"I’m sorry, John," Mitch whispered instead, knowing how thin the walls could be.

The grin turned into a weary smile and John walked up to Mitch, tentatively putting his hands on Mitch’s waist. Leaning forward, Mitch brought their heads together in a light touch. Even doing something so harmless like this sent a feeling of guilt coursing through Mitch’s veins but he ignored it. Instead he focused on John’s warm smell, mingled with the crispness of snow and the bitterness of coffee.

"Let’s put our stuff into the wardrobe and then have a walk around the house for a bit," Mitch murmured, his hands resting on John’s shoulders.

"Yeah, let’s do that," John replied and kissed Mitch on the cheek.

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Mitch shifted awkwardly on his chair. Left to him sat John, who’s back was rigid with military habit but also trying to stay in control in the bustling and at some point hostile surroundings. Since Sarah
was on the corner of Mitch’s right hand side, he didn’t even dare to sneak a hand over to John under the cover of the table cloth. Being so close yet unable to touch weighed on Mitch. Trying to block out some of his stress, his mind wandered back to the afternoon he had spent with John.

Dressed against the sharp cold John and Mitch had trudged through the newly fallen snow that glittered like thousands of crystals in the sun. The walkways around the house had been cleared for the most part but on either side piles of snow had already gotten thigh high. While walking only their shoulders had touched from time to time, afraid that any more contact would give them away.

Inside the stables their breath had still hung in the air as if painted, but despite that, the freezing edge of the cold had been shut out. The warm smell of hay and horse had enfolded them, giving Mitch a sense of having traveled back in time. A little grey shine had filtered through the skylights and had managed only partly to pierce the smokey blue gloom.

"Here we are," Mitch had announced with a lopsided grin at his obvious statement but John smiled in return.

"They are very well kept stables," he had commented while running his hands over the wooden gates and whitewashed walls.

Keeping close to John, Mitch had nodded. "Yeah, it’s kind of the lifework of my aunt and uncle. But I never could relate, really."

John had looked at him out of the corner of his eye and had walked further up the aisle. "How come?"

Then they had reached the only two occupied boxes in the whole stable and Mitch had stopped several feet before that, fiddling with his hands.

"I, uh … My aunt taught me how to ride when I was about five or so and I stayed over for the holidays. But, but I fell off of the horse. Nothing serious really, but I never wanted to get back up in the saddle. And … horses scare me somehow," Mitch had explained and watched his breath puffing into the air and vanishing.

John had turned around completely and his eyes were full of concern. The dim light in the stables had made his features even sharper.

"If you’re uncomfortable we can go back outside," John had offered and extended a careful hand.

Mitch had smiled, taken the hand but had shook his head.

"No, no, it’s fine. I just don’t like … you know, sitting on them or petting them really," he had confessed but had drawn John closer to the stables.

In the soft gloom of the box nearest to them had been Boxer. He was a white and black spotted appaloosa stallion with a graceful neck and very spirited eyes. He had whinnied the moment they had reached the box but did nothing more. Mitch still had fidgeted a little.

"This is Boxer. He doesn’t have the right coloring for breeding," Mitch had explained and then indicated the other box, containing a small, heavy-set mare with bay fur. "And this is Betty. She isn’t an appaloosa at all, but I think my aunt and uncle picked her up from friends who couldn’t afford her anymore."

While Mitch had explained, John had his eyes fixed on the horses. His face had begun to loosen up and a small shine appeared in his eyes, giving him the look of someone much more carefree. Mitch
had felt John’s hand twitch.

"You can pet them, that’s fine,” Mitch had offered and released John’s hand.

What had happened then was the most wonderful thing Mitch had ever seen. John had remained in front of the box for some time, watching the stallion step back and forth in its box. Boxer had weaved his head a little, sniffing John out, but then he walked up to the gate and lowered his head slightly. As if in trance, John had cupped the head of the animal, stroked the long nose and then brought their brows together.

Mitch’s heart had started to pace and he was afraid that its sound would break the soft, fuzzy silence that had settled in the stables. Only once in a while Boxer had given some sort of grunt, but other than that he had remained perfectly still. After a time John had broken the contact and had begun to run his hand over the muscular neck of the animal, thumping it affectionately.

Then he had moved towards Betty, who already had her head craned over the gate in order to get to John. Different than Boxer, she liked everyone who petted her and John did just that. Without much preamble he had his hand buried in the thick mane, ruffling it.

"They are very fine horses," John had said, his voice low and almost reverend.

"I … Yeah," Mitch had breathed, unable to tear his eyes from the strange but heartwarming scene.

After that they had walked over the rest of the farm that was reachable under such weather conditions. But after a time the sun had already vanished completely behind the mountains, leaving the sky a velvety black but not before having painted it a fierce pink.

Surfacing from his remembrance Mitch looked about the heavily decorated and minutely laid out table. His aunt had used all of the fine gold rimmed porcelain platters, the heavy silver cutlery and the thin crystal glasses like every year. Despite the cheerful appearances of the roasted turkey, numerous side dishes and green winterberry wreaths bound together by soft red ribbons, Mitch didn’t feel cheerful at all.

Around him the conversation flowed a little bit awkwardly. That was partly due to Sarah and her mother exchanging very formal pieces of information, unsure of how much the soldier should get to know about them. Once in a while Mitch chimed in but he never managed to relief the unease hovering over them.

At some point he was desperate enough, that he stated, "You remember our phone call earlier this month, aunt Lisa? I still haven’t told uncle Henry."

Aunt Lisa’s face lit up with delight, revealing the usual friendly cast to her features. "Oh yes, I do remember. Go on, tell him Mitch. It is your achievement after all."

Grinning, Mitch sat up a little straighter. "I have started on a sheriff’s career the last month."

"You did?” uncle Henry exclaimed happily, his eyes wide with surprise. "Well, that is some news that need to have a toast!"

Everyone raised their glasses and joined them in the middle of the table, while Sarah chatted away happily about what it meant for Mitch and how glad she was for him. Next to him John had only raised his glass in a small salute, staying clear of the family interaction and Mitch felt bad.

"You see, Henry,” aunt Lisa beamed. "Mitch’ll make us proud, just like Sarah did. First he’ll become sheriff, then find a nice wife and then give us some more grandchildren."
Mitch nearly choked on his wine and he tried hard not to spit it all over the place. How could they have such high hopes for him, when Mitch just knew that he was bound to disappoint them sooner or later. His heart rattled uneasily as he set down the glass as casual as possible.

"I don’t think I’ll find a wife in near future," Mitch laughed awkwardly.

"Tosh," his aunt chided. "Sure you will. You’re a nice young man and some girl will be very happy to have you."

"And wouldn’t it be nice to have someone to help you with the house and your chores? Being a sheriff must be very busy," Sarah agreed. She had married herself some years ago and had mainly worked as a stay at home wife. But then her husband had died in a standard surgery when unforeseen complications had occurred. After that she had begun to work in the management of the horse breeding ranch her mother and father had given over to Richard.

"Well, I’m not a sheriff yet. So I manage," Mitch defended himself but only with little vigor behind it. He could feel John looking at him and Mitch wasn’t sure if John actually tried to hide a grin at this tragically funny situation or if he tried to keep himself from shouting out the truth.

"You can’t stay a bachelor all your life, Mitch. That wouldn’t be good," aunt Lisa put in affectionately, patting uncle Henry on the hand. "I know how you men can get when you’re older."

"And even Mr Rambo will have a girl he’s going to return to," Sarah said, her voice getting a little hard around the edges with implication. "Don’t you, Mr Rambo?"

John looked up from his platter where he had been very busy cutting the turkey down to size. His gaze was the usual hooded one and his expression was carefully schooled.

"I had a girl. But none to return to," he explained.

"Sarah," aunt Lisa hissed reproachfully. But Mitch couldn’t tell if it was because she thought Sarah impertinent or if she wanted her to stop from engaging with the stranger any more than necessary.

"What?" Sarah asked indignantly. "He's celebrating Christmas with us, the least he can do is answer some questions."

Mitch shot her an angry glance, only partly managing to keep his ire in check. "Yes he can, but do you have to be so … bloody indiscreet about it?"

"It's fine, Mitch," John soothed.

"Yeah, I think Mr Rambo can speak for himself. And anyway, you're the indiscreet one, if you ask me. Going about inviting people to our celebrations as you see fit," Sarah's voice was level but there was a cold edge to it.

"Sarah, that's enough," aunt Lisa scolded.

"Really, Sarah, you should--" uncle Henry began but was cut short.

"What is your problem with that? It's just a decent thing to do. It's Christmas," Mitch shot back, ignoring is uncle.

"Decent? You call picking up homeless soldiers a decent thing? It's like taking in a stray dog, no one knows when they'll turn rabid and bite," Sarah spat, her voice rising.
Mitch felt his inner retrain burst with a snap and he shouted, "Take that back!"

Mitch had begun to rise out of the chair as his cousin did the same. Amber sat next to her mother with eyes wide open, not understanding what was happening to her Christmas.

Suddenly a gentle hand was put on his shoulder and Mitch was pulled back into his chair.

"Mitch, calm down." John's voice was soft and carried a loving note, that only Mitch could hear. Mitch trembled with anger but managed to force calm breaths. "Your cousin is right. I'm a stranger at this table and it's her good right to feel that way."

"And she had about enough," Sarah said coldly and gathered Amber up in her arms and left the dining room.

"Sarah, you'll come back this instant!" Her mother shot out of the chair and followed her, doors banging.

Mitch eyed his platter defeatedly. He knew things were going to be awkward and uncomfortable, but this was far from anything he had imagined. He truly had managed to ruin Christmas and now he couldn't even look his own uncle in the eye, who had remained seated.

"I'm sorry uncle Henry," Mitch murmured.

"Don't be, Mitch," his uncle answered, his voice was calm. "I can understand Sarah very well."

Mitch's head shot up, afraid of having insulted his uncle too and fearing to get into another argument.

"No Mitch, it's fine," uncle Henry soothed. "I can understand her, but that is no excuse for behaving like she did. You invited John in good faith, so we should do the same. I hope you haven't taken too much offense, John."

John seemed genuinely surprised by the apology, despite the hurt darkening his eyes. "Not at all. There's always worse people who harass me just because of the way I look. Sarah actually has a reason. She has a child and I'm a complete stranger to her in her own home."

"That is true. But ... she'll come around and I'll talk to her later on. And after all, Amber has taken a shine to you," Henry laughed.

A sad smile appeared on John's lip. "Maybe. But I'm afraid I've ruined her Christmas."

"You didn't, John," Mitch spoke up finally. "I should have kept my mouth shut. But since we're kids Sarah's always managed to get my goat. It's like nothing has changed."

Henry laughed at that. "Of course it hasn't. You're still our children, fighting over who's right and who's wrong."

Mitch grinned and rubbed his nose with relief, glad he hadn't cried or even worse, spilled out what actually was going on between John and him. In the hope of changing the subject to a nicer one, Mitch addressed his uncle."Uncle Henry, would it be possible for John to take Boxer out for a ride tomorrow?"

Uncle Henry looked up from his third helping of turkey he had returned his attention back to. "Well, I'm not sure. Do you have any experiences with horses, John?"

"I do," John confirmed and Mitch could always hear the unspoken 'sir' lingering in the air. "Back in
Arizona my uncle used to breed quarter horses. I worked on the farm and I rode quite bit."

"Quarter horses? That’s interesting. Did he breed them for ranching?" uncle Henry wanted to know and put down his fork.

"Yes. He supplied a lot of the surrounding farms, never really selling out of state. That’s why I’m most used to quarter horses, but I think I could manage the appaloosa, too." John had a way of explaining his achievements in such a way, that it never sounded like bragging.

"Oh, I’m sure you will. You look like a fine horseman to me. So, how did your uncle go about the breeding? What streak did he favor in his animals? We are going for a more hot-blooded temperament here," the older man chatted away happily.

And most surprisingly, John reciprocated the easy going manner. He spoke freely about the farm of his uncle, his work there and even some anecdotes. Mitch found himself glued to John’s lips, not daring to interrupt his flow of words. Like this, Mitch was even tempted to believe that John could be accepted by his family, despite the rough start and that everything would turn out alright.

***

That evening, when Mitch and John had finally returned to their room, Mitch was too worked up to fall asleep. He lay in his bed, the covers up to his chin, facing towards John, who lay on his back on the thin, barely patted camping-mat on the floor next to the bed. They had kept the bedside lamp on for a while and the screen, which was adorned with cowboys on horses chasing cows, threw winding and meandering shadows on the patterned wallpaper. It looked like they were caught in a memory of Mitch’s childhood.

Before his inner eye, Mitch replayed the argument he had had with Sarah over and over again. That she had insulted John and wouldn’t even try to get to know the other man was something Mitch couldn’t let go.

The hurt in John’s eyes had been well hidden, but Mitch had seen it nonetheless.

„I’m sorry, Johnny,“ Mitch murmured.

John turned his head, his face was calm but Mitch recognized the fine lines of stress clinging to the corners of his mouth even in the diffuse light. „Don’t be, Mitch."

„No, I really am. I brought you here and I couldn’t even defend you from my own cousin. I never thought that she’d …“ Mitch slowly drew to a stop, overcome by remembering.

„She has a point, you know,“ John went on.

„You’re not like a rabid dog!“ Mitch interjected.

„No, but sometimes my reactions are … unreliable. Mitch, I broke your nose once."

„But that was my fault, too! And anyway it never happened again. I trust you, John. I know that I can trust you,“ Mitch intoned, his whole being yearning to push out of the covers and gather the other man into an embrace.

John’s eyes grew heavy and a sad smile appeared on his lips. „And you’re the one were it matters." Mitch returned the smile. „They’ll come to trust you. Tomorrow I’ll speak with Sarah and aunt Lisa. It’s Christmas Day after all."
John looked at him, still the smile played around his mouth. But then he closed his eyes and pressed his head a little more firmly against the cushion. He looked defeated and tired. Mitch really longed to comfort John and take all of his pains away.

Sitting up a little more and pushing his blanket aside, revealing his bare legs and the fine scar on his thigh, Mitch offered, „We … could lock the door and you could come into my bed?“

„I don’t want to gamble your good relationship with your family just for tonight,“ John replied, his voice husky with sleep.

„Well, I think we already did that,“ Mitch laughed and tired to cheer them both up.

„Maybe, but we don’t need to try our luck too hard,“ John said with a wry smile but then sobered up a little. „Family is important, Mitch. Mine was really bad and I don’t want to be the reason why you’d break with yours. I’ll stay on the floor.“

Mitch’s heart got heavy because right now he wanted nothing more than to bury his face in the dark curls of John’s hair and breath in his soothing scent. He felt that John need to be held right now, too. But the risk of being caught was too great.

„You’re right,“ Mitch agreed finally and switched off the bedside lamp. Sometimes it seemed that the whole world were against them. Veterans and gay people alike were hassled, insulted and in general treated horribly. That didn’t seem fair, they couldn’t change who they were.

For some seconds Mitch’s eyes wouldn’t adjust to the deep, soft darkness around them. But slowly he could make out the form of John lying on the floor. Tentatively, Mitch worked his arm free from under the blanket and extended it towards John’s. John rolled onto his side and caught Mitch’s hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the knuckles. The small contact managed to calm Mitch down slightly. No matter what happened, they still had each other. They were partners.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all the people who are actively reading this! <3

Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
That ain't all I'll do for you

Chapter Summary

The first day of Christmas holiday has passed with only some minor disputes due to John's presence. Now Mitch and John can finally spent time together, sidestepping the family interactions.

Chapter Notes

This is already the fifteenth chapter of WDIGFH and I am still honored to have tattiosala (tumblr) as my beta, who is putting their time and headcanons into this fic and keeps me going!

Please note: I'll be on vacation from the 4th of March until the 16th of March so I guess the next update might take some more time than usual ... Sorry for that in advance!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Over the night new snow had fallen and the sky was a pale, washed out grey with only some darker, more defined clouds. Everything outside was doused with the white burden and the landscape looked peaceful, quite contrary to how Mitch felt about the holidays so far. Like that the weather didn't look like much, but the anchor man on the radio had announced sunshine with the advancing day, so Mitch hoped John could actually take the horse out for a ride.

John and Mitch had woken up quite early in the morning, when it was still dark outside, but the snow had magnified the little moonlight that still shone over the towering mountains. Glad to have some time for themselves without the presence of the other family members, they had climbed down into the kitchen, where Mitch rustled up a small breakfast. Some toasted bread rolls from yesterday's dinner, a little left over turkey and strong black tea was all that could be scavenged from the fridge and cupboard without making too much noise.

While the softly glowing lamp illuminated their place at the isle in the middle of the kitchen, a pale sun had risen in the sky and brought a grey dawn with it. Over their meal Mitch and John talked a little bit about horses and Mitch's childhood here at home.

"It's funny," Mitch said and twirled the fine china cup between his hands. "I only drink tea when I'm here. I never do that back at Fairview."

"We should start, then. I like the tea," John smiled and sipped at his cup.

Before Mitch could agree, the white washed door leading to the hallway was pushed open and aunt Lisa stepped in. Her thoughtful face turned into a surprised expression as she spied the two men in the kitchen.

"Good morning aunt Lisa. We couldn't sleep any longer so I made us a little breakfast," Mitch greeted her apologetically, unsure how she felt about yesterday evening.
John sat up a little straighter from his former position of resting his elbows on the counter. "Good morning."

Aunt Lisa brushed some imaginary dust from her dark trousers and nodded. "Good morning. I didn't expect you up so early." She sounded a little stiff.

Sensing the awkwardness of the situation, John got up from his chair and announced, "I'll go for a walk." With a respectful nod at Mitch's aunt, John vanished silently through the door.

Squaring her shoulders brusquely, aunt Lisa stepped into the kitchen and set about preparing breakfast for the rest of the family.

"Aunt Lisa," Mitch intoned and got up from his chair. "I'm really sorry about yesterday."

"Well, you should," she replied curtly.

That stung and Mitch hung his head.

"But so should be Sarah. I might not be happy with Mr Rambo's stay here, but that isn't a reason to act like that," aunt Lisa went on and began cracking eggs over a bowl.

"I know that ... that you don't know him well enough as I do. But John really is a nice person and he appreciates being here very much," Mitch explained.

"Well, Mitch that is easy for you to say. He might be a nice man, but that doesn't change the fact that he fought in Viet Nam and did God knows what. And we all heard that about Hope. He didn't exactly cover himself in glory there."

Mitch sighed desperately, feeling the scar in his leg blaze up. "Yes, that's all true. But ... but he regrets everything! And he has just started getting back home, like ... You know, he really has no family left and all his friends died in Viet Nam. When he came to Hope he actually wanted to visit a friend from the forces. But Delmar – that's his friend's name – he died of cancer. There wasn't anybody left. And you know Teasle, how I always talked about him and his big mouth and ego. You should have seen what he did to John."

His aunt looked at Mitch with an unsure expression, her dark eyes full of worry and unease.

"Mitch ... I'm not sure what I should make of this. I'm sorry for Mr Rambo if he has had all these losses and was treated unfair ... but why should we– should you make up for it? I know you're a good boy, but isn't that a little bit too altruistic?" She wanted to know.

Mitch's heart skipped a beat, afraid of having said too much. Squirming under his aunts inquiring gaze he turned around and looked out of the window. Unconsciously he rubbed at his right thigh.

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"It, it doesn't have to be me. It's just that I happened to have witnessed all of his abuse at the police station. And I'm a deputy and I didn't do a thing against that injustice! I have to set some of that right," he offered and turned back to her.

His aunt's gaze was sad but there was also affection in it. "You know, you are like your mother in that way."

Mitch smiled carefully.

"Well, now get out of the kitchen otherwise I won't be finished with the breakfast when Henry, Sarah and Amber pop in," she clucked like a mother hen and Mitch couldn't do anything but smile.
"Alright, I'm getting out of your way," he laughed.

Just before he reached the door his aunt said, "And don't worry about Sarah. I spoke with her."

"Thank you, aunt Lisa."

***

Mitch had found John in the stables where he had rested his arms on Boxer's gate and watched the horse as it munched away on some straw. For a time they had stood there together, looking at the peaceful animal, enjoying each other's company before they were called to breakfast. The real deal.

Of course the atmosphere in the bright and cheerful living room was slightly overshadowed by yesterday's events but other than that everything went quite civilized. Aunt Lisa had made pancakes and french toast and there was a generous amount of hot chocolate in an old porcelain coffeepot, adorned with a flowery blue pattern. The sun had risen more fully and the white walls glowed brightly, nearly competing with the heavily decorated Christmas tree with all its presents.

When everybody moved over to the couch and adjoining armchairs, Amber couldn't be held back any longer and made a b-line towards the presents.

"Which are my presents?" she squealed happily as she lifted every box, shook it and held it to her ear.

"Amber, you have to wait your turn," her mother chided but didn't manage to get her daughter to calm down.

Exchanging presents with everyone was quite a hustle because Amber made a lunge for each brightly wrapped present but was instantly captured by the next one and so on.

When Mitch finally reached his present for John his heart started to beat so heavily that he almost felt sick with it. Somehow giving John his present felt like a very intimate situation but with everyone around, chatting and laughing there wasn't anything reverend about it. But still, Mitch smiled lopsidedly and handed John the box.

"And that's for you," Mitch announced with a soft voice, hoping it wouldn't carry too much.

John looked quite overwhelmed with the gesture and accepted the parcel only very cautiously. For the others his face might have looked stern, but Mitch saw the emotions glittering in John's eye.

When the red and green wrapping paper came off, John held a bright blue paper box with three white stripes in his hands and he froze.

"They're ..." he began and opened the lid and his mouth became a thin line.

"Sneakers," Mitch concluded for him, rubbing a hand over his nose in anxiety. "I thought since you only have your boots these might be nice for, I don't know, free time?"

John had freed one white shoe from the soft paper engulfing them. Then he looked up, his face stunned.

"They must've cost a fortune," he breathed and his reply was nearly drowned by Amber's laughter and Lisa and Henry's cooing sounds, as they talked to their granddaughter about her present.

"Don't think about that," Mitch chided lovingly and allowed himself to put his hand on John's lower
arm. "These are your own shoes now."

John's mouth twitched into an insecure smile as he nodded and put the shoe back into its box. Grinning like a fool, Mitch felt his happiness rising. At least the present had been a success and Sarah had refrained from any more nagging comments. Turning around, he saw that the rest of the family was quite busy doting on Amber and had moved away from the tree.

Suddenly a small bag made out of glossy gold and brown colored paper was held in front of him. Mitch looked up and saw John giving him a wry grin from underneath the black fringe of hair that had grown so long again.

"And that's for you," he said.

Surprised by the gift Mitch looked at it for some seconds before taking it.

"You really shouldn't have," Mitch said, feeling guilty that John had spent his hard earned money from Chuck's workshop on him.

"Don't think about that," John echoed softly.

Opening the very exquisite bag, it revealed a thick, soft cashmere scarf with a fine fawn coloring and thin black and blue checkered pattern.

"It's ... it's lovely, John. Thank you," Mitch breathed and let the fabric run through his hands.

Awarding Mitch with a very loving and private look John replied, "You never wear one and it's winter already."

Grinning himself Mitch announced, "I'll start today. Come on, let's take Boxer out for a ride."

***

After having extracted themselves from the family breakfast, John and Mitch had gone outside to the stables. Swathed in his new scarf the cold didn't bite as much as it had before and even the sun had managed to disperse the lingering clouds and a bright blue sky revealed itself.

Mitch didn't need to show John around the stables at all. The other man moved along the boxes with an ease Mitch rarely saw in him. Assembling the gear, fitting it to the horse and preparing everything for a ride seemed second nature to John. His face was intent but relaxed as he worked on the perfect fit for the saddle, calmed the horse and made sure everything was alright. Boxer, who usually was quite hot tempered and fidgety with people he didn't know, was as calm as John and bend to his every silent command, eager to go out as John was himself.

Through the whole process of saddling the horse Mitch remained a respectful distance form the box, still intimidated by the huge and powerful animals. But at the same time he battled the urge to step closer and to watch John work in such a deeply unwound way.

Outside on the paddock John mounted Boxer flawlessly. The horse made two quick steps to the side at first, but the moment it realized that John wouldn't budge, it settled down.

Leaning on the chest-high fence, Mitch watched as John eased Boxer into a slow walk. Then after a time when Boxer and John were quite comfortable with each other, they started to trot and then for short burst even went for a gallop along the longer side of the paddock. Watching them in awe, Mitch could have sworn that John and the horse seemed to move as one. Boxer's long, forceful strides rippled his muscles and John mirrored them with his own graceful movements, when he rose
and fell on the horse's back.

The snow covering the field was kicked up in white bursts and only emphasized the power and speed both man and animal displayed. Mitch's heart pumped with joy at seeing his partner in such a carefree way.

Skillfully, John brought Boxer down to a trot for several rounds and then made him walk some slow circles before he drew level with Mitch again and slid out of the saddle.

"He's a very well bred horse. The coloring really doesn't matter, his temperament and form are truly stunning. I'm astonished your uncle didn't breed for racing," John commented as he stroked Boxer's muzzle that was pushed at him.

"I think at that time it didn't seem profitable? But I think he sold some horses to a breeder who was specialized on racing horses," Mitch explained, squinting his eyes against the bright light shining off of the snow.

"Racing can be very fitful, that's true."

Mitch watched John who was still busy running his hands over the lean neck and graceful face of Boxer.

"I'm sure you could even take him out for a ride into the woods. There's a path that is quite accessible even in winter," Mitch offered, clearly sensing John's pleasure in spending time with the horse.

John looked up at that, his eyes surfacing from the far away place they had visited.

"Would you join me for that?" he asked, his voice had a careful and considerate tone, his expression unsure.

"I--" Mitch began, his heart twinged. "I'm not sure if I could handle a horse after such a long time."

John's eyes widened instantly. "No, you don't have to. I'm fine here riding on the paddock." He gave Mitch a reassuring smile.

A burst of affection shot through Mitch. He loved that man more than anything else and he would do everything for him. Mitch had never seen John happier than today while being in the outside and working with the horse as if it was his life's vocation. It gave Mitch the feeling that John had truly come home and he wanted to participate in that. Even if it meant overcoming his own fears. John had to battle fear and panic everyday of his life, so taking on this own fears of horses seemed an insignificant sacrifice for John's happiness.

"No, I'd love to!" Mitch exclaimed. "You'd ... you'd just have to help me along a little bit."

At that John's expression softened and a tender smile appeared on his lips. "Sure. If you're really fine with that."

Mitch nodded and played down his pumping heart. "Yeah."

Luckily, John knew enough about horses and sensed Mitch's unease when he stepped into the paddock, that instead of introducing Mitch to Boxer, John went back into the stables and saddled Betty. Mitch had followed the other man and tried to help as best as he could.

"Just hand me the saddle, that's fine," John explained calmly and saddled the sturdier horse.
With his uneasiness rising, Mitch followed every move John made. Betty didn't seemed to mind being saddled very much so that was a small comfort. But then, when they returned to the paddock Mitch was frozen.

The bright daylight cast dark shadows on the bay colored fur, underlining the thick muscular legs, that once in a while stomped on the ground when the mare tossed her head to cast off imaginary flies. A soft steam rose from her flanks into the cold air, making her look like something released from primeval times. The horse scared Mitch.

"I'm not sure I can ..." Mitch stuttered but stopped as John's shoulder pressed next to his.

"It's alright. We can just look at her," John offered, his voice without a hint of reproach.

Taking a struggling breath Mitch nodded and looked back at Betty, who just stood there, her nose ploughing through snow, looking for something to eat.

"She's a very good eater, I imagine," John commented offhandedly.

"I think," Mitch put forth haltingly, still captured by the animal’s appearance.

"With horses like that, you really have to watch out how much you actually feed them. They'll eat up everything."

Again Mitch nodded but then the information started to sink through to him.

"Back in Arizona we had a pony that managed to open its box and went straight for the grain storage. Every night it went foraging like that and it took my uncle weeks and his sanity to find out how that pony got that big," John went on, his voice laid back, even happy.

And inch by inch, Mitch felt himself relax as John told him the story and other things he had experienced with horses, that after a time he found himself laughing alongside the other man. Somehow ponies weren't so intimidating anymore.

The stories had made Mitch curious and unconsciously he took a step forward, his hand extended.

But then Betty changed her stance and her foot clomped on the ground and Mitch hurried back, bumping into John.

"I'm here," he murmured, his hand running down his shoulders and resting on the small of Mitch's back.

"Here, I'll go first," John stated and stepped up to the horse and stroked its neck. Betty wiggled her ears in appreciation.

Slowly, Mitch joined John and extended his hand once more.

"How stupid ... I used to ride them," Mitch murmured feebly, his hand shook.

"No, it's not," John put in, his face intent. "You've made some bad experiences with them, Mitch. Of course you're afraid."

Smiling weakly, Mitch rested his hand hesitantly on the strong neck. The fur was bristly and the heat emitting from the horse's body felt sickly warm, tendons and muscles worked under his fingers but he kept them in place.

"How's it?" John asked, his hand sliding closer to Mitch's.
"Weird ... They feel so ... alive and real," Mitch blabbered, his heart racing again. "And huge!"

"Yes, they can be intimidating," John agreed.

Luckily, Betty stood between the two of them and the main house, so they were out of sight. Using that fact, John put his hands on Mitch's in a reassuring gesture. And then, moving as one, they brushed down the length of Betty's neck and flanks.

Releasing a long held breath, Mitch relaxed somewhat and began petting the horse on his own account.

Above them the sun had dipped further over the zenith, announcing the approaching afternoon. Today there wouldn't be any lunch, only another vast dinner, so there was no need to get back into the house just now.

"Should we stop for now?" John asked as he cast his face up towards the sun, undoubtedly telling the time by its position.

"No ... I feel quite alright, we can go on," Mitch said, eager to share this experience with Johnny, no matter what it would cost him.

John eyed him for a second with his unbelievably wise eyes. "Sure. Do you want to get up or just pet her some more? I think she's enjoying it."

"I think so, too," Mitch laughed, getting a little fond of the plump pony. "I think I can try to get up in the saddle."

John helped Mitch step by step. He hovered close behind, guiding his moves, careful hands keeping him in place and a soft voice always encouraging him. Being so close to John calmed Mitch down a lot. Back in the house he felt strung taut with surveillance by his family, but here, where John seemed to fit right in, Mitch could find his peace too.

With a struggling pull, Mitch heaved himself upward, flung an awkward leg over the horse's back and sat in the well-worn saddle with a thump.

The minute Mitch sat up and the full extent of the height rushed in and Betty began moving with the new weight on her back, Mitch let out a yelp. Like a tripping person, he flung himself forward and grabbed the pommel in fright.

"It's fine, Mitch. I'm here," John soothed, one hand resting on Mitch's shoulder, the other on Mitch's thigh.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Mitch groaned, the horse beneath him swayed and his body relived the fall from years ago, bending his arm the wrong way, his back hitting the sandy ground forcefully.

"That's ok. I got you."

John slung his arm fully around Mitch's waist while the other loosened his grip on the pommel. In one graceful heave he had him pulled down from the horse and firmly planted on the ground once more. Betty nickered and made two steps forward, not caring very much what just had happened, but happy to be able to search for some grass again.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Mitch stuttered, he grabbed John's shoulders for support as his legs regained the strength to keep upright by themselves.
"You don't need to apologize Mitch. You've done very well," John told him, his voice full of confirmation and love.

"But I didn't stay up. I– it didn't work," Mitch felt agitated at the loss of the chance to ride out with John, of sharing this special connection with him. Was this how John always felt? How he had felt when Mitch had just overrun him with his need for touching? The feeling was made up of inadequacy and failure and it sickened him to the bone. It was like an unseen barrier kept him from connecting with John completely.

"That doesn't matter. You've helped me loose my fears, I'll help you loose your's. It takes patience and time. Don't rush yourself." Still shielded by the browsing mare, John's hands had come to a rest on either side of Mitch's face, spreading warmth and consolation.

Like a beaten dog Mitch looked at John. His face was soft, understanding and overall loving.

"Next time," Mitch promised. "When ... when we should visit again. I'll manage it next time."

Mitch saw how John restrained himself from leaning into a kiss and instead ran his thumbs along Mitch cheek as a discreet display of affection, fearing that anymore would give them away if they were found out.

"This time was already perfect, Mitch."

Despite the bumpy start, Mitch wanted to stay outside with Betty and John agreed, after making sure that Mitch was fine again. For some time they just stood next to each other, watching the horse browse. Then they took her by the reins and Mitch lead her over the vast grounds, John always at his side should Mitch change his mind. Like that they spent the last hours of the gleaming sunlight before it turned into a fierce orange and then drowned in the dusky twilight, announcing the next family dinner.

***

Conversation around the dinner table flowed quite easily today. After the catastrophic christmas dinner and the following awkward lunch, everyone had settled down a bit. Uncle Henry was very engrossed in a conversation with John over horse breeding and riding in general. Watching the two men exchange stories made Mitch grin all over his face. At least one person of his family didn't try to shun John. Aunt Lisa still remained fairly cold but had engaged with the conversation once or twice, after all horses were her livelihood too.

Again on the corner next to Mitch sat Sarah. She refrained from talking to Mitch directly for a while because she was too proud to apologize, as was Mitch. He knew he should apologize too, but this was something he wouldn't do just now. It was childish, but then again, they had grown up together so there was nothing new.

Later in the evening Amber had crawled into Mitch's lap and explained her new doll, which had a strap coming out of her back that could be pulled and the doll would say things like 'You're the greatest mom!'. Having Amber on his lap quite naturally lead him and Sarah to a conversation, which at first was rather stiff, but then loosened up after a while. They accepted each other's unspoken apology.

The dinner drew on and at some point Amber clambered over to John, who carefully held her in his lap, sensing Sarah's very stern looks. But like the day John and Mitch had arrived, Amber couldn't be pursued to stay away from John, so Sarah bend to her daughter's will. When Amber started to doze off, because it was well past ten already, John handed her back carefully, as if handling fine china.
Sarah gave him a stiff nod of thanks and vanished to her room.

After that the gathering broke up and John and Mitch climbed the squeaking stairs to the first floor, back into Mitch's room.

Closing the door behind him, Mitch turned the key with a determined twist.

"I think I had quite enough family interactions today," he announced and flopped to the floor, facing John's sleeping mat.

John smiled, taking his seat on his makeshift bed. "Won't they be suspicious when they find the door locked?"

"Maybe. But they won't be coming in anyway. They don't want to spend more time with you than they have," Mitch complained.

"That's fine."

Mitch grumbled but he said with more enthusiasm, "At least uncle Henry is fond of you."

"Yeah, he's a very fine man. Knows an awful lot about horses," John replied, a hint of admiration in his voice.

Mitch smiled as he suddenly remembered something. "Oh, didn't I say that I wanted to show you my record collection?"

A grin flitted across John's face, apparently remembering Mitch singing along the radio while driving the car. "You did."

"Great!" Mitch exclaimed and crawled over the floor to open a huge wooden chest on the far wall. The light in the room was low since they had only turned on the old bedside lamp, but it was enough to read the battered old record covers.

Running his fingers over the paper jackets, Mitch remembered when he had bought every record. There were soft memories attached to each piece and he couldn't decide which one they should listen to first. He had been so deep in thought that he hadn't heard John sitting down beside him.

"That's quite a record shop," he chuckled, his voice deep and soft.

"Yeah and I feel like fourteen again, I can't decide!" Mitch laughed.

John hummed in understanding and brushed his fingers over the displayed backs of the paper jackets, picking records up, putting them back again. At one point, he extracted one vinyl wrapped in an unlabeled paper envelope.

"What's this one?" he wanted to know and handed Mitch the package.

"Oh that! It's a single with 'Bring It On Home To Me' by Sam Cooke. My dad bought me the record in a thrift shop. He didn't understand much about Soul, but he knew I liked it, so he got me that for my birthday," Mitch explained with a sad smile on his face as he pulled the disc free of its wrapping. "Let's listen to it."

The record player on a small table next to the chest hadn't been touched in months so a fine layer of dust had accumulated on the lid. Fitting in the record and setting the dials to the right speed, Mitch started the song.
Soft and carefree piano tunes began drifting through the room. The light and playful rustle of a drum set made up an easy rhythm that gently drove the song along until finally Sam Cooke began his singing. His voice seemed to carry a smile lit by sunlight and so much pleading love it was almost tangible.

For some seconds Mitch was caught up in memories when he had heard the song for the first time but then he freed himself and looked at John. The dark haired man sat transfixed, his eyes looking at nowhere in particular, but there was a certain gleam in them.

Not thinking at all, Mitch got up and extended his hand. "Would you like to dance?"

John looked up, an uncertain look on his face. "Dance?"

"Yeah like, you know ... sway," Mitch grinned lopsidedly, unable to resist the slow, but playful melody filling the dingy room with a feeling of afternoon light.

Tentatively, John got up. And as if they had been dancing all their lives, their hands clasped, their feet stepped close and they moved in unison.

John’s larger hand rested on Mitch's slim waist, while Mitch held onto John's shoulder. Like that, each swing and each step brought them closer, until their chests touched and Mitch could brush their brows together in a loving caress. Around them the music spilled, making them sway this way and that. Dancing with John was like being trapped in a slow stream of sunlight and emotion. Mitch couldn't feel anything but secure, joyful and overall content. This was where he belonged, close to John, following his every step.

Outside in the cold blue of the dark snow had begun to fall anew, but inside Mitch's room the gloom and the cold had been washed away by the shining music, moving the two dancers in gentle waves.

For a while their brows remained close together, but then John lifted his face and Mitch gave in to the sluggish, sweet pull he felt towards John and kissed him. Their lips came together in a light brush, before pressing together more firmly. Everything around Mitch vanished in a blur, the light, the music and the sensation of John's lips and gentle hands merged into one, engulfing him.

The kiss broke and Mitch pressed his face close to John as the next note swept them around gently.

"You know," John murmured, the music giving his voice an odd tone. "I never believed I could do this."

Mitch listened carefully to each word as it drifted to him through the flow of the music.

"What didn't you believe?" Mitch wanted to know and brushed one thumb over John's shoulder, while his other hand was lead by John into a new course.

"That I could ... hold anybody like this," John finished, his voice sombre. "I always believed I was only capable of killing ... the only thing I was good at."

"But that's not true ..." Mitch began and raised his head. But before he could get any further away, John's hand sneaked up Mitch's back, cupped his neck and drew him down into a kiss.

With a smile John murmured against Mitch's lips, "I know. But you showed me. And that's what I'm grateful for."

Chapter End Notes
I've recently received so many love comments I can't tell you how glad that makes me! Thank you all for reading! <3

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Bring your sweet loving

Chapter Summary

After having evaded all of the awkward family situations, John's and Mitch's crucial misstep had to happen on their last day of Christmas Holiday. And that isn't the last of their problems, since New Year is just around the corner.

Chapter Notes

Aaand, we're back again! I am sorry for the long wait in uploads, but tattiosala and I both have full-time jobs and sometimes a lot on our hands ... but never think that this fanfiction has been abandon. We will give John and Mitch the Happy End they deserve.

So a big thanks goes out to my wonderful and loyal beta tattiosala who keeps reading through my heaps of writing! <3 And of course to all who commented and waited for this fic to go on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As a small sliver of sunlight filtered into the room, Mitch drew the blanket around him more closely and half-asleep he thought back to yesterday evening when he had been dancing with John. That evening the music and their proximity had made them unwound and carefree. After the song had finished they had tumbled into the small bed where they rested in each other's arms. John was on his back and Mitch, who had been drawn down by him, had sprawled over John, his face a blissful expression.

Somehow being caught out by Mitch's family had ceased to be a threat anymore. Aunt Lisa and Sarah tried to stay clear of John as much as possible and uncle Henry never had a reason to get Mitch out of his room.

So giving in to their need for each other, Mitch and John had slept in one bed. It was a narrow affair and each move had made it creak and shiver like it was about to break, but they hadn't minded. After the tense days spent with Mitch's family, just lying close like this meant more than anything.

Now Mitch had his head rested on John's broad chest that rose with equal breaths. John had one arm slung around Mitch to hold him tight. Of course this was done so they could share the narrow blanket, but also because they just wanted to feel near.

When they had woken, neither of them said anything and both were listening to the snow cracking upon the roof. The light in the room was a soft grey blue only partly cut through with bright sunlight. This night had been the first where John hadn't been plagued by nightmares that made him jerk awake in a horrible fashion. Deeply rested for the first time and unwound as he had never been before, John started humming, his fingers slowly threading through Mitch's sleep ruffled hair.

As the low notes reached Mitch, he didn't dare move. His hand was splayed over John's breast and picked up the fine vibrations running through the hard muscles.
Mitch grinned as he recognized the song, it was 'Can't Help Falling In Love'.

"So you do have a favorite musician," Mitch murmured happily.

John's chest moved with his chuckling. "Seems like it."

His hand moved over Mitch's neck and came to a halt at the back of his head, pressing him close. Mitch savored the touch and could feel a hot tingle rippling through his chest and pressing down into his belly where it sat as a warm feeling. Fighting the stirring sensation from between his legs, Mitch pushed himself upward reluctantly.

"I think we have to go down to breakfast, before anybody comes up and tries to get us," Mitch sighed and rubbed his hand over his face, hiding the blush.

"You bet," John rumbled with a smile and got up after Mitch.

In comparison to yesterday's dinner, the last breakfast with all of the family went rather well. John was instantly captured by uncle Henry who, after yesterday's conversation, had looked some things up in his multitude of horse breeding books and wanted John's opinion on it. Sarah happily chatted away with Mitch, their argument seemingly forgotten, while Amber played around underfoot.

After some time aunt Lisa suddenly addressed John, "Have you ever thought about getting a job in horse breeding at your uncle's farm?"

She might have ignored John as much as possible, but that sure didn't mean that aunt Lisa hadn't listened to her husband's and John's conversations.

John was slightly surprised at being talked to by her, but he put his cup of coffee down politely and shook his head. "I could imagine a job in horse breeding, sure. But my uncle died some years ago, which he didn't plan on. So the farm was taken to clear some debt or other. I don't know exactly, I haven't kept in touch with my family after Viet Nam."

Mitch winced at John's deadpan delivery of the subject. He wasn't sure if his aunt wanted to put a finger on a raw spot, or if it just had been a well meant question. Either way, her expression didn't change.

"Well, I think there will be other opportunities to find a job in that area around Arizona," she said pleasantly, as if she was taking it for granted, that John would go home to the state where his relatives used to live.

John replied with a careful smile, "I'm sure."

"But maybe John, you'll find something around here. I mean, if you ever get tired of working at Chuck's carpentry workshop," uncle Henry put in with genuine interest. "You must be very good at wood working if Chuck's keeping you. But I bet that you are an even better horse breeder."

At that John laughed a small but sincere laugh. "I'm definitely considering that."

When they all had finished on the breakfast, Lisa and Henry announced, that they were invited by their next door neighbors three quarters of an hour away from them, to have lunch. Since they wouldn't be around to see John and Mitch off, they said their good-byes right after the breakfast.

Mitch was pulled into a heartfelt hug by his aunt and he knew, that there weren't any hard feelings between them and he happily hugged her back.
"Thank you for everything, aunt Lisa. It was good to see you again. And I promise I will visit more often from now on," he assured her.

"That's what I'm hoping for," she replied and patted his shoulder lovingly.

When uncle Henry was quite finished shaking John's hand enthusiastically, he also embraced Mitch and clasped his shoulder.

"I'm very proud of you, Mitch. Mind you, not just because you plan to become a sheriff," uncle Henry grinned.

Mitch laughed with relief. At least his uncle hadn't taken offense in John's being here and actually liked the other man.

As long as he thinks we're just friends, Mitch reminded himself. He wasn't sure how uncle Henry would react to the truth of Mitch's and John's relationship.

Having seen his aunt and uncle off, Mitch lead John upstairs again to pack their few things and then head home, to a place where they again could be themselves.

Mitch stuffed the rest of his clothes into the well worn bag and turned towards John so see how far the other man had come.

To his surprise, John was quite finished already, but he wasn't waiting at the door. Instead he had hunkered down in front of the record player which lid he had opened to extract the record from it.

"Do you want to keep it?" Mitch asked.

A careful nod. "Yeah, I liked it."

"What, the music or the dancing?" Mitch joked, still exuberant from their shared night.

"I thought they weren't mutually exclusive," John replied with an equally mischievous grin on his face and Mitch could have burst with joy.

They had weathered the stay at Mitch's family and it had only turned out to be half the catastrophe Mitch had dreamed up. Now they were finally going home and John was in such a happy mood, that this day couldn't turn out any better.

Down in the living room they found Sarah who had curled up in one of the deep, soft armchairs and was reading a book, while Amber was playing on the floor with her Christmas presents.

"We're leaving now," Mitch announced and hugged Sarah who had gotten up.

"Alright. Make sure you drive safely with all the new snow on the road," she reminded them, with her usual mother tone of voice.

"Will do," Mitch assured her.

Releasing Mitch from her hug, Sarah spied John who had remained two paces behind and waited politely.

With her face a hard mask of unease and guilt, Sarah stepped up to him and held out her hand.

"Have a safe trip home," she said, sounding friendlier than the day before.
"Thank you," John replied sincerely.

Amber hugged John, after she had beckoned him down to her. John patted her a little awkwardly on the back and wished her well.

The air in the garage was cold and smelled of turpentine and snow. They had opened the gate from outside and now the harsh sunlight washed over everything, highlighting the dust motes that were circling through the air. The rusty red pick-up beckoned them with a promise of home and peace.

Mitch and John dumped their bags unceremoniously on the loading area and faced each other. Both grinning with relief.

"Finally we can go home," Mitch said with vigor.

"Isn't this your home?" John wanted to know and placed a hand gingerly on Mitch's waist, nearly completely concealed by his huge winter parka.

"But not _our_ home," Mitch replied huskily and felt the pull that ran through his body, longing for John.

A deep desire lit up in John's eyes and was merged with a hint of insecurity.

But then they slung their arms around each other and their lips met. Mitch braced himself against the pick-up as John stepped between his legs, closing the space between them.

It was a moment sprung out of relief, heat and desire, that had build up between them unnoticed, until now. Mitch was always very careful around John and John never initiated that kind of extreme physical contact. But today a restraint in John had come undone and Mitch just couldn't withstand the pull John had on him.

Mitch's hands grabbed the back of John's head, running his fingers hungrily through the silken, black hair, searching for purchase. John's hands had Mitch's waist in a firm, but tender grip that pressed them close. And this time Mitch felt John's reaction to their passionate kiss, if only barely.

Their lips moved against each other, carefully kissing and nipping at the soft flesh before their tongues entwined for a deep, slow kiss. Despite all of the passion, John didn't rush or press things on, but Mitch could feel his need in every tender caress.

His arousal made Mitch's head spin, he felt like wax beneath John's hands and he sagged against the pick-up completely boneless, sinking into John's touch–

"Mitch, you still here? Did you take the– What are you doing?!!" came an indignant shout.

Before Mitch or John could react in any way, John was violently pulled backwards by Sarah, who had her hands buried in John's parka.

Whirling the other man around she flung herself at him with a menace, Mitch had never seen in her. Her small, pale fists rained down on John's chest as she spat insult after insult at him.

"You! You filthy parasite! Baby killer!" her voice was ragged with rage.

John, his face a mask of utter shock and insecurity, stepped back with each blow Sarah flung at him. He never made a move to protect him.

"Sarah!" Mitch yelled and overcame his initial shock. He reached out for her but he was too late.
Sarah raised her hand and slapped John hard across the face. John's head spun with the force of it and the silent garage reverberated with the sound.

"Sarah, stop it!" Mitch grabbed her wrist, as she raised her hand a second time.

"You faggot, damn you! What have you done to him?!" Sarah screeched at John and Mitch twisted her away.

"He hasn't done anything, calm down!" Mitch pleaded, but felt his own anger rise.

Now Sarah rounded on him, her eyes slight with rage, fear and concern.

"What has he done to you, Mitch? Are you alright?" She asked frantically.

"I'm fine, really Sarah," Mitch soothed her, his voice trembling.

"I don't believe that! What does this soldier-pig have on you that he blackmails you with?" She spun around again. "I knew you couldn't be trusted."

When Mitch looked over Sarah's shoulder towards John, his heart broke. John stood rigid, his back pressed against the shelf behind him. His lip had split with the force of Sarah's blow and his cheek turned an angry red. On his face barely concealed was shock, sorrow and worst of all, such a deep pain. Pain of being harassed for something that he didn't do.

"I've had enough! Sarah, calm down now," Mitch ordered.

Sarah turned again and looked at him with disbelief.

"Listen, I want this, alright. I'm gay and I'm in love with John," Mitch explained, his voice sounding flat and tired to his own ears.

"I … what?" Sarah looked thunderstruck.

"You heard me right. John and I are in a relationship. But I can't tell uncle Henry and aunt Lisa. Not yet," Mitch said.

Sarah pushed Mitch's hands viscously off of her shoulders. The disgust in her eyes making the whole room seem to shrink. The cold air suddenly turned oppressive and Mitch's gut contracted.

"You're telling me," she began, her voice deadly cold. "You've been … together with this person, before you came here and that you deliberately didn't tell mum and dad?"

"Yeah. I was afraid of what they might think …"

"What they think? They wouldn't understand! I … I don't understand, Mitch. Why? Why would you do this to us? After all we did for you."

Mitch's head shot up in anger. "I'm not doing anything to anybody! This is just who I am and I never intended to tell anyone."

Sarah's face twisted in confusion as her gaze switched between Mitch and John. John had barely moved. He had stepped clear of the shelf but hadn't come over to Mitch, because Sarah cut off his way. He looked like a cornered and wounded wolf.

"I don't know what I should make of this," Sarah murmured and turned towards the small door, connection the garage to the main house.
"Sarah, wait," Mitch extended a hand but saw the disgusted look in his cousin's eyes and he drew back his hand instantly. "Could you … could you please not tell anyone? I'll … I'll tell them when the time comes, ok?"

"I, yeah sure," she said flatly and vanished through the door.

Carefully Mitch turned to John, trying to look as none-threatening as possible. He held the palm of his hand toward John, but his arm remained firmly at his side. A small offer to join him.

"I'm sorry, Mitch. I … ruined everything," John said, his voice distraught and his eyes wild with guilt.

"No!" Mitch exclaimed. "Don't be sorry, John. You didn't do anything," he then added more softly. "But I kissed you. If I hadn't, Sarah wouldn't've found out."

"That's not true. It's no one's fault. I would have told her, told them sooner or later … Lets just go home, ok?" Mitch beseeched him with a careful smile.

John haltingly stepped up to him and brought their foreheads together.

Mitch pushed back against the tender contact. The pain and hurt rolled off of John and engulfed Mitch. One moment they were happy together, everything had seemed to be just fine, when suddenly their small bubble of security had burst, leaving John dreadfully hurt and Mitch shaken to the bone.

Mitch extracted a handkerchief from his coat pocket and gently dabbed at John's bleeding lip. "We're going home now," Mitch said firmly.

***

The ride back to Fairview had been silent. Not because John and Mitch wouldn't talk to each other after the unsettling events, but because each of them was lost in their own thoughts. Every once in a while they stopped and John would scoop up some clean snow and press it against his split lip, reducing the swelling as far as possible. In their silence the radio prattled on undisturbedly. The only song Mitch could make out of the mess of tunes and voices was 'Simple Man' and listening to the lyrics 'go find a woman and you'll find love' made him sad somehow.

Back home, the day slid past unnoticed. John and Mitch unpacked their bags, Mitch put on the washing machine while John fixed them some late lunch after a recipe he had learned from Mitch. Overhead the sun roamed the bright blue sky and slowly turned from white gold to a deep, orange glow as it slid lower and lower towards the horizon.

In the evening, Mitch had put on an Elvis record with a lot of slow and soft songs and made them both a cup of tea each. That were nearly all of good experiences of their stay with Mitch's family he wanted to reenact.

Mitch huddled close to John on the living room couch as they sipped at their teas in silence, letting the music wash around them.

"I don't know what to do now," Mitch whispered after a while, his head on John's shoulder.

"No matter what will happen Mitch, I'll have your back," John replied and slung his arm around Mitch.

"I'm not sure how my aunt and uncle will take the ... the news. I don't want to hurt them. But I don't
want to hide from them either," Mitch mused, putting back his cup and leaning more fully against John.

"You still could talk to Sarah. Make her understand," John offered in his deep voice still slightly tinged with held back guilt.

Mitch's head nearly burst with memories from today and thoughts of apprehension and fear, making his heart twinge and his hands tremor. Today had started so fine, he had held John close, had kissed him, caressed him and had felt how the other man responded to his touches. They had been close, they had been happy.

As if John had picked up Mitch's thoughts, he turned slightly and brushed their foreheads together. Mitch's lips escaped a trembling sigh as he leaned into the touch.

"Don't worry," John's voice had taken on a husky note and was now barely audible.

Mitch cupped John's neck and carefully drew the other man into a gentle kiss, which he immediately returned. Relief and joy mixed with the soft tunes in the background soothed him. He pressed more firmly against John, who held him with one hand covering the small of his back.

Their kiss was a very timid affair, careful not to strain John too much and hurt his split lip even more. But gradually Mitch felt the other man ease into their slow pace, unwinding, opening himself up like he had never done before.

A calloused but tender hand drew a shaky line across Mitch's cheek, feeling his round cheeks and slight neck.

Sighing, Mitch's hand dropped from John's neck to his chest, where it carefully mapped the layout of the taught muscles and their fine rippling sensation. Through his finger tips Mitch detected a very small shiver running though John's body.

Drawing away, Mitch looked John up and down.

The dark eyes of the other man seemed to be on fire. Their liquid brown color had taken on a deeper, warmer shade but there was an insecure expression in them.

"Are you ... is this still fine?" Mitch asked, his voice shaking.

A slight smile, then a nod. "Yeah."

Assured, Mitch leaned forward again and pecked John on the lips, while both his hands stroked over John's broad chest.

John had curled his arms around Mitch and held him fast, his hands drawing small circles on his back.

Slowly, sensually, they melted together. Their touches and caress went to and fro, reverently shared like something valuable. For each move Mitch made, John reacted perfectly and their touches turned into a slow dance, carried onward by the humming music surrounding them.

Mitch's fingertips brushed over the worn out fabric of the shirt John wore, feeling every seam and tear until they settled on the hem.

This time Mitch felt it. There was a minimal but now very obvious shift in John's posture that spoke of his unease.
Mitch retreated a fraction.

"Should I stop?"

John's face was torn between discomfort and the need to be close and Mitch just knew how he felt. John wanted Mitch to go on, to share this experience with him, but at the same time there were cruel, invisible hands that pushed all the right buttons to set John's nerve on edge.

"I ..." John breathed and averted his eyes.

"It's fine, we don't need to go on," Mitch replied and for emphasis ran his hand along John's jaw, feeling the coarse stubble.

"It's just ... not a beautiful sight," John said with a trembling voice.

It dawned on Mitch what he meant and sadness overtook him. But then his fierce love for John erupted and he couldn't hold back. "They're not ugly, John. I ... they are part of you and nothing to be ashamed of."

Mitch squeezed John's shoulder.

A thin smile flickered over the other man's face.

"But they speak of terrible things."

"Then ..." Mitch fumbled for words, his heart thumping in his chest. "Then we'll make them resemble something good."

John's hooded eyes searched Mitch's face for what? A lie or certainty or maybe they just wanted to see how serious Mitch was.

Then suddenly John extended both his big hands and caught Mitch's. Very carefully they drew them away from their place on his tensed shoulders and Mitch wanted to draw back, but then John pushed them down and laid them on the hem.

Mitch looked up and there was a timid, but lovely smile on John's face.

Smiling back, Mitch leaned forward and kissed John. His hands slid under the shirt and found the exposed, flat belly. Inch by inch his finger tips and the heel of his hands drew over the hard muscles, covered by soft, warm skin.

When Mitch had reached John's breast, he carefully tugged the shirt over the other man's head, putting it aside reverently.

In front of him John sat rigid. His back was straight and his head slightly bent so that his fringe fell into his eyes. Automatically, Mitch grabbed for John's hands and held them fast. Then his eyes traveled over John's exposed body, bathed in the dim light. His stomach was made up by soft, rippling abs that seemed so tense and drawn in, that the contour of his ribs stood out very clearly. His chest was broad and well defined. Over their tanned expanse some four or five scars broke the skin and shone like mother of pearl when they caught the light. They were cruel, gnarled things that made John appear broken and haphazardly put back together.

Very carefully, Mitch traced a finger over the scar on John's left breast just below the collarbone. It was hard to the touch but the skin left and right felt soft and vulnerable.
Mitch traced each scar with his finger tip, setting it on their thin entry point and following their crooked way to the ragged exit point that had left the skin badly mauled. Imagining, that John had been conscious while the cuts were drawn along his chest made him angry. Not at the Vietnamese who had done this, but at people like Trautman, who thought it was right to send soldiers to their certain death in a war that meant nothing and had achieved nothing.

Under his slow and deliberate touches, John shivered. But his breath remained steady and he made no move to stop Mitch.

As if in trance, Mitch bent forward, picked up John's unique smell, now slightly mixed with sweat, and placed a soft kiss on the first scar he had traced. A jolt went through John, but he relaxed again immediately. John's skin felt like hot velvet to Mitch's lips, as he moved onto the next scar and the next. He kissed John's scars to accept them, to mend them and to show John that they meant so much more to Mitch than he could say.

Of course Mitch had always wondered how they had gotten there and John's file had only mentioned torture in broad terms, but that was it. Mitch swore to himself, that no-one would ever do that to John again. Bringing up his second hand, Mitch spread them over John's chest, his forehead resting underneath the other man's collarbone.

Suddenly, John began to jerk fitfully and Mitch looked up. John's posture was still rigid, his arms straight at his sides, their muscles contracting with the clenching of his fists. A tear spilled from his eye and burst on Mitch's hand.

Drawing away, Mitch said, "John, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ... I ..." He didn't know how to go on. Why had he pushed John like that?

But then, John picked up Mitch's right hand and put it back across his broad chest, holding it in place. Then he brushed their noses together.

"'S fine," He breathed through the sobs as more tears found their way down his face.

Looking closer, Mitch realized that it wasn't one of John's panic-attacks but a deep sadness that had taken him over, racking his shoulders with harsh sobs. Leaning into the touch, Mitch exhaled carefully and tried to put as much love into his touch as he could.

"They just ... remind me so much," John went on with a low voice.

"I didn't mean to stir up your memories, John," Mitch replied equally soft. "But I ... I want to know their story. They are a part of you and I want to be a part of you, too."

"That's alright. I ... I want to tell you," he offered.

Mitch searched John's eyes and found them full of remembrance and pain but also trust and hope, that some of this might actually ease his suffering. Mitch nodded. "I'm here for you, we can remember together."

Taking Mitch's pale and smaller hand into his bigger, more tanned one, John carefully moved it over to the scar that was more or less in the center of his chest. Leaning on Mitch, he began to recollect how he had gotten them.

For the next hour Mitch was trapped in a world made up by John's warm, tanned body, here and there broken by a shiny scar and his own imagination of the Vietnamese jungle. He saw how John lead his troop through the underbrush where the leaves were heavy with dew and hung down low. At the image of shouting and shooting Vietnamese soldiers, Mitch flinched and felt how John got
shot in the leg and how the bullet tore through his muscles, sending him down the ravine and into enemy hands. He saw how John was stretched upon a cross made out of bamboo in the middle of a stormy night in a dingy hut illuminated by a bare petroleum lamp. The thin, cruel knife caught the soft light and turned it into a feral gleam, biting into the dangerously exposed flesh. Mitch's finger followed the path of a scar, as he saw it burst open and spewing blood and pain. Over and over.

Mitch only barely surfaced from his imagination as tears of his own spilled down his face as he wept for John, for all of his pain and for all of his grief that seemed to be cut into this vulnerable body. Marked down forever.

Haltingly, Mitch sobbed, "I know it must hurt you to look at the scars ... But for me they show that you never gave up. The only thing the war gave you were cruelty, death and pain, but you pulled through anyway, still clinging onto your life that other people have thrown away, deemed worthless. And now you're here ... Your willingness to bear these scars brought you here, Johnny." His hand brushing up to cup John's neck. "I love each and every one of them."

John's eyes darted over Mitch's face. He looked sad, weary and worn out, the gash on his lower lip burning an angry red. But there was also relief in his look that made Mitch's heart thrum. Tightening his grip on Mitch's hand he murmured, "Thank you, Mitch."

"Don't thank me John. You've made it through all this pain on your own. But now you don't have to any more. Every time you'll see your scars from now on, you can think about how they got there, but also think about how they've got you here. You don't have to love them, because I already do."

Smiling, Mitch tenderly nudged John's forehead with his and a shaky smile appeared on the other man's face, making one final tear escape his eye. Gently, John kissed Mitch and once again they felt close, happy and secure. And now Mitch knew, this was something no one could ever take from them. Not Sarah, not the whole world and it felt good.

Chapter End Notes

Recently I have received so many comments that say that they have read and re-read WDIGFH or individual chapters and I ... I'm just so glad to hear that! THANK YOU to everyone who reads, comments and enjoys, you people are great!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
All of the good gifts given today

Chapter Summary

John and Mitch try to get over their fright with Sarah and start to catch up with everyday life. But things get exciting again when John brings home a new addition to their small family.

Chapter Notes

And here is another chapter to make up for the long wait ;3

Please note: Maybe a slight heads up for mild NSFW content in the end of the chapter happening after the second triple stars (***)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the Days following Christmas the police station was always overflowing with cheap, but cheerful garlands made out of tinsel and the small isle where the coffee machine stood was overflowing with pastel colored tupperware boxes, full of cold turkey, bread rolls, fruit cake and everything else that hadn't been eaten on Christmas.

All policemen and deputies stood around the table, mugs in hand, chatting away about their holiday, blissfully ignoring the telephone for some time. In the background John Denver sang 'Christmas for Cowboys'.

Still a little heavy-hearted from the events at his aunt and uncle's place, Mitch cast a rueful look outside. The sky was only a grey smudge and flimsy snowflakes drifted down, but didn't add to the already huge snow masses on the ground. But if it remained cold like that, they would have snow till April.

"Mitch?"

Jerking around, Mitch saw Thomas standing next to him, biting into a buttered piece of corn bread.

"Sorry, I zoned out for a moment," Mitch laughed and drank some coffee.

"I noticed that," Thomas commented with an easy grin. "How was your holiday at your uncle's?"

"Oh that! It was … good."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "I see. And how did they take to John?"

Now Mitch was fully awake. His eyes darted nervously around the group of talking men. Apparently all engrossed enough in their discussion, as to notice Thomas' question and how it might have sounded.

"Uh … well, not so good actually. But my uncle liked him well enough," Mitch replied, keeping his
"Oh well, with any luck he'll be moving out soon and they don't have to worry anymore," Thomas offered with a smile, completely oblivious to Mitch's torment.

Mitch should have told him to keep quiet about that. No-one needed to know that John lived with him. It was worse enough, that his neighbors already cast him questioning looks.

"Who're you talking about?" Anderson butted in, in his good hand a powdery white donut which had spread about the same amount in his full, black beard. His other arm was still in a sling, but he was capable of doing minor office chores, so he had started to come back in.

"Mitch is—" Thomas began but Mitch cut him short.

"A friend of mine stayed over for Christmas."

Thomas looked at him utterly confused but kept his mouth shut.

Anderson raised an eyebrow. He had never been fond of Mitch and after he got shot on the assignment to arrest the shooters at the start of the month, he had liked him even less. Now he was looking for every chance he got to score off Mitch. "Doesn't he have a family of his own?"

Mitch felt his ire rise, but he also wanted to keep up his calm façade at work. It wouldn't do to get into an argument with your colleagues, when you planed on becoming a sheriff.

"No, he doesn't," Mitch replied curtly.

"Hm, awfully kind of you," Anderson said, with a strange undertone, while he eyed Mitch up and down.

Not saying anything else, Anderson turned around again and joined his two best friends on the staff and began to talk in low voices.

"Christ, that guy has it in for you after that shoot out," Thomas murmured and stepped closer to Mitch who had been edging away from the rickety wooden table.

"Yeah, just because of his own damn foolishness," Mitch grumbled, having overcome his feelings of guilt after Anderson had been shot. John had been right, everyone was responsible for their own actions and Anderson just hadn't listened.

"Hm," Thomas agreed. "I'm sorry if I … shouldn't have mentioned John."

Mitch's heart softened, he shouldn't be mad at Thomas. "Don't be. I … I should have told you that I don't want them to know."

"But why not? You're doing nothing illegal."

Maybe not illegal, since Washington State had decriminalized same-sex relationships just this year, but Mitch doubted that this news had made it into the heads of the people living here that quick.

"No, I just thought it wasn't so good for my career, to be associated with a war veteran," Mitch lied and twirled his empty mug between his hands, watching the last drops swirling in the bottom.

"Oh," Thomas exclaimed and nodded. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

Having prevented any more unwanted forays into his private life, Mitch still felt Anderson's eyes on
him the whole day, watching him, thinking.

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The days following Christmas went by fast and quite soon New Year's Eve was upon them. Now the fine winter weather had finally turned to worse and the grey clouds had accumulated to huge, towering masses, pressing down onto the mountains, swallowing them. Harsh winds roared through the streets and drove ice and cold into every crevice it's piercing fingers found.

Mitch had to take a late shift on New Year's Eve and around 10 p.m. he finally had made it out of the office and fought his way over the parking lot to his truck. The huge, brown police parka only left his legs bare from the knees downward but that was enough exposed body to make Mitch shiver violently. Back in the car, he fiddled with the heating and for the first quarter of an hour he drove the truck with low revs, to get the heating kick in earlier.

Since all the big shops had closed already and Mitch needed some last second groceries, he went into the small 7-eleven store some streets away.

Finally he pushed the heavy shopping bag onto the co-drivers seat and headed home through the driving wind. At home he saw that the light in the kitchen was already turned on and the warm glow looked like a beacon to him in the murky dark.

Upon entering Mitch called exhausted, but happily, "I'm back, John."

Mitch peeled himself out of his dripping parka and stopped. There hadn't been any answer and the house remained utterly silent, expect for the soft clatter of the windows as the wind pushed against them.

"John? You there?" Mitch called and heaved the brown paper bag onto the counter of the illuminated kitchen.

Then his eyes fell on the round table, which was laid out for one person. There was a plate with a lid on it, which revealed mashed potatoes, peas and some gravy and meat. Next to the sink was another set of dinnerware, neatly scrubbed and put out to dry.

A strange feeling crept up Mitch's spine. John had definitely been here, made dinner, set the table for Mitch, but then had disappeared somehow.

Walking around the adjoining living room nothing spoke of John having spent time here. The couch was well made, the table empty of books or any other items. Fighting his nervousness, Mitch wanted to turn around and head for the bedroom, when he suddenly spotted a moving dark spot on the veranda. In disbelief, Mitch made out John, who sat huddled over on the veranda.

Dashing towards the glass paned door, Mitch yanked it open and was immediately hit by an icy blast.

He exclaimed in relief, "John! Here you are! Are you ... are you alright?"

John sat up carefully, the wind wasn't as driving on the sheltered veranda as it was in the front of the house, so John's hair was only tossed lightly. His face looked relaxed.

"Hi Mitch," John replied with a smile in his voice and shifted a little awkwardly, gathering his arms around him.

And then Mitch's eyes adjusted more fully to the gloomy half-light and spied the small, squirming
puppy in John's arm, nearly completely swathed in his military parka.

"What … is this?" Mitch asked in disbelief, slowly sinking to his knees, the wind making him shiver heavily without any jacket.

Carefully John cradled the yapping pup closer, as it tried to vanish between John's upper arm and his chest, to get away from Mitch. Or maybe just the cold.

"I found him on my way home. Someone put him out on the street in a box. When I walked by, he followed me," John explained with a soothing voice, as not to scare the puppy.

"I see," Mitch replied and in awe extended a hand, which only drove the puppy squirming further away.

John smiled softly and petted the tiny bundle carefully. "It's fine. Look, it's Mitch. He's a wonderful human," John explained and gradually the puppy poked his nose back out of the jacket to eye Mitch with dark, brown eyes, far to wise for an animal that young or small.

"But why're you out here? It's freezing," Mitch stuttered.

"I wasn't sure if you were alright with keeping him, so I kept him here first," John explained readily.

"You wondered if I'd sent him away?" Mitch was aghast. "No way! We're keeping him."

With that John, Mitch and the puppy went back inside the dimly lit living room and Mitch happily closed the door to shut out the cold. Then he turned around and saw how gingerly John knelt in front of the low armchair and set the puppy inside. His huge hands nearly encompassed all of the reddish, shaggy dog as he petted it. It was the same when John had laid eyes upon the horses back in Rosswood. His whole face was relaxed and revealed a far younger, more carefree person, with happy, nearly infantile emotions dancing over his face.

Smiling to himself, Mitch went into the bright kitchen.

"What can we feed him? Does he already have teeth?" Mitch called to John, while he rummaged through the low fridge.

"There is some left over meat from dinner. Without gravy. That worked well," John answered.

Carrying a small porcelain bowl, Mitch went back and very slowly sat next to John on the floor, who was busy keeping the puppy in place, that always tried to jump into his lap.

Mitch chuckled. "I think he wants to sit on your lap."

"I thought you're the only one who's allowed to do that," John replied with a smirk.

A furious blush washed over Mitch's face as he sputtered. It always took him by surprise when John was direct like that. But he loved him for it.

"Well, yeah," He admitted. "But for this tiny pupper, I'm going to make an exception."

Grinning, John let the puppy jump into his lap, where it immediately stood up and pushed his two big front paws against his chest, tail wagging, his tongue lolling.

"You feed him," John said and turned to Mitch more fully.

Cautiously, Mitch extended a piece of meat towards the dog who eyed it skeptically. But then, seeing
that John had put a hand on Mitch's knee, the dog dared a step forward and gingerly took the meat from Mitch's hand. After that, the puppy relaxed more and more and quite naturally, jumped from one lap into the next. John and Mitch laughed, petted the dog and watched it as it clambered down their laps and started to walk around the room.

John's eyes followed the dog intently, their expression kind and lovely. Mitch felt his heart soar.

Suddenly, John put his hand on Mitch's and asked, "You're really fine with keeping him?"

"Of course!" Mitch answered. Not only because that puppy had captured his heart with its cuteness, but also because it somehow seemed to act like a replacement for the horses they had to leave behind in Rosswood. John showed so much love and interest in caring for the tiny animal, that Mitch couldn't possibly take that away from him. "I mean, you could ask Chuck if it was alright to bring him to work with you … Then he would get enough walks. Or I'll drive home during lunch every day and take him out."

John's face lit up and joy was written all over it. He bent over and kissed Mitch on the lips. Chuckling, Mitch leaned into the soft contact and brushed a hand along John's jaw.

Withdrawing, after letting his lips linger on Mitch's mouth for some time, John said huskily, "We need to give him a name."

Mitch leaned back and looked around to find the puppy nosing books out of the lowermost shelf and trying to scramble into it instead. When it didn't succeed, he sat down on his haunches and looked at him. Now that the dog looked directly at Mitch he found, that somehow the fur over his eyes and along its snout were longer, looking like eyebrows and some sort of fuzzy mustache. Overall the dog had a rather shaggy and scrawny appearance, probably because it hadn't been fed well. And then there were those wise eyes, that reminded Mitch of …

"Sam," Mitch breathed.

Suddenly there was a strange sound and Mitch and the dog flinched and looked around. Next to him John had braced one hand against the armchair and the other was firmly placed over his mouth, his eyes huge. He was laughing, John was laughing out loud.

Not able to control himself and finally realizing what he had said, Mitch joined into the laughter. That dog looked like Trautman.

They spent some time laughing over that fact, while John moved to lean his back against the couch, while Mitch sat between his legs and settled against his breast. Entwined like that they kept watching Sam discovering each and every angle of the room, while sometimes bounding back to them, as if to check that they were still there. All the while Mitch and John talked about how they were going to divide the care for the dog between them and how anyone could be so cruel as to put him out on the streets.

Slowly Mitch became aware that it was a little bit like when he had taken John in. A stray that nobody wanted, but meant everything to him. Smiling to himself, that John had found something more to care about and share his love with. Mitch was sure that keeping Sam would help John a great deal. Sometimes animals understood more than people.

A sudden explosion sent Sam howling and scampering back towards them, while John flinched violently and nearly knocked their heads together.

"Wha–," Mitch began but stopped. "Oh no, we've forgotten New Year's Eve!"
Frantically Sam clawed at Mitch's shirt front, since John's was covered by his leaning on him. Carefully Mitch scooted the small bundle up and turned around to John.

John's face was ashen and his eyes wide. A stark tremor ran through his limbs as more and more explosions tore apart the silence of the night.

"Johnny," Mitch breathed. "I'm here for you."

John already had his hand wrapped around Mitch's upper arm and had contracted painfully with his affright. His eyes looked at Mitch wildly for a second before they seemed to focus on him.

With every burst of a firework the whole living room was bathed in a wonderful bright light, that somehow appeared cruel and taunting now.

"I'm fine ... I just had forgotten," he mumbled and instantly reached out a shivering hand to pat Sam, who was still trembling in Mitch's hands.

"He is scared, too," Mitch said and let the tiny dog slide into the space between his and John's bunched up legs. Leaning forward, Mitch slung a hand around John's neck and pressed their foreheads together in support. Despite his own tremors, John kept petting the dog while his other hand still held tight onto Mitch, who could only try to emit a soothing aura, while stroking John's neck.

"At least they are pretty," John said silently.

Mitch turned his head and watched green, golden and red colors flash all over his living room with a fierce light, only to vanish once again.

"Rockets, grenades, napalm ... they all burn red."

Mitch sat anxiously and waited for John to break apart, as he had done so many times when he came in contact with sounds or noises that reminded him of the war. But now, he only seemed stricken, sad, but not painfully confused as he had been months before. The tremor spoke of his fright still, but his conscious was in the here and now. With Mitch.

"It must've been horrible," Mitch breathed and searched for John's eyes. "Do you want to tell me?"

John's eyes widened a fraction. Mitch knew what the therapist had said about a passive trauma, but he didn't care. Clearly, John was caught up by his memories and maybe talking about them would help to straighten things out, to re-live them and finally be able to bury them.

"You want to hear?" John asked in disbelief, his voice breathless as the first tears slid down his face. His hand still rubbing over Sam's fur, who seemed to have quieted down somewhat.

"Sure do," Mitch assured John with a warm, tender smile.

A sad smile tugged on John's lips as words began to tumble out of his mouth. At first haltingly, insecure, but getting steadier the more words came.

Mitch clung to his lips and let the stories and recollections wash over him, as the fireworks turned into exploding bombs and back again into a festive tradition. The living room walls burned red with fire, but turned back blue and green in an instant. John's rough, slurred voice was nearly drowned by the fireworks, but Mitch absorbed every word, as he told him about grenades flung at him, napalm falling from the sky and flamethrowers eating away at the jungle. And just for one second Mitch fully experienced John's terror despite being safe at home. It was something he carried with him
Silent tears streamed down his face and he looked into John's eyes. John lifted his hand and brushed Mitch's tears away.

"I'm sorry, Mitch, I didn't mean to scare you," John apologized.

"I'm not scared," Mitch replied and tried a feeble smile. "I just feel so sad. I'm sorry that this has been done to you. I just love you so much."

At that, John's face lightened and he smiled back, tears ebbing away. "You always have my back, Mitch. Even in this," John said. "I love you, too."

As suddenly as they had appeared the fireworks died down, leaving the living room cold and empty again.

Slowly, Sam came out of his protective nest he had made between Mitch's and John's legs and looked them up and down. Then, with happy yaps and barks he ran to and fro between them.

Unable to resist, John and Mitch began laughing, while they held each other close, the last of their tears falling down their faces, taking all of their pain with them.

***

Silvester had changed them. Something in John had been unwound, opened and healed. For the first time after their visit at Mitch's aunt and uncle, John had slept through the night. After the fireworks had stopped and they had calmed down far enough, they had gone to bed, with Sam in tow. The bed was a little crowded with the dog sleeping underfoot, but Mitch didn't mind. Sam wouldn't leave John and Mitch just knew that John felt the same, although he might not have said it.

When they had to go to work again, Mitch suggested to leave Sam at home, until Mitch had his lunch break so he could drive home and take the dog for a walk. He figured that Sam might be too small to actually stay the whole day with John. And Chuck had to be asked for his consent to have the dog underfoot at the workshop.

Much to Mitch's regret this didn't work out. He had arrived at home just about a quarter of an hour into his lunchtime, when he heard the howling from inside. Sam had gnawed at the table legs, had ripped apart a couch cushion and emptied all of the lowermost bookshelves in panicked loneliness. At Mitch's arrival he had been so overjoyed that his tail wouldn't stop wagging and any attempts to keep him from licking Mitch's face were futile. Mitch hadn't been able to stay mad at him. In the end it had turned out, that Chuck had allowed John to bring Sam with him, as long as the dog behaved and Chuck was granted to take him for a walk or an appointment from time to time. Chuck had had a dog himself years ago, but when it died, his wife didn't want anymore pets and Chuck had agreed, seeing her grief.

Content, Mitch huddled closer to John, who was laying next to him in bed. Only some minutes ago Sam had been curled up between them like an armadillo, snoring silently. But then some rattling window in the living room had caught his attention and he had gone rushing off.

"He never gets tired," Mitch commented with a laugh.

John grinned. "Yeah and Chuck even took him out twice today."

Looking deeply into John's dark, unfathomable eyes, Mitch couldn't help but smile. Somehow they had managed to end up here together. The threats and dangers from the outside world suddenly
appeared far away and insignificant. Together they could weather any storm.

John cupped Mitch's face with a calloused, but tender hand and traced the line from his cheekbone to his ear. The touch was as light as a feather but Mitch felt its pull running through his whole body.

Slinging his arms around John's broad frame, Mitch pulled himself closer, kissing John. The coarse stubble along John's jaw sent a shiver down Mitch's spine, as he opened his mouth and licked John's lips lovingly. Carefully, John reciprocated the touch and held Mitch's face in his warm hand, stoking his thumb up and down over his cheek.

The orange light of the bedside lamp wrapped them in its lush, warm shine, painting John's skin a deep bronze and Mitch's a fine alabaster, now flushed with a rosy blush.

Mitch threaded his fingers through John's hair, caressing the sensitive skin underneath and moving onwards to the taut neck muscles, working with every tilt of John's head, to follow Mitch's kisses more fully.

Slowly, as if unsure of what to do, John's free hand crept around Mitch's waists and towards the small of his back, where it set with a reassuring warmth and heaviness. Mitch gradually arched his back and pressed against John's hand, showing that it was quite alright. Losing himself in the sensation of their caress, Mitch let his own hand glide over John's rippling back to the hem of his shirt. Drawing small circles just above the waistband of the sweat pants, Mitch heard John giving a low hum.

Deepening their kiss, Mitch pressed fully against John's hard body, reveling in its heat. Overcome with lust, Mitch grabbed John's hip a little more firmly and ground their hips together. The heat between his legs had become a growing pressure and a moan fled from his lips.

But the moment Mitch rocked against John realization struck again and Mitch pushed himself away from the other man. John wasn't aroused at all.

"Johnny, I'm sorry," Mitch gagged, embarrassment clogging his throat.

As hot tears pressed against Mitch's eyes he rolled around and buried his face in the pillow. He had done it again, he got carried away, bursting into John's personal space like the lovesick fool he was.

He felt very cold and alone and curled up further into the blankets, crushed by his shame and guilt. Somehow he felt dirty.

Suddenly a hand was laid upon his shoulders, weighing down comfortably. The blankets rustled like fallen leaves as John drew near, bringing his chest flush with Mitch's exposed back.

"Mitch," he murmured softly, his breath washing over Mitch's neck warmly, making him shiver with arousal even more.

Fidgeting, Mitch pulled at his boxers, trying to get them to be less constraining.

"Oh ... I'm really sorry, Johnny," he replied, his voice caught between a sob and a moan.

"Don't be, Mitch. You didn't do anything wrong," John assured him and began to rub slow circles over Mitch's shoulder blades.

But I ..." Mitch swallowed hard and fought with his surging emotions, but felt himself ease into John's careful administrations. "I did it again ... didn't I?"

"It's fine, Mitch," John breathed and kissed Mitch's neck. "It's really fine."
Gulping for air, Mitch began to unwind as John kept kissing his neck. They were cautious, tender kisses that started behind his ear and wandered down to the crook of his neck. Then John gingerly sucked at the skin and Mitch couldn't suppress a hitched groan any longer. His boxers became unbearably tight.

"John– Johnny ..." Mitch mumbled against the pillow to soften his moans. "You don't have– tah ...

A soft sound told Mitch that John was smiling and his hand slid down Mitch's back in a light curve, pushing over his hip bones and massaging them, as if to figure out how they worked and how the surrounding muscles connected to them. Mitch came apart piece by piece.

"Don't worry ..." John replied and pushed his face into Mitch's hair.

The fear of letting go evaporated, when John's broad hands roamed the entirety of Mitch's stomach and chest. They felt across every rise and fall, mapped every single curve or angle they found, as if to commit each inch to memory. Only the fabric of his shirt kept Mitch from going insane. John was so unbelievably cautious and tender, that Mitch nearly didn't realize when his shirt was pushed out of the way. But then John's rough fingertips brushed over the sensitive and exposed skin, that Mitch jolted backwards and moaned, pressing back against the other man.

Feeling Mitch's desire, John pressed him close and kissed his neck with more fervor, but still very carefully.

Mitch had grabbed the pillow hard so he didn't accidentally grab at John in the heat of the moment, scaring him. But Mitch couldn't resist putting his shaking hand on top of John's. His skin felt so hot to the touch, sweat began to bead all over Mitch's trembling body.

Then, almost reverently, John drew his hands lower down Mitch's stomach and reached the tight expanse of his boxers.

The second the first tentative hand stroked over Mitch's arousal he only managed a breathless, "Oh". His vision blackened out for a second but came back more vivid than before. The light of the bed lamp suddenly seemed like the brightest sunshine. His lips turned numb and fuzzy and only some unintelligible sounds came through.

"Oh God, Johnny ..." Mitch managed as he pushed his hips forward.

"I'm here, Mitch," John husked, his voice considerably deeper than before, but still collected, still loving.

Careful hands lifted the waistband and pulled it down Mitch's legs, while John's whole body pressed heavily against Mitch's, seemingly to melt him with its heat. Mitch let out a shaky sigh as the pressure was lifted but he could still feel his need bundled up tightly, sitting just below his navel.

Then John curled his one hand around Mitch's arousal with so much reverence that Mitch didn't know what to do. He wished for nothing more than to rock his hips against John's wonderful touch, to lose himself in the sensation, but he also wished for this moment to last forever. The last time and also his first time he had ever been with another man had been a rough and fast affair. Only satisfying some basic needs, but doing nothing for Mitch feelings. But this, this was so much more to him than sex.

Very gingerly John began to move his curled hand up and down, as if to test that Mitch didn't break under the touch. There was only the slightest tremor in John's hands that made it clear that he was affected after all. Not so heavily and by far not so devotedly trusting as Mitch, but he felt it too.
Grabbing the pillow even harder, Mitch pushed his face down deep, stifling the ever growing moans that just bubbled up from the depths of his throat without any restraints. His legs jerked up only to be shiveringly extended again.

John's other hand pressed warmly against Mitch's hip bone, slowly sliding towards his lower belly, building up the already maddening pressure.

"Mitch," John mumbled and let his lips brush over the soft skin, already blushed by the numerous kisses before.

"Ah-" was all Mitch was able to gag out, he couldn't take any more.

John's hand had settled into a loving, slow stroke that appreciated every inch of Mitch's length as it rose and brushed down again. It wasn't hard or demanding just so fiercely tender that Mitch surrendered everything. With one heedless thrust of his hips Mitch came, shuddering and sweating heavily, as stars swam in front of his eyes and all his muscles gave way at the same time.

Still shivering, completely doused by the joy and carelessness of his orgasm, Mitch felt John's arm drawing him into a tight embrace. Mitch reveled in the pressure of the hug since the orgasm had blown Mitch's mind so far apart, that he feared his body would follow and he would come undone.

"John, John ... John," Mitch blubbered instead of forming a normal sentence. The only word that came flawlessly over his lips was 'John'. Over and over.

"I'm here, Mitch. Are you alright?" John whispered, his voice a little unsteady and concerned.

Floating on a far away cloud, Mitch didn't register John's question at first, but then he slowly blinked his eyes open, eyelids weighing heavily. Turning in John's embrace Mitch saw John's eyes and was instantly captured by their liquid appearance, the hooded gaze even more clouded with a light shine of arousal.

"Yes ... yes, I am," Mitch said and a shaky laughter bubbled up in him. Leaning forward, he kissed John gingerly on the lips. Then, driven by a sudden impulse, Mitch grabbed the wrist of John's hand in which he had come and licked along the length of the palm. John's eyes shot wide for a moment while he watched Mitch liking up the sticky mess clinging to his fingers.

With a little more effort and weak arms, Mitch pushed himself up, pulled his shirt over his hand and began rubbing it over John's hand to clean him up more properly.

All of the time John's eyes followed him intently, watching his every move. Mitch knew that John feared giving himself up while having sex, rendering him vulnerable to any form of attack or hurt. Mitch made sure, that every caress now was considerate and loving. Having Mitch turn his back on him had given John enough security in this situation, that he had been able to let down his guard and finally be closer to Mitch than ever before. John glowed with the happiness of it.

Settling back into John's arms, the other man didn't hesitate once to pull him close and bury his face in the crook of his neck. Mitch sighed happily.

"How do you feel?" Mitch breathed and ran his fingers through John's dark hair.

"Good," John answered, his voice muffled but content.

"You didn't feel ... afraid?" Mitch wanted to make sure he didn't force anything on Johnny he didn't want to do.
"No. This was fine."

Relieved, Mitch offered hesitantly, "If you ever want to ... do more ... We could always do it with me on my belly."

Suddenly John sat up a little and looked at him.

"No, I don't want that," he said, his voice firm.

"Oh yes, I mean, I'm sorry ... I didn't want to force you," Mitch stammered, appalled at his own stupidity of taking things from zero to one hundred in bare seconds.

Then John's face lightened up and a soft smile appeared. "That's not what I'm saying. I'd want to see your face."

Mitch's whole face burned with the blush that spread all over it. To be looked at by John with such a deep and steady love while being told something like that was too much. A tear slipped past Mitch's eye as he dove in for a kiss.

Between all the sloppy, wet kiss Mitch was only barely able to say, "I love you, partner."

And the deep rumble in John's chest told Mitch that John was laughing. "I love you too."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Ours is the sky and the wide open range

Chapter Summary

Finally everyday life has taken over again, but the tranquility is treacherous. Phone calls made by Sarah drive Mitch into a corner from where he has only one choice left.

Chapter Notes

Folx ... I can't believe WDIGFH is already two years old and I forgot to post something on it's birthday! Still, I am as always so grateful to have fattiosala's (tumblr) as my beta with whom I can exchange all the Rambo feels and ideas. For two years alreday! And of course you people, who always read and comment, thank you <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Tell me where
Where does a fool go When there's none left to listen
To a story without meaning That nobody wants to hear
Tell me where
Where does a fool go When he knows there's something missing
Tell me where
Where do I go from here "

PAUL WILLIAMS – Where Do I Go From Here

The days of January slipped by unnoticed and still the snow remained. By now the houses were so heavily covered, that it was quite impossible to get the Christmas decorations down again, since they were buried deep beneath the snow and frozen fast.

After the one stay at the hospital, John had managed to report back to the probations officers each month in time, so his file there remained impeccable. For now nothing could endanger John's probation and that was a weight off of Mitch's mind. He didn't know what he would do if John should be imprisoned again and he really didn't want to find out. But then his mind wandered to the fateful night in the Blue Jays Bar, where they had met Derek in a very uncomfortable way. Mitch wasn't sure how John would react, if he should ever see Derek again. Up until now he had maintained a low profile and no one had seen him since the shoot out.

Those thoughts added to Mitch's discomfort in the beginning of January, but after some time he shoved them aside. If Derek had only half a brain, he would leave the state.

Having evaded that threat, something darkened their future yet again. The money he had set aside for John's therapy began running low and John's pay wouldn't cover enough of the expanses caused by consulting Dr. Philipps. In the end, John had decided to stop going to therapy. Mitch had been furious, as furious as he could get with John anyway. He had spent days bent over their accounts, calculating this ways and that, but the numbers didn't add up.

They had Sam to look after, Mitch's pick-up truck would need a complete over haul soon or had to be replaced by a newer model entirely and then of course there were John and Mitch themselves who needed to be fed.

John had been adamant about stopping to go to therapy, he said he had learned enough about himself and his illness that he would manage. Dr. Philipps had even recommended some free-time activity for John to help him stay focused and calm and direct his energy towards something hands on and useful. Of course John already did what ever work he could find around the house to keep busy, but now he really had picked up knitting as a hobby. And after all, John had said, he still had Mitch to help him. So Mitch found himself quite out of arguments.

Around the middle of January the phone calls started. They weren't just any one phone calls but phone calls made by Sarah, who wanted to talk to Mitch. To threaten Mitch.

The first call took Mitch completely by surprise. It had been a grey Sunday and he and John had spent the whole morning clearing the sidewalk and the driveway from the new snow that had come down over night. Dressed in a brightly orange colored parka and heavy boots Mitch had run into the living room, as soon as he had heard the phone ring, expecting some owing call from the police department.

"Hullo, Mitch here," Mitch had huffed breathlessly into the receiver.

"Mitch, it's me," Sarah's voice had been clipped and cold.
"Sarah," Mitch had echoed in disbelief. Then hope had risen in him. Maybe she wanted to talk things through. "How, how are you?"

"Miserable, because of you."

Mitch had gagged, unable to say anything.

"Mitch listen," Sarah had implored. "You've put me into a very uncomfortable situation with keeping your … secret from mom and dad."

"I … I know," he had stuttered helplessly. "But Sarah, look. You and I we're like brother and sister! I need your help in this. I don't want to burden Henry and Lisa anymore than I have to. And as long as I can keep them from knowing … I'd want to do that," Mitch explained with a heavy heart, sick of hiding himself from his family like that.

"We're not … like brother and sister, Mitch. Not anymore," Sarah had spat. "I don't know who you are anymore, you've changed!"

"I– No I didn't! I've … I've always been … gay," Mitch had finally spelled it out and relief filled his being.

"You– What? And you've never said anything? Why? We could've helped you!"

Hurt, Mitch had asked, "How could you've helped me? That is just who I am. Always have been."

"No, no, no, Mitch this isn't you. We've got to do something. You have to do something, you've to stop! That man doesn't love you. He has ensnared you with this nonsense of being in need of help and support! He is just after your money," Sarah had argued fiercely.

"Sarah Stop!" Mitch had barked, his heart throbbing in pain. "Please … I, I can fully understand that you must be confused by all of this. But please, I beg you, don't say anything to Lisa and Henry. I'll figure something out."

There had been a moment's silence on the other end of the phone.

"I don't know how much longer I'll be able to keep that secret, Mitch," and with that she had hung up.

Mitch had stared down in disbelief at the receiver in his hand, as if it had turned into something vile and poisonous. His heart had beaten frantically in his chest. How much longer would Sarah keep quiet? How much time did he and John have to spent in peace and when was the storm bound to break loose over them?

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The more time went by the more heated the telephone calls got. At some point Sarah had called Mitch three times in a week to pressure him into leaving John. Her threats were hollow and only hurtful, but then she had said something that shook Mitch down to the core: If he wouldn't listen to her, she would tell her parents. Mitch had sat frozen, the receiver trembling in his hand as the world seemed to come undone around him. He had begged her not to tell them while tears ran down his face and his voice faltered. He had begged her for all the love that there still was between them, for all the happy times they had spent as if they had been sister and brother. Sarah had appeared to be flustered by Mitch's emotional reply and how scared he sounded. In the end she had only mumbled some few words about 'keeping the family peace' and had hung up.
John must have been standing in the living room when Mitch had answered the call, for the moment Mitch hung up, the other man had stepped up without a single word and embraced him. Mitch had buried his face in John's breast, sobbing painfully and desperately. Sam had run around them, barking plaintively until he settled down, pressed against Mitch's leg.

That day, nothing had been able to cheer up Mitch. He had wandered around the house, unable to focus on his chores until he finally put on a jacket and sat down on the veranda.

After a time Sam had suddenly appeared next to him, nudging him and putting his head in Mitch's lap, begging to be petted. But having sensed that Mitch wasn't really in the mood he had gotten up and ran around the snowy garden, yapping and chasing his tail. From time to time he had gathered up so much speed, that he fell down head over heels but got up again immediately to chase around the garden once more.

Watching the carefree puppy, Mitch couldn't help but smile. He had gotten up and started playing with Sam who in turn danced around him all tail wagging and lolling tongue.

All of a sudden something had hit Mitch in the shoulder and burst, releasing a cold dust of snow. John, standing in front of the veranda, had thrown a snowball at him and waved grinning. Leaving all his troubles behind, Mitch had bent down, made a snowball of his own and threw it back at John. Laughing, they both had chased Sam and made snowballs for him to catch.

Finally, John and Mitch had fallen down into the snow, arm in arm, breathing heavily.

"You're afraid that they'll leave you," John had said after a time.

Mitch had nodded and buried himself deeper into one of John's self-knitted scarfs. He was getting quite good at it.

"If I'd'nt be here, you wouldn't have these worries, Mitch," John had gone on.

"We're not going there!" Mitch had choked and sat up. "We've done nothing wrong! And ... and," tears had sprung up in his eyes. "And if they can't accept that, they'll have to live without me."

John's expression had been sad, his brow furrowed in pain at Mitch's burden. But then he had sat up too and wrapped his arms around him.

"Yeah, alright. And I'll be there all of the way."

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Mitch furiously sharpened a pencil he had broken for the third time in a row, while filling out a report. The strain Sarah's phone calls had put upon Mitch made him short tempered and jumpy. No matter what he did, Sarah's accusations crowded his mind, suffocating any other thought he might have had.

Outside the sky had remained a bleak grey for about a week now and frost patterns blossomed all over the windows of the police station.

In order not to get in touch with his colleagues, especially with Anderson, Mitch had picked out some work he could do at his desk. Preferably alone. But of course Thomas sat across from him at his own desk and chatted away happily about one thing or other he had done on the weekend. Trying to keep up a good face for Thomas, Mitch smiled and nodded and gave the occasional answer or grunt of agreement. Thomas seemed to be perfectly content with that.
The day dragged on without a single change of light. No movement of the sun could be seen through the thick cloud cover and instead of a rosy sun set there was only the darkening of a sky to a sadder grey. Around him the bustling and the conversation soon blended into one another, becoming a buzzing sound, sealing Mitch in his own world of sullen thoughts.

The harsh ringing of the telephone at the front desk nearly sent Mitch reeling backwards.

"You're a bit jumpy today," Thomas laughed amiably.

"Yeah, work has me captivated," Mitch replied shakily with a forced grin and turned back to his form.

But instead of getting on with the form, his own phone rang.

"Mitch here," he said and turned towards the front desk where Anderson sat.

"Yeah. It's your cousin," Anderson told him, suspicion dripping from his voice. Sarah had never called him at work, even when his aunt had been brought into a hospital because of a broken leg. "She sounds quite distressed."

"Well, put her on then, why don't you?" Mitch snapped more viciously than he had intended. Fear making his hand shake.

"Fine by me," Anderson replied sarcastically and hung up.

"Mitch," Sarah hissed, before Mitch could say anything.

"Listen I don't have time--" he tried to put her off.

"Oh yes you do! I have been living with this knowledge of that stranger living in your house … being with you. And it's not right! It's … it's against nature– against the church."

Mitch couldn’t say anything, couldn't defend himself out of fear of giving himself away. Thomas even cast a questioning glance over to him. But Mitch only grinned weakly and shrugged, while inside he fell apart and tears pressed against his eyes. Why would Sarah ruin him like that?

"I don’t--" he started but was cut short.

"If you won't stop this, Mitch, I will. I will tell Chuck all about John, what he is, what he has done to you," Sarah's voice trembled with rage or sorrow Mitch couldn't say. "I'm not doing this because I hate you! You're right, we're like sister and brother and as your older sister I will protect you. You can't hope to live a happy live when you keep on being … what you are."

Thunderstruck Mitch sat in his chair, the receiver pressed to his ear so no one could hear what Sarah was saying. She was going to ruin their lives. She would tell Chuck who would immediately be at John's throat for being a fag, making sure he wouldn't harm the son of his best friend anymore. Society would tear them apart.

He took a shaky breath to reply but the word stuck in his mouth. There wasn't anything he could do to prevent her from realizing her plan.

"Are you listening, Mitch? Mitch?" Sarah barked but it was a far away sound as Mitch slowly, as if in trance, set down the receiver and broke the connection.

"Women. Got you talked into a corner, hasn't she?" Thomas joked.
Something snapped inside of Mitch and he shot out of his chair. "That's not even close to funny, Thomas," he hissed.

Grabbing his jacket, Mitch stormed out of the police station, his shift having ended half an hour ago anyway. A stunned Thomas and a suspicious Anderson were left behind.

***

Back at home Mitch prowled the house. Sometimes he sat down, trembling hands pressed between his thighs to stop them. But then he would get back up again and wander around.

Dread rose in him like a dark cloud and blotted out all of his reasonable thoughts and made him despair. If Sarah went through with it, the news that John was a fag would spread like a wildfire through Chuck's workshop. The boys working there might accept a veteran, but a homosexual was something far more threatening to them.

Keys rattled at the door and John came in.

"I'm home," he said with his typical low voice, knowing that Mitch tended to overhear John's silent footsteps. But since Sam barged in with John, there was no way of entering the house unnoticed anymore.

"John," Mitch choked and rushed into the hallway but came to a halt some steps away, knowing that sometimes too sudden burst of proximity made John uncomfortable. Instead he bent down and petted Sam affectionately, seeking comfort in the loyal animal.

Seeing Mitch's haunted expression in the gloom of the unlit hallway John's face changed.

"What happened?" He asked and came up to Mitch, taking a hold of his trembling hand.

"It's Sarah … she called me up at work," Mitch murmured, his grip tightening.

John nodded and drew Mitch into a hug. Mitch rested his head on John's shoulder and breathed in his unique smell, now mingled with wood and resin from work.

"She said, she's going to tell Chuck all about us … about you. To make you leave me."

John stiffened momentarily but then he relaxed and began rubbing Mitch's neck, to soothe him.

"Let's tell him."

"What?" Mitch stepped out of the embrace and searched John's angular face, full of seriousness.

"If she's going to tell him, we can't be certain what exactly she'll say. If we go there first, clear things up, Chuck at least gets an honest story. In this case attack's the best defense."

Mitch stared at John and noticed snowflakes thawing in his hair, clinging on as tiny droplets. The snowflakes didn't go away, they just changed.

Now it really had begun, the unraveling of his friends and family. He would have to come out to them on his own, John was right about that. It was the only way to tell them the truth instead of lies and misconceptions fueled by fear.

Mitch drew a hand along John's cheek, feeling the stubble and every fine angle. John leaned into the touch and watched Mitch with his calm, hooded gaze.

"You're right. We're going to have to tell him first," Mitch replied and threaded his fingers through
the dark hair, feeling the cool droplets clinging there. "I have a late shift tomorrow, I'll visit him tomorrow morning."

John gave him a reassuring smile. He had already been a victim of a social stigmata and had survived. And now they had each other so somehow they would work it out. Even if they had to leave Fairview behind.

The tender kiss John placed on Mitch's lips made him hot all over and he sighed deeply. Relaxing, Mitch's hands slid along John's neck and over to his chest where they came to a rest.

"We should make some dinner," Mitch murmured with closed eyes as the kiss broke.

"Yeah," John breathed. "Let me handle that."

So John vanished into the kitchen with Sam hard on his heels and Mitch tended to the washing. Stuffing the clothes into the machine was so monotonous that Mitch's thoughts drifted off to tomorrow and how Chuck would react. Mitch would tell him. It wouldn't do if John did that. Chuck needed to hear it from a person he knew and trusted. No matter how he would think of Mitch afterwards.

"Mitch?"

Taken by surprise, Mitch whirled around and saw John standing in the doorway to the narrow bathroom, Sam pressing past him and trotting over to Mitch to lick his hand.

"Sorry, I zoned out for a moment," Mitch laughed.

"'S fine. But the doorbell's ringing," John said.

Mitch blinked in confusion. Who would call upon him at that hour?

"I don't think it's a good idea that I should open the door," John explained.

"Oh!" Mitch exclaimed. "Yes, of course. I'll get it."

A little warily Mitch went into the illuminated hallway and opened the door, which immediately let in a gust of icy wind.

"Evening Mitch," Thomas greeted him, standing in the half-light of the front porch with a brown paper bag tucked under his arm that clinked ominously.

"Thomas," Mitch exclaimed in disbelief, instantly regretting how they had parted today.

"The very same. I just thought I'd come over after my shift so we could talk. I'm really sorry that I got on your nerve like that earlier," Thomas explained, his expression apologetic.

"I, yeah. I'm sorry I snapped at you. But I don't have time ... And John's still around so ..." Mitch trailed off.

"Well, can't he give us an hour or so? He can wait outside if you think it's too private," Thomas asked.

Suddenly Sam burst past Mitch and began barking at Thomas, while John stepped up next to Mitch, apparently having tried to capture the excited puppy but now had stopped to eye Thomas.

"I, um, I didn't mean it like that," Thomas stammered flusteredly while trying to evade the tiny dog.
that was yapping at him. "You understand how I meant that, don't you?"

"Sure," John replied.

Mitch quickly made a lunge for Sam and picked him up, trying to calm him down. "I'm sorry, Sam's still not properly trained. I ... we only have had him one month or so."

"Ah, that's fine!" Thomas reassured him, apparently not having noticed the 'we' and extended a hand towards John. "Thomas Magnussen."

For a second it seemed like John wouldn't return the gesture, but then he shook Thomas's hand. "John Rambo."

"Well ... why don't you come in, Thomas? John can join us too, I've got something to tell you, anyway," Mitch explained and ushered Thomas in after having set Sam down again.

Looking back at John, Mitch saw his surprise but then the corner of his mouth turned into a slight, encouraging smile. John was fine with Mitch's decision. A small rub on the back was enough to fill Mitch's heart with courage.

The three of them sat down at the wooden table in Mitch's dingy kitchen. Since Thomas had taken John's usual seat, John took the chair closer to Mitch, his back straight and his face expressionless.

"I'd offer you a coffee, but I think we should talk first," Mitch said and rubbed a hand over his face in nervousness.

"Fine with me," Thomas said but sounded confused.

"Alright ... Look, what I'm going to tell you now might ... make you mad at me or want to leave. That's fine. You can just leave without having a bad consciousness," Mitch explained.

"I'm not sure where you're going," Thomas admitted and looked warily over to John. "But alright, go on."

"You have known me for over fours years now and you are my best friend and I would never lie to you. But there are some things I haven't told you, because I thought it might ... ruin our friendship," Mitch began and looked straight at Thomas.

Thomas' eyes had widened in confusion and maybe even fear, but he nodded. John remained silent.

"When I first took John in it was for the reasons I told you. I felt guilty because of the things that happened in Hope and I wanted to make up for it. But then John and I got to know each other better and ... and things lead from one to another and what I'm trying to tell you," Mitch pressed forward with force to overcome his stammering. "Is that John and I are in a relationship."

The kitchen fell silent. Now and again the windows squeaked with the nightly wind pressing against them. Mitch's heart was like a drum beat in his ears.

Blinking Thomas said, "You're telling me, you're gay?"

"Yeah," Mitch confirmed, feeling strangely elated after the burden had left him. A small gleam of pride nestled itself in his chest. Finally he had stood up for who he was freely, instead of being found out like a teenager. "I've always been. Even before you met me."

Across the table, basked in the harsh light of the kitchen, Thomas still sat transfixed. Thoughts and
emotions crossed his face in such quick succession that Mitch wasn't sure how his friend felt at all.

"But you've never had ... anybody around?" Thomas asked haltingly, apparently trying to figure out why he had never suspected Mitch of being gay.

"No, I've never had a ... a relationship before. I didn't come out to anybody, really. It's too ... dangerous," Mitch concluded sadly.

"Yeah," Thomas agreed absentmindedly. But then his gaze wandered over to John, who had remained silent throughout the conversation, and he blanched.

"And that is why Sarah called," Mitch picked up the thread again. "She found out about us over Christmas and now she's threatening us to tell Chuck about us or even worse, my aunt and uncle. So before any gossip reaches your ears I thought I tell you directly, now you can ... like ask me some questions, if you have any, or if you want to go ..." Mitch trailed off and rubbed his nose.

Thomas face had settled into an expression of mild confusion and wonderment, his brow slightly crinkled.

"I … don't think I understand fully, Mitch. But … this here doesn't change the way how I think about you, alright? You're still my friend," Thomas finally put forth, his gaze steady.

Mitch's heart suddenly burst with joy and he cried. Pawing at his eyes, he tried to stop the tears. He longed to embrace Thomas, but he knew that this might be uncomfortable for him. So he remained seated and occupied himself with his tears.

"You … you do?" he choked out between the sobs.

Grinning feebly, Thomas replied. "Yeah, sure. I mean … if you've always been gay that is apparently the only way I know you without realizing it, so … nothing's changed, right?"

"Well, no," Mitch laughed sobbingly. "Just that I put you into an uncomfortable position of keeping my secret."

"I imagine there are worse things," Thomas said, sounding understanding.

Suddenly John shifted as if he was about so say something but he didn't. His face had been impassive, but now it wore a quite intense expression with which he regarded Thomas, who fidgeted under the stare. But then John turned around and quite naturally took Mitch's shaking hand in his.

Mitch grinned back at him and rubbed a final tear out of his reddening face.

"Thank you, Thomas," Mitch smiled.

Looking at their clasped hands with a little disdain that he tried to hide behind a grin, Thomas nodded. "Sure thing, I just might … need to get accustomed to it." After a moment's silence he turned to John. "Could you … still give us a minute? But you don't have to go outside! Had I known earlier how … things are, I wouldn't have suggested to put you out of your own home."

For some seconds John studied Thomas' face then looked at Mitch and nodded.

"Sure." John replied.

Before getting up, he ran his thumb over Mitch's knuckles and gave him a small, private smile that made Mitch glow with love.
"Sam," John said in his low voice and he and the scruffy dog left the kitchen, heading for the bedroom.

"I'm sorry to put this all on you at once," Mitch apologized.

Thomas shrugged. "That's fine, I think."

"Do you want a coffee now?" Mitch got up.

"Oh no, I need a beer." The moment the words had left Thomas' mouth he looked guilty. "Oh Christ, sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

Mitch laughed. "No, that's fine. I could use one too."

With that they opened the bottles hidden in the paper bag, still cold from the weather outside. For some time they sat in silence and enjoyed their beers.

"Mitch," Thomas began haltingly. "I'm sorry if I seem a little reserved. I just need to … get my head around everything. I've never met a gay person before."

"None that you know of," Mitch said levelly and Thomas stared.

"Guess you're right," he admitted sheepishly. "But I mean, how does it feel like … being with a man?"

Mitch blinked, then said, "How does it feel like being with a woman?"

Thomas looked at him aghast. "Are you telling me you've never slept with a woman before?"

Mitch shrugged his shoulders, his heart racing a little. "I tried but it didn't work for me."

"But, it's--"

"Natural?" Mitch finished the sentence for Thomas.

"Oh … I see," Thomas replied and looked down on the table, his understanding battling with his own world view for dominance. "What are you going to do about Sarah?"

There it was again, the inevitable question. "I'll tell Chuck tomorrow. Better me than her. And then … I'll tell aunt Lisa and uncle Henry. There's no way around it."

"But what if all of this reaches the police station?" Thomas sounded concerned.

With a heavy heart Mitch said, "Then John and I'll have to move. Maybe into a bigger city, where people're less likely to know us. Or maybe even leave the state."

Thomas' initial reservation evaporated instantly. "But you can't just let them make you leave your life behind! I mean, you're doing nothing wrong."

A sad smile flickered across Mitch’s face and he took another sip of his beer. "Tell them that."

Sighing defeatedly, Thomas sagged back in his chair. "Shit."

"A tremendous amount of it, yes."

Thomas and Mitch kept talking for a while, Thomas warming to the subject ever so slightly. When
he left, he told Mitch that he could count on him and after some awkward shifting clasped his hand and shook it. And Mitch understood, this also would take patience and time.

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Mitch huddled deeper into the folds of his huge police parka. The heating in the pick-up had begun to kick in even later and now that the car was turned off, the small amount of heat ebbed away. He had parked the car in a small alleyway, connecting to the broader street leading to Chuck's workshop. Mitch knew that he needed to collect his bravery before talking to his old friend and for that he might need some encouragement from John.

John sat next to him as silent and steady as a mountain. If he was nervous about the things to come, something that might well cost his job he had fought so hard for, he didn't show it. John had been on the borders of society ever since he came back from the war, it didn't matter to him for which reason he was shunned. It was better to be shunned because you loved someone than to be shunned because of actions you took because the government wanted you to.

The morning like the weeks before had been grey and only small and flimsy snowflakes drifted out of the sky here and there. Slowly, Mitch’s breath began to form clouds in the air.

"I think I should go now," Mitch announced with a thin voice.

"Whenever you're ready," John replied silently.

Mitch looked at the dark haired man who looked back at him with his deep and calm eyes, full of reassurance.

"Now's the time to find out who our friends really are," Mitch said and clenched his hands. They were trembling.

John put his broad, tanned hand across Mitch's and leaned closer.

"Chuck's a good man."

Mitch smiled and thought fondly of his father's oldest friend.

"He is," Mitch agreed. "Ok, I'll go."

But before Mitch could get out of the car, John held Mitch fast and slid one hand behind his neck and very gingerly pulled him forward into a kiss. John's touch felt like molten lead settling softly onto Mitch's lips. Mitch somehow felt ashamed of himself for hiding away in an alleyway like this, but he knew that there was no other way. They would take this step by step.

Giving himself over to John's kiss, Mitch rid himself of all the dark feelings. John brushed his nose along Mitch's as the kiss broke and sat back.

With one final grin, not needing to say anything else, Mitch jumped out of the truck and into the cold but could still feel the warmth of John's kiss lingering on his lips.

The walk up the workshop didn't take long and Mitch tried to keep up a fast pace, before the cold could catch up with him.

"Mornin' deputy Rogers," Mitch was greeted by some of the early workmen. Despite his mission, Mitch tried a grin and gave them a short wave before hurrying on.
The door to Chuck's metal container inside the huge working hall was already ajar, spilling harsh neon light onto the concrete floor.

Knocking at the door, Mitch called out, "You in there, Chuck?"

"Come on in!"

Mitch stepped into the bright but cluttered confines of the container and securely shut the door behind him.

"Mornin' Mitch. Where's John? Did anything happen?" Chuck had gotten up from behind his desk, concern showing in his voice.

"Mornin' Chuck and no, don't worry. John's fine he's just ... coming in later. I wanted to talk to you beforehand," Mitch explained.

Chuck's shoulders dropped an inch and he sighed. "Alright, you had me worried there for a second. John's of course a valuable worker, but he is also a very fine man. I've seldom met someone with such decency and discipline."

Mitch grinned at Chuck's praise but was also too cruelly aware the he might destroy everything now.

"But don't mind an old man ramblin' away like that. Here, take a cup of coffee and tell me what's on your mind, lad." Chuck handed him one of the frail white china cups and leaned back against the desk.

Mitch had taken a seat on the usual, rickety chair in front of the desk and now turned the cup in his hands.

Some invisible force clenched down upon Mitch's throat and he felt parched and quite unable to say anything. A careful sip of the coffee helped with the thirst but it accelerated his heart quite painfully. But he had made this decision and John was with him. It had to be done.

"Chuck," Mitch began and stopped as his throat caught again. "Um, I've something to tell you."

Chuck raised his bushy eyebrows but other than that his face was attentive and his eyes mild.

"John's been living at my place for about half a year now. And, you know, I took him in to make up for all that had happened in Hope. So at first I thought it was only pity that I felt, so I kept letting him stay. But you know ... ugh, this is hard for me to say ..." Mitch trailed off and looked frantically all across the room.

Chuck furrowed his brow but said nothing and Mitch was quite unable to tear his gaze away from Chuck once he had looked into his eyes.

"Ok, this might be hard for you and I can understand if you'll get angry at me and want to fire John, so I just say it. I'm gay and ... I'm in a relationship with John." The moment the words had left Mitch's mouth another constrain inside his chest seemed to have broken apart. He sat up a little straighter and pushed his shoulders back like he had seen John do. Mitch would not be ashamed.

For a long moment Chuck looked Mitch intently, his grey eyes hard and unreadable.

"Ah," he said. "I figured."

Mitch looked at Chuck as if he had just answered in fluent Chinese. The old man seemed perfectly at
"You ... did what?" Mitch breathed, still unbelieving.

A weary smile appeared beneath Chuck's beard. "Jesus, Mitch. I've known you since you were a wee babe. I've seen you grow up, I've heard George and later Henry talk about you. I've seen how you care for John. I might be old but I'm not blind."

No words came out of Mitch's mouth. It had clamped down on its own accord as his whole body went rigid with tension. Chuck had known? But if he had who else had--

"It's fine," Chuck's deep and gravelly voice cut through Mitch's whirlwind of thoughts. His big and calloused hand rested gently on Mitch's shaking knee.

"But ... you're not ... disgusted?" The words only came haltingly as Mitch tried to focus on Chuck through the veil of tears obscuring his view.

The warm smile broadened and took on a wiser note. "Why would I be? If God made you that way, then there is nothing wrong with it. Who am I to judge?"

"You think that ... God ... That it's not against--" Mitch couldn't hold back his tears anymore. Being told by his father's best friend that it was fine opened every wall inside him that had held back his fear and desperation.

Chuck gently pried the coffee cup out of Mitch's hands and drew him into a hug. Being held like that Mitch traveled back in time. He felt like ten years old, when he had had a bad dream and his father would console him. Grabbing a bit of sleeve from Chuck's flannel shirt, Mitch sobbed quietly.

Drawing back again, Chuck placed two firm hands on Mitch's shoulders. "Have I ever told you about Randy?"

Mitch only vaguely remembered having heard of Chuck's brother, so he shook his head. "Not really."

Sadness washed over Chuck's face as he sat back. "Randy was my younger brother. We would do everything together, fishing, fooling around in the woods and even the occasional apple scrumping. We had no secrets between us. But as I grew older and took Randy out with me to meet my friends and to some extend, girls, he somehow began shutting me out. I thought I was helping him along, finding a girlfriend since he was a very shy character."

Mitch saw Chuck's eyes getting wetter and his voice thinner, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything.

"Then, some time later I finally made him talk to me. I promised him, whatever the problem was, I'd be there for him. If he was too shy meeting girls, that was fine. If he wasn't sure how things worked, I'd tell him. I'd do everything for him. Then under tears, he came out to me. Told me he was gay and didn't have any clue what to do about it. All you heard where gays being lynched, being shunned by the church, he was so afraid." Chuck's voice broke and he bit his knuckle looking away.

But before Mitch could say any word of comfort, Chuck went on. "He's my brother. I'd known him all my life and I knew, if he was gay, then so he was. I didn't care. I helped him to gain some balance with himself more or less. But then ... some months later he decided to tell our parents, worn out by living in denial of himself. They didn't take it well. They shouted at him, hit him, not able to accept a child that was so deviant from their world view. There'd been nothing I could do. In the end, one summer morning I found him in the bathroom, his wrist were cut."
Mitch watched as silent tears slipped over Chuck's cheek and vanished into his thick, grey beard. His stomach knotted with agitation. How could parents be so cruel?

"I'm so sorry, Chuck," Mitch husked, searching the other man's face.

A wan smile crossed the old man’s face as he brushed the falling tears away. "Don't be. It's been over fifty years now. I hope his soul has found some peace."

Mitch nodded.

"Anyway," Chuck went on more softly, but still determined. "What I'm trying to tell you is, that I know you don't need my absolution, but I just want to tell you that it is fine. You and John have my full support."

Now finally smiling, Mitch replied, "Thank you so much. I ... I was so worried about how you'd react and your support means so much more."

"Of course. Sometimes the most cruelty comes from people close to us. But I won't be part of that Mitch. What did Henry and Lisa say? Or … haven't you told them?"

Rubbing a hand over his tear stained face, Mitch began recounting the events that had occurred since Christmas, how Sarah had found out. How Sarah threatened them. And Chuck listened with patience and gave Mitch all the time he needed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you!

**Art**

[Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag](#)
[ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag](#)
But there's no place left to hide

Chapter Summary

After coming out to his dead parent's long time friend, Mitch's and John's relationship has gone one step further. But they are still harassed by Mitch's own cousin who threatens to expose them to his aunt and uncle. Now Mitch has to make a move that might as well change his whole life.

Chapter Notes

After the last update we got so many nice and encouraging comments ... thank you folks! It is still such a pleasure to have tattiosala's (tumblr) as my beta and co-creator for this by now huuuge fic of this very tiiiiny ship. I am more than grateful <3

And yes, I am aware that the timeline with the Rambo setting and the Rocky Movie (released 1976) might be a little bumpy ... but as written in an earlier chapter, I've aimed the fic to be set around 1976! And tattiosala and I just wanted to have that little wink towards Stallon'es other successful franchise.

Please note: Maybe a slight heads up for NSFW content in the end of the chapter happening after the third triple stars (***)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The receiver gave a hollow click as Mitch set it back down. Fright and dread had him frozen into place while small tremors started in his shoulders. He could still hear his aunt's happy voice that he had decided to visit them tomorrow afternoon for some coffee and cake. Around him the living room turned a vivid orange, caused by the setting sun. After a week of bleak weather it had cleared up and the sun was now battling the snow with all its might but not really succeeding.

After Mitch had come out to Chuck, Sarah had indeed called one day later. Apparently Chuck had tried to reason with her, since he knew her nearly as long as he knew Mitch. But Sarah wouldn't hear any of it. Finally she had ended up insulting Chuck for covering up for John and hung up. Chuck had called Mitch immediately afterwards, now there was no turning back. He had to tell aunt Lisa and uncle Henry.

Rubbing a forlorn hand across his face Mitch turned towards the windows and eyed the snow-covered garden. Tomorrow his family was going to break with him. For sure.

A tender hand slid around his back and settled on his waist. John had silently stepped up to him, having overheard the conversation from the open kitchen. Mitch leaned back against his broad chest but remained silent.

John's slow, rhythmic breathing and the steady thump of his heart washed over Mitch like a warm shower, taking away his strain.
"I'm afraid," Mitch breathed after a while.

"Yeah. Me too," John replied.

"But I'll drive over there tomorrow and … and …" Mitch faltered.

"I'll go with you."

"But--" Mitch began and turned around.

John smiled. "I'll wait in the car. A safe distance away, if you like. But I'm not leaving you."

Searching John's angular face, all Mitch could see were kindness and love. His dark brown eyes looked unwaveringly back at Mitch.

"Thanks, partner," Mitch murmured and found that a small smile blossomed on his lips.

In the evening Mitch found himself sitting on the couch and flicking through the tv guide. His mind wandered off to tomorrow every now and then, to think about what would happen, so Mitch felt he could use some distraction. Then his eyes settled on the small synopsis for a film scheduled in fifteen minutes.

"Something worthwhile's on?" John asked and sat down next to him.

"Uh, yeah, this one sounded pretty interesting. It's called 'Rocky','" Mitch explained and handed over the magazine.

"You wanna watch it?" He wanted to know after skimming the synopsis of the film.

Mitch looked from John to the TV set, thinking back what had happened months ago.

"I … don't know. Is it alright for you?" Mitch wanted to know, rubbing a hand subconsciously over his scar.

"Sure."

Grinning, Mitch got them a beer each and found some popcorn he quickly prepared in a pan before dousing it in icing sugar, while John called Sam back from the garden where he had been roaming around.

Settling down on the couch once more, Mitch let the story sweep him away. Seeing the struggles and woes of the young boxer captivated Mitch so much, that he never touched his beer. At some point he had pulled up his legs and wrapped his arms around them in anticipation.

John next to him sat very, very still. Once in a while Mitch cast a sideways glance at the other man, but his face betrayed not a single emotion.

Unsure how John felt, Mitch leaned sideways and bumped a cautious shoulder into him when the commercials began to play. Looking around, John's face lightened up and extended his arm. Getting John's drift, Mitch settled down in John's arm, his head on his chest and continued watching.

The final fighting scene took its toll on Mitch. His hand was clenched into John's pullover and his eyes opened wide. It was nerve wrecking to see Rocky pour out all of his strength and will for this one fight and Mitch desperately wished for the underdog to win. But then Rocky lost, he was beaten bloody and bruised but still he kept upright and embraced Adrian who had fought her own way through the crowd.
The ending credits rolled and Mitch sat stunned, his hand still clutching at John. He felt tears behind his eyes.

"He lost," Mitch breathed.

John pushed his hand up over Mitch's neck and into his hair. "Maybe in the ring, but not in the heart of the audience. And definitely not in Adrian's eyes."

And John was right, Mitch realized. Rocky had fought for his dream and maybe he hadn't achieved it, but he had won the love of his life and that was worth more than enough.

***

Mitch rolled over in the huge bed and was only met by a cold and empty space. Just as he had expected. This night had been quite troubled for John since he had woken up to nightmares several times. Of course Mitch had tried to calm him down and coax him back to sleep but John only told him to let him be and left the bedroom.

Some days it was harder for Mitch to break through John's shell of memory and pain that weighted him down once more. On those occasions John wanted to be alone so he even pushed Mitch away. That always hurt and Mitch wanted to yell 'Listen, Johnny, I'm your-' and then he didn't know how to go on. What was he for John? Mitch knew that he wasn't John's wife and people like Sarah hurtfully reminded him of that. But then John had said that Mitch wasn't his wife, that he was his friend, his partner and that was all Mitch needed. Mitch let himself be pushed away as it wasn't a violent shove, it was more of a determined push, that made sure he was out of reach for any sudden outbursts. John battled with his own demons and when he was done, returned to Mitch's arms to find peace again.

With a heavy heart Mitch got out of bed and into the bathroom to get dressed and prepared for the meeting with his aunt and uncle.

Struggling to put on his favorite beige and brown striped pullover, Mitch stumbled into the kitchen, the fabric having tangled somewhere around his head.

"Let me," John said and with gentle hands loosened the twisted fabric and pulled the pullover down and into place.

Mitch shook his head to righten his tousled hair and looked back into John's weary, but loving eyes. "Morning, partner."

A small smile tugged at John's lips as he held Mitch and placed a tender kiss on his forehead. "Mornin'."

Beneath the already sat table was Sam, scrambling to get up and greet Mitch. The puppy had already grown a considered bit but now his legs appeared to be too tall and gangly for his body. With a happy yelp he let himself be petted on the head before running around them in happy circles.

The dingy light in the kitchen was turned on because it was still dark out, although the clear sky already promised a sunny day.

Mitch sat down on the already laid out table and gratefully cradled the mug of tea between his hands. Apparently John had spent the rest of the night in the living room, judging by the accumulated books on the coffee table and the telltale crease on the sofa where Sam must have sat next to him.

Regarding John once more, Mitch saw the other man's tiredness in the drawn features of his face, the slight shadows under his eyes and the pale touch to his skin.
Cautiously, Mitch brushed his fingers over John's hand resting next to his mug. John looked up and smiled, turned his hand and closed it around Mitch's.

"I'm fine," John answered the silently asked question.

"You don't have to come, if you don't feel well," Mitch offered, his voice shaky at the prospect of being alone after all was said and done.

John's hold on his hand tightened for an instant.

"Nothing is keeping me away from you. I'll be there, outside, waiting for you," John stated with his firm, dark voice and his eyes settled on Mitch with an intensity that made him warm all over.

Maybe John pushed him away sometimes because he needed to fight his battle on his own, but that didn't mean that he was gone. He was still there when Mitch needed him.

"That is all I need."

***

On their way to Rosswood John and Mitch both sat silent. Around them bright and shiny landscapes underneath a perfect blue sky passed by silently. The cheerful weather seemed to mock Mitch's heart which was filled with dread and fear. His hands on the steering wheel were sweaty and from time to time he had to wipe them on his trouser leg. On one occasion his hand lingered over the spot where the long and silvery scar wound around his upper thigh and Mitch thought back to Hope. No, he wouldn't live like a coward anymore. He would stand up to his aunt and uncle and be true to his feelings for John.

Suddenly the music coming from the radio got louder and Mitch saw that John had turned it up, his eyes fixed on the small gadget. Mitch tried to figure out what the singer was singing.

"Together Wendy we can live with the sadness
I'll love you with all the madness in my soul
H-Oh, Someday girl I don't know when
We're gonna get to that place
Where we really wanna go
And we'll walk in the sun
But till then tramps like us
Baby we were born to run."

Indeed they were born to run, Mitch thought. Not in the sense that they were running away from coming out to his aunt and uncle, more in a way that they would be made to run. He was sure when they had heard him out, they would make him leave the house immediately.

The drive up to the farm was a little bit easier than before Christmas, since some part of the snow had melted and recent tire-tracks had evened out the path. Fearing that he would want to leave the property in haste, Mitch didn't drive up to the garage, but parked the car just left of the fence's gate. Killing the engine, reality finally caught up with Mitch and he watched the house where he had spent most of his life.

A calloused but warm hand cupped his cheek and brushed a single, stray tear aside.

"You can go to the horses, if you want," Mitch offered. "I'll find you."

"No, I'll be right here," John replied in a soft voice.
Mitch smiled feebly and held John's hand in place with his own as he bent down for a kiss.

John's lips where soft and tender and radiated a warmth that seeped into Mitch's bones and his heart and he could feel his confidence rise. Their lips lingered on a moment longer before they sat back.

"See you later," Mitch breathed and slid out of the truck.

Walking up to the house sent shivers down his spine because despite the bright sunshine it was still cold and the snow broke beneath his feet with a frosty crispness.

The moment Mitch was greeted by his aunt and swept inside everything happened in a blur. His coat and the gifted scarf from John where taken form him, a cup of warm something was pushed in his hands and hugs and pats on the back shoved him this way and that until he finally sat in one of the huge, plush armchairs he knew so well. The conversation rushed around him like waves of the ocean, some things were distinct, others just a faint memory. Mitch knew he had said things, answered questions, but he couldn't remember, they were only a shell, a farce to work up for the final revelation. One that would destroy everything.

"I'm glad to hear that Richard's fine. How's Sarah, has she been in touch?" Mitch asked unsteadily, slowly surfacing out of the blur.

"Oh no, she hasn't. I think she has a lot on her mind with finding an elementary school for Amber and all that," his aunt provided happily and stirred her coffee.

"I see," Mitch chocked out. "You see, I-- ah, I wanted to tell you something and ... um, Sarah already knows so I think I need to tell you, too."

"What's on you mind?" Uncle Henry asked pleasantly, his warm eyes intent on Mitch.

"Do tell me that ... Mister Rambo has left, dear. That man really ought to move on, you know," Lisa chided in her motherly tone.

"Well, John's actually the reason I came here, so ..." Mitch explained but felt his lips go numb as his blood rushed through his body with overwhelming speed that made him nauseous. His heart felt like it was going to come popping out through his mouth. He swallowed.

"Has something happened to him?" Uncle Henry wanted to know and sat up straighter.

"Dear," aunt Lisa said disapprovingly and patted him on the knee.

"No ... No, actually he is fine. You see, Sarah already knows and well, she found out about it on Christmas and I told her not to tell anybody ... But I gotta tell you."

At that his aunt and uncle looked at him with a confused and worried expression.

"Yes, dear?"

"John and I ... well, me actually, that is to say ... I, er, I am gay," Mitch stuttered and tried not to fall off of the chair as the room around him began to swim and shake.

There, he had said it. But other than with Chuck he didn't really feel proud about it. Something made him feel guilty and ashamed.

"You're what?" Aunt Lisa barked, her voice rising in distress.

"Surely there is something--" uncle Henry began.
"Oh, you be quiet," Lisa snapped. "What are you saying, Mitch? You can't mean that."

Mitch looked up from the small, fragile china cup in his hands that trembled ominously. He found to his distress that his vision was blurring.

"No, aunt Lisa, I really mean it. I've always been gay, even before you took me in after mom and dad ... died. And what Sarah already knows is that I'm in a relationship with John. I love him," the words poured out of Mitch's mouth and with each spoken word aunt Lisa's face got more agitated.

In a rush she stood up from her chair. "With that ... creature? You can't be serious, Mitch. No ... I'm not allowing you to do this, young man!"

"Lisa please, let him explai--" uncle Henry began.

"There is nothing to explain! Clearly Mitch has no respect or gratitude towards us or what we did for him."

"But I do!" Mitch pleaded and got up.

"No you don't. Otherwise you wouldn't have done such ... such abominable things!" The last words were shouted and Lisa's eyes brimmed with tears and confusion and to some extend ... hate? Mitch felt himself coming apart.

"Please don't say that! I really love him. It's just love!" Mitch reached out a hand in order to console his aunt.

The slap across his face took him by surprise. His right cheek burned red hot and the pain shot through his whole skull. The tears streaming down his face felt like molten lead. He looked at his aunt in disbelief.

Lisa looked back at him. Her eyes wide and a hand raised to her opened mouth. Never had she raised her hand against him. Up until now.

With an uncontrollable sob she pushed past Mitch and shot out of the living room. Mitch just stood and stared at his raised hand.

" Mitch ... son," uncle Henry murmured, he only ever used that endearment when Mitch had been really heartbroken as a child. Henry reached out a hand but stopped as he saw Mitch flinching back.

"She hates me," Mitch breathed, tears falling down his face with the violent shudders of his shoulder.

"No ... no she doesn't, she's just ... confused," Henry explained and motioned for Mitch to sit down. "Sit, sit down, Mitch."

Refusing the plea, Mitch looked at the crinkled and agitated face of his uncle. Why was he still here?

"And you? Are you confused, too?" Mitch sobbed and regretted the venom that had sneaked into his voice. He shouldn't turn bitter like that.

Henry cringed at Mitch's words but shook his grey head. "No Mitch, I'm not."

Trembling and bereft of all his energy, Mitch flopped back down on into the armchair, while hot tears still flowed down his cheeks. "You're not?" He asked in disbelief, his words slurred slightly by his swollen lip.

A sad smile appeared on Henry's face. "Why would I be, Mitch? I know that ... that gay people
exist. I have spoken with George about Chuck's brother. I mean, I don't know anything about being gay but … That doesn't mean I have to hate anybody for it."

The pain in his face and even more so the pain in his heart made Mitch bitter and he chocked, "That's not what aunt Lisa thinks … or Sarah."

"Ah, has Sarah been talking to you about that?" Henry wanted to know.

"Talking? Talking?" Mitch barked and shot out of his chair again, trembling with grief and anger. "She's been terrorizing us via telephone for a whole month now. She's threatened to expose John to Chuck and make him loose his job so he would be lynched out of the workshop. She has set her mind on making John and me miserable."

"Mitch," Henry soothed and stood up, too. "I can only imagine how you must feel but … Sarah and your aunt they are just afraid for your sake. They don't want you to be unhappy, to be unsafe." Henry stressed the last word and his concern showed heavily in his eyes.

Rubbing furious hands over his face to make the tears stop, Mitchnbawled, "But why don't they support me then?"

At that Henry appeared to be taken aback and he just looked at Mitch, defeated and pitying.

Suddenly all of the anger and frustration seeped out of Mitch and his shoulders slumped. He had expected both of his relatives to shout and walk out on him. But Henry hadn't and Mitch should be thankful for that.

"I'm sorry, uncle Henry," Mitch whispered and made for the door. "I think I should leave now. Thank you for, for … staying."

"Mitch wait," his uncle called out. "Where is John? Is he with you?"

Confused, Mitch nodded. "Yeah … yeah, he is outside in the car."

"I'll walk you out then."

Outside the sun still roamed the sky and the red pickup-truck sat like a huge glowing beacon next to the white fence, surrounded by snow. Mitch knew, that John longed to be with him, to support him while facing his relatives. Unable to do that, John still sat in the car like a caged tiger, impatient but motionless. When Mitch and his uncle came out of the house John stepped out of the truck, but remained standing next to it.

The moment Henry was in earshot, John stepped up to him. "Sir–," he began with his dark and even voice but was cut short.

"Henry is still fine," Mitch's uncle replied warmly and extended his hand.

John looked taken aback, his dark eyes confused, but then his shoulders relaxed and he shook Henry's hand. Then his eyes rested on Mitch and his face grew dark with concern. Mitch's stomach churned.

Noticing John's expression, Henry said, "She'll come around. It just takes … Time. Have patience with her."

"Yeah," Mitch breathed dispirited.
Henry gave Mitch's shoulder a careful squeeze, sensing that he wasn't up for more, then nodded to John and trudged back up to the house.

Caught up in the whirlwind that were his emotions, Mitch clambered into the truck, only remotely registering that John joined him before he kicked the engine to a start. The drive back to the main road was bumpy. Mitch's vision blurred as a fresh wave of hot tears spilled out of his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. He couldn't see the road and potholes clearly, so the car hopped and bumped along the path. He felt his nose starting to run and itch, but his hands were clenched too firmly on the steering wheel to let go and brush them across his face.

Mitch grunted as a particular vicious jerk of the car yanked at his arms. Suddenly a third hand appeared on the steering wheel, keeping it on course.

"Turn the car over here," John instructed gently, his warm voice reaching through the roar of Mitch's mind.

Bleary, Mitch pulled the car over and killed the engine. Grief shook his shoulders and tears dripped off of his face into the clenched hands in his lap.

"I'll drive," John offered.

Nodding monotonously, Mitch slid out of the truck and walked around the hood. John stepped up to him and Mitch couldn't hold back any longer. With two quick strides he fell into John's outstretched arms and buried his face in the crook of John's neck. John slung his arms around Mitch and held him close.

Painful sobs racked Mitch's whole form as John suddenly began to rock him carefully. It was a slow, soothing motion, that swayed Mitch back and forth. Fighting his crying, Mitch's sobs turned into hiccups, hurting his throat even more until his breathing finally evened out and he just melted into John's warm, steady embrace.

"I … I," Mitch stammered and knotted his fingers into John's worn out parka.

"I know," John mumbled against Mitch's hair.

The sun shone down on them and Mitch could feel the rays on his shoulders but that wasn't enough to warm the chill in his heart that the one person he loved like a mother had forsaken him. But then John's warmth seeping through his jacket reminded him that it was something he was willing to accept, as long as John stood by him.

After a while of standing entwined like that, John helped Mitch back into the truck and climbed behind the steering wheel. John started the engine and smoothly moved the pickup back on the path and then onto the main road heading towards Fairview.

Leaning against the doorframe Mitch was lulled in by the rhythmic humming of the motor and the peaceful landscape passing by. It was a reassuring feeling to have John drive the car, to stand down for a while and let the other man take care of him. Mitch knew with all his heart that he could trust him. So leaving behind his grief for now, Mitch drifted off to sleep.

***

This evening, Mitch curled up in bed, pressing his forehead to John's chest and trying to shut out all of his roaring thoughts. Upon their return, they had been greeted by an overjoyed Sam, who had to stay behind. John had rustled up a small dinner, but Mitch hadn't been able to force anything down, so he had retired to bed, with John close behind.
Mitch relived his coming out to his aunt again and again in his mind. Every time it felt like falling down a black abyss as he remembered the expression in his aunt's eyes. She had cast him out.

Was this how John had felt when he had returned from war, like tripping down and endless hole and nowhere to seek purchase to stop the fall? Society had just stepped around John, shunned him, ignored him, so he had to live in a sphere of constant isolation, unable to make contact.

Mitch whimpered. The supporting structure that had been his aunt, his cousin, who had accepted him as their own, had been drawn away with a heavy jerk, leaving him falling. Forever falling.

Suddenly a tentative touch to his face rose him out of the dark thoughts. Mitch drew back a little and looked into John's concerned face. It was full of worry, but there was a soft glow of love in his eyes.

Right, Mitch thought, he wasn't falling, he had John to hold onto. And that was all he needed.

A small smile worked itself free on Mitch's lips, as he reciprocated John's caring expression.

As if drawn by invisible strings, Mitch leaned towards John and placed a tentative kiss on his lips. John's hand brushed along his cheek and settled at the back of his neck, keeping him close. The kiss was deliberate and deepened with an intense longing that burned through Mitch's body. The dark thoughts evaporated and instead he could only concentrate on the tingling of his skin and John's presence that filled up his senses.

Insecure but gentle as always, John's hand slid over Mitch's back to his shoulder and onto his chest and belly. Mitch clasped his hands in John's shabby shirt and arched his back with desire. He wanted to feel loved, he wanted to be with John, he wanted him to make it all go away.

As if John had picked up Mitch's unvoiced desire his fingers slid under Mitch's shirt, caressing the skin beneath.

Sighing softly into the kiss, Mitch reveled in the sensation of John's coarse beard stubble scraping against his cheek, sending sparks flying all over his nerves. Following his pulsing desire, Mitch let his hands travel over the broad expanse of John's chest, lovingly tracing every rise and fall of the muscles beneath. John gave a hitched breath as Mitch lifted his shirt to reveal the taut stomach, but instead of drawing away, John deepened the kiss.

Mitch slowly came undone under John's steady caresses and touches, that he slid onto his back, tugging John with him. Sitting up a little more in order not to smother Mitch, John pushed the shirt higher and looked at Mitch with intense, dark eyes. The smile Mitch' gave him was all the reassurance John needed. He pulled the shirt over Mitch's head, exposing his slighter frame.

Undressed like that, Mitch couldn't help but feel a little shy, as John hovered over him, with a tentative smile upon his face. Reaching out, Mitch cupped John's face.

"It's fine," Mitch murmured and John closed his eyes and gave a shaky breath but smiled.

Then, as if handling fine china, John brushed his fingertips carefully over Mitch's arms, chest and belly, coaxing small sighs of pleasure from him. Seeking for purchase, Mitch tangled his fingers in John's shirt.

"You can take it off," John said, bending his head to kiss Mitch.

Overjoyed by John's offer, Mitch pulled the shirt free over John's head. Seeing him basked in the warm glow of the bedside lamp, Mitch couldn't hide his arousal any longer. The sharp and defined features of John's muscles sent Mitch's mind reeling. The sight of his scars filled Mitch with a deep
love, because they showed what John had endured to be here with him. To finally come home.

Mitch drew John down atop of him, reveling in the weight of the other man pressing down on him.

Driven on by their shared kisses and touches, Mitch could feel his own confidence rising and how John began to unwind and find his place in their lovemaking. His insecurity was still visible in his shaking hands and a soft gasp here and there, when Mitch licked or nipped at his skin, but other than that he let himself be swept away by their shared passion.

Gingerly, John's hand slipped over Mitch's boxershorts and stroked down his thigh, tracing the silvery scar there.

A gasp fled Mitch's lips and he pressed into the touch. "Oh, John …"

Assured of Mitch's willingness, John settled into a soft stroking rhythm that drove every coherent thought from Mitch's head.

Wanting to give back the love he felt for John, Mitch drew his hand over John's hip bone and down to his groin. And for the first time, Mitch felt that John was fully aroused, too. Becoming aware, that things were getting serious, Mitch's heart sped up with nervousness and desire.

Mitch pushed down his boxer, signaling John that he was ready to take things further if he wanted. John broke their kiss and looked at Mitch.

"You sure?" John asked huskily, his chest rose and fell heavily, a fine sheen of sweat had appeared on his forehead.

"Sure thing, partner," Mitch whispered and kissed John once more.

Moaning, John leaned into the touch and tenderly curled his hand around Mitch's arousal, starting to stroke. With trembling hands, Mitch managed to relief John of his shorts, too and was rewarded with sigh.

Carried onward by his lust, Mitch grabbed John's hand and broke their kiss to suck on the index and middle finger. John's eyes shot wide as he watched Mitch working himself up and down on his fingers. His gaze was made up of love, shyness and longing, intently set on each of Mitch's moves.

With a thundering heart, Mitch guided John's hand back down between his legs. John's eyes got wider still and he sucked in his breath sharply.

"Mitch–" he started but he stopped as his finger slid into Mitch.

"Ah," was all Mitch was able to choke out, with his free hand holding onto John's back. "John …"

Burying his head in the crook of Mitch's neck, John very tenderly began to massage Mitch, reacting to each moan and buck of his hips, to find the right pressure and rhythm.

Slinging both trembling arms around John's shoulders, Mitch rocked his hip against John's tender caress. John watched Mitch moan and sigh with a look of fascination and trepidation, apparently unable to believe that his touch could evoke pleasure like that, instead of pain and death.

Mitch groaned and pressed his back against the mattress. John stopped and eyed him closely. "Are you … is this still fine?"

With a breathless laugh, Mitch hugged John and whispered, "It's wonderful. You're wonderful … I
want you, Johnny."

John drew away from Mitch and their eyes met. A flickering smile appeared on John's lips, as he let himself be pulled between Mitch's legs while carefully extracting his hand. With his arms John framed Mitch's waist and hovered over him. Not a looming figure, but a sight of safety, reassurance and love.

Running his hands down John's back, Mitch gripped John's waist and pushed him forward, raising his hips.

A gasp of pain erupted from Mitch's lips as he felt John entering him. Afraid of having hurt him, John stilled, but Mitch began rubbing his hand up and down the small of John's back, setting a rhythm, begging him to go on.

Seeking Mitch's lips for a feeble kiss, John bent down, his hips moving gently against Mitch.

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny …" Mitch gasped between kisses and moans. Never had he felt like this and all fear and caution left him, as he became one with John.

"Mitch …" John breathed against his lips, his voice more slurred and rugged than usual. Pleasure had had taken him over but his care for Mitch was something he still held onto. Measuring his movements, always listening to Mitch's moans for a sign of pain.

For some blissful moments Mitch lost himself in John's kisses, the fluid motions and the passion that surged through him. He only barely realized that the word 'Johnny' bubbled out of him in hitched moans and gasps. Over and over he called the name of the one person he trusted his life with, as he clung on to his broad frame, feeling the muscles move beneath his palms.

"Johnny, Johnny …"

His hip rolled out of its own accord, meeting John halfway, rocking away the pain, turning it into pleasure. Mitch was so lost in his rhythm that he only slowly realized that John had stopped moving.

Blearily Mitch opened his eyes to a rigid mask of terror and pain, that was John's face. The muscles of his arms were strung tight, as he stemmed his hands into the mattress. Tears began to stream down his cheeks and his eyes were unfocused.

"Joh– John! What, what happened?" Mitch stuttered, cupping John's face, but somehow he was afraid that John would flinch away.

"Joey … I thought …" John choked.

"Oh," Mitch exhaled, realization dawned on him. "It's me, Mitch. I'm here."

"I heard him … I …" John whispered.

Mitch brushed the cool layer of sweat from John's face. His whole body was trembling now and his arousal diminished as he tried to get away from Mitch.

"I have to … get … get it off …" John was rambling all over, his words unintelligible.

"That's fine, John … let's, ah–" Mitch tried to soothe John as he pushed himself into an upright position, separating from John. Mitch was surprised at how feeble his arms and legs were after he nearly had climaxed.
John pulled his legs under him and buried his head in his hands, whimpering.

Sadness washed over Mitch and erased all of the passion that had cursed through his body and left him cold, drenched in sweat and miserable. But Mitch didn't care, he huddled closer to John and put his hands on the shaking shoulders.

With a gentle tug, he had John's head resting in his lap and swathed him in one of the blankets that had been pushed aside by their lovemaking.

"I'm here, John," Mitch said and brushed his fingers through the clammy dark hair, trying to get through to John.

After a moment's silence John murmured, "I … he was back in my arms … he, he screamed for me to help him. Johnny, Johnny he said."

Mitch bit his lip. Had he known what this endearment would cause, he would have never called John that way. Not in that voice, not in that intimate context.

What John feared most about sex was to loose himself. To loose himself in memories and feelings so much that he couldn't control himself anymore and ended up hurting someone. Or being hurt himself. And now his worst fear had become true because Mitch hadn't thought ahead and had let himself be governed by his lust.

"I'm so sorry," Mitch choked through his own tears welling up.

"Don't be," John whispered hoarsely and sat upright, resisting Mitch's attempts to make him lie down again. "I'm sorry."

Mitch looked into John's agitated eyes, his skin pale and his hair ruffled. He looked as if he was going to be sick.

"John …" Mitch started.

"No. I'm sorry that I couldn't--" John began but stopped with a gag. "That I couldn't …" His expression got frantic as he battled with his own frustration and pain.

"Shh … It's alright, partner" Mitch soothed and embraced John carefully, holding him tight. In return John slung his arms around Mitch and sobbed silently into his shoulder. "Don't worry, John. It's fine. It truly is. I love you,"

Some months ago, Mitch had told himself that it would take patience and time to make John better again and he was determined to stand by that. John had come so far, they had come so far. This was just another wave that rocked their boat, but nothing that would topple them. If having sex meant that John would break down like that again, Mitch was more than happy to never have sex again. The only thing that mattered was, that John got better and that they had each other.

Chapter End Notes

To every reader: Thank you for staying by!
Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
Mitch has come out to his aunt and uncle and as expected has been cast out. Still, Mitch tries to stay strong and work through his everyday life with John by his side. But sudden inquiries into his personal life and the return of a well known convict make things a lot harder.

First of all ... sorry for the huge lack of updates but the time from December through New Year and January has been very busy and needed a lot of attention. Still, as I've always said, I won't abandon those two and will see this fic through. This is of course only possible due to my wonderful beta tattiosala (tumblr) with whom I share all the headcanons that make up this story <3 And I am still amazed by the comments we get on here! All of them are lovely and mean a lot.

**Spoiler for end of Chapter (slightly):** In the end of the chapter someone will mention a "nasty plague" in context with gay people. Of course what I am trying to say here is AIDS. I know that the disease wasn't really in public focus until the 80ies and that it took a long time to figure out what it was and how to name it. Still I wanted to bring it up for the fic's historic context. A lot of inspiration for that came from the amazing novel "Harlan's Race" by Patricia Nell Warren. Which is the follow up novel to "Front Runner" which I can only recommend!

Mitch watched John's composed features as the other man turned a page in a threadbare novel that rested on his thigh. Next to his seat in a shaggy heap was Sam, snoring away and enjoying the morning sun that painted his fur a bright russet. Mitch couldn't help but give a pained smile as he remembered yesterday evening.

John had been distraught. The last time he had had a break down like that must have been after the accident in Chuck's workshop and John had been transported into hospital. Yesterday's shock had taken its toll, but John had recovered from the brunt of it. Still, Mitch knew that John battled his pain and frustration at his supposed failure, even if it didn't show. He was very reluctant to touch Mitch or even be touched himself. Mitch longed to embrace him, to kiss and caress him, but that wouldn't do any good. John still labored under the assumption, that he might not have hurt Mitch but that it could have happened quite easily. And that troubled him.

Lost in his thoughts and his own painful memories of his aunts reactions, Mitch hadn't realized that John had turned around to watch him with his deep and unfathomable eyes.

"Lost in thought?" John asked huskily. There was a tired smile on his lips.

Mitch rubbed a hand over his nose and grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, sorry."
"'S fine."

Looking at John's strained face, the urge to comfort him grew stronger and Mitch tried to will it down. But he might just as well have tried to stop a thousand pigeons from taking flight when one had already taken off.

Setting his magazine aside, Mitch got up from the couch and walked over to John, where he knelt down in from of him.

Sam looked up alarmed, but when he spied Mitch, he settled down again.

"Ah, he's protecting you," Mitch smiled and stroked the bristly head of the loyal animal.

"As do you," John replied, his smile slightly more prominent now.

"Sure thing, partner," Mitch breathed and clasped John's knee.

For some time there was silence but then John took a breath and began, "Mitch, I--"

"It's fine, John," Mitch interrupted him gently and cupped John's face. Never before had Mitch interrupted him, but John shouldn't kick himself for things he wasn't responsible for. That no one was responsible for.

John's expression was agitated at first, but then he succumbed to Mitch's beaming smile.

They came together for a hesitant kiss in which Mitch nipped at John's lips, gradually slipping past. John grabbed Mitch's shoulder in support and Mitch felt a tremor in the touch. He drew away.

"You know that it's fine, don't you?" Mitch asked softly while brushing his thumbs over John's finely cut cheekbones.

"I … try," John grinned wryly.

Grinning back, Mitch stood up and pulled John with him. "C'mon, let's put on some records. I brought back some good ones from Rosswood." It hurt to think to their stay on Christmas and what had happened yesterday, but Mitch wouldn't let that destroy his love for music.

Surprisingly, John accepted the offer without hesitation and followed Mitch to sit in front of the low sideboard where the record player stood.

Next to 'Bring It On Home To Me' which John had enjoyed so much, Mitch had brought back a whole carton with records of his favorite musicians. Thumbing through the assortment, Mitch just chatted away about tidbits he knew about each singer and songs that he had read about in music magazines. John listened closely, nodding, sometimes even asking questions and Mitch felt that it took John's mind off the dark thoughts.

When a song played they turned silent, watching the record turn sluggishly on the pin, spilling soft tunes and driving rhythms. After a while Mitch lay belly first on the floor, shuffling records over the floor, deciding what to play next. Caught up in the music and their unwound talks lunchtime slipped past unnoticed and the sun rose steadily higher.

Mitch put on another record which he thought John might enjoy. As it had turned out, John liked Elvis a lot but also loved listening to Bruce Springsteen, whom they had heard on the pickup truck yesterday. Mitch had been very happy to find out, that he actually owned the 'Born To Run' album, so he could treat John with it. Now Mitch had chosen a single by Johnny Cash, to see what John
thought of it. After he had lowered the arm with the stylus onto the record, Mitch reclined and put his head back into John's lap.

As the first notes began to clip through the air, Mitch realized that he had actually put on the b-side instead of the a-side. So now 'Get Rhythm' filled his living room with its careless tunes but melancholic texts. Closing his eyes, Mitch let himself be swept away by the quick pace and brushed his cheek along John's thigh affectionately.

Suddenly a drop of water burst on his cheek an Mitch opened his eyes in confusion. He was inside, it couldn't be raining!

But then he beheld John's stricken face, with tears streaming out of his eyes. He looked heartbroken. When Mitch tried to get up in a flurry of limbs, John just put his broad hand on his chest and kept him down, the other hand brushed through Mitch's hair.

All questions and consolations died on Mitch's lips as he watched John close his eyes while listening to the music that spun around them.

It was an eerie moment. The afternoon light had taken on a golden hue and everything looked like it was trapped in amber, time only a trickle of resin. After an eternity the record came to an end, gave two or three scratchy sounds and stopped. Silence filled the room.

John was breathing heavily now, the tears had dried on his face and his hand had stopped running through Mitch's hair.

Mitch still held John firmly in his gaze while pondering what had brought on his tears when the lyrics of the song finally came together in his mind. Shoeshine box. Why hadn't Mitch realized this earlier so he could have prevented John's breakdown and– Mitch stopped his rushing thoughts. John hadn't broken down. He had stopped Mitch from getting up, had lowered his head and closed his eyes and listened to the music. Apparently reliving what had happened to his friend Joey all over. Reliving what had happened yesterday.

"He was just … gone," John whispered. His voice made hoarse by his crying.

Mitch swallowed against the lump in his throat. John's hand on his chest clutched the pullover a litter harder as if to make sure Mitch didn't … vanish like Joey had.

"One moment to the next," John went on while his eyes got a far away look.

To reassure John of his presence, Mitch laid his hand on John's. "I can't imagine how it must've been."

John gave a despairing laugh. "You know, we just take it for granted that the people next to us are solid. That they are fine and don't just die suddenly. Sure, car accidents happen all the time but … they are far away, you don't actually see the people being ground to bits stuck away in their cars as they are."

A bitterness had seeped into John's voice as he talked on and Mitch could very well understand why.

"I've … I've seen so much blood and guts and, and … misery. But Joey …" John trailed off as his voice left him and a high pitched moan split his lips.

Mitch’s grip tightened. But he didn't dare say anything.

John took a shaky breath and swallowed against the saliva in his mouth. "One second there is this,
this human being full of thoughts, memories, emotions like … a whole galaxy of nerves and then … They are blown apart. Their bodies ripped to shreds, completely destroyed and beyond any possibility to come back … just gone."

"John …" Mitch breathed.

"It just ripped his legs apart … his abdomen, all of it. I held him … I held the rest of him in my arms. The blood … his blood all over me and … guts. He was just half," John choked out as new tears spilled from his eyes and he began to shake.

Hesitantly, Mitch slung his arms around John's neck and pulled him down, so he could hide his face in Mitch's pullover.

"It was just a second, Mitch."

"I know …"

"Just a second. It was so fast," John pleaded.

"It's not your fault, John. You … you couldn't have done anything," Mitch tried to soothe him, unsure what to do. How would he handle the experience of witnessing a person suddenly and out of nowhere blowing apart. It must be so deeply unsettling, that nothing seemed safe anymore. If people next to you suddenly burst into a gory mess, life was unearthed.

"I'm here, partner. I won't go away. You're safe here," Mitch intoned and tugged John closer still.

"I know, I know. It just … comes apart sometimes," John murmured, slinging his arms fully around Mitch and cradled him close.

Sam had watched them silently for a while before he got up and laid down next to them. Huddled together like this, time went by, the sun dipped below the horizon and Mitch whispered small endearments into John's ears. They were really just sweet nothings about what they would do the next weekend, how they would play fetch with Sam and what they would have for dinner. Slowly the tension in John's shoulders subsided and small laughs and sobs escaped his lips at Mitch's carefree ramblings. It would be fine.

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Having weathered the storm of coming out to his relatives life for Mitch just continued as normal, despite the huge black hole he carried in his heart, where his family had been. It was still hard for Mitch to accept that his aunt and cousin wouldn't hear anything from him. Only uncle Henry had called in the past month, to check on him. Apparently Sarah had driven over to their parents in Rosswood and told them about Mitch. That aunt Lisa and uncle Henry actually knew about him seemed to shock her so much that she had stopped calling. Mitch guessed she must have realized that he was serious to stick by this "way of living".

On one hand Mitch was relieved that the immediate threat of being exposed at work through Sarah was over, but still the loss of his cousin and aunt was something that hurt him a lot.

But there were also good moments followed by his coming out that Mitch was grateful for. Chuck had begun to invite Mitch and John over for dinner every Friday. As it turned out Chuck's wife was the good soul he always described her to be. She knew about Randy and held the same accepting attitude towards gays that Chuck had. In her eyes John and Mitch were the children they had never had and enjoyed doting on them. Especially John was the center of her attention, since her brother had served in Viet Nam, too. It was a heartwarming sight when Susanne put her hand on John's
shoulder, chattering on about this and that, while John smiled with a placid air about him.

Even Thomas had kept his promise of trying to adapt to his new knowledge of Mitch being in a relationship with John. He had come over once or twice, brought some beer and snacks and they just chatted the night away. Sometimes John would only sit with them for about an hour until he felt the need to be alone. Then he got up, kissed Mitch on the head and went for a walk with Sam. Mitch wasn't bothered by it at all. In fact, he was very happy that John trusted Mitch to understand.

Life went on like that for a while and Mitch settled into the comfortable rhythm of their everyday life. But then something strange happened. One evening Mitch had gotten home, carrying two bulging bags of grocery shopping and was only able to bump the doorbell with his shoulder. When John opened the door, he immediately dove for one of the bags but then stopped in mid-movement. Confused, Mitch followed John's gaze and spotted a car driving past slowly. The window on the driver's side was just being shut but Mitch thought that he spied Anderson's face in the gloom.

"That was … odd," Mitch commented and got inside.

"Maybe just someone looking for a certain number?" John asked and walked into the kitchen.

"I could have sworn I recognized Anderson," Mitch mused but let the thought drop. That was very unlikely since Anderson lived on the other side of town.

Next morning Mitch stepped into the police station and already heard the distant hum of conversation. But the instant he entered the office area the talking stopped and the officers turned around, looking at him.

"Mornin'," Mitch greeted them.

There were only some murmured replies but nothing more.

Then Anderson stepped out of the throng of gathered policemen and stepped up to Mitch. By now Anderson's arm and shoulder were fully healed and he stemmed his hands into his hips.

"Hiya, Mitch," he said with an unpleasant grin on his face.

"Hi," Mitch replied suspiciously. Something was off and Mitch began to fidget.

"So, how was your evening yesterday?"

"I, er," Mitch rubbed a hand across his chin. "Good."

"Watched the game?" Anderson pressed on, still grinning.

"Um no. Hadn't had the time. Was it good?"

"How come, had a guest over for dinner?" Anderson wanted to know, ignoring Mitch's question. The other policemen had returned to their work again, but they were listening alright.

"No," Mitch lied reflexively and regretted it the instant the word had left his mouth.

"That's funny. You see, I drove by your place yesterday evening, on my way to the 'Blue Jay's' and I saw someone opening your door.

In fact, I have seen him quite often at your house."

Mitch's gut contorted in fright and the world around him spun. They had been found out and
Anderson was about to expose Mitch and John to everyone on the police force. Mitch was doomed.

Trying to form words with his mouth became a daunting task as his breath caught in his throat.

"Do you mean the boyfriend of Mitch's cousin?"

Mitch spun around and saw that Thomas had walked into the police station, unzipping his parka and shooting Anderson a questioning look.

Anderson's mouth twisted. "Her what?"

"The boyfriend of Mitch's cousin Sarah," Thomas repeated in a purposely slow speed as if Anderson was dumb.

"But she was married," Anderson interjected.

"Well yeah, was. Her husband is dead, as you know," Thomas continued with a nonchalance that startled Mitch.

But unable to pick up on Thomas' lie, Mitch remained silent.

"But as it is a woman's wont, she has found a new man. But apparently they had a falling out, hadn’t they, Mitch?"

Put on the spot, Mitch rallied his wits and nodded. "Yeah … yeah they had and she kicked him out. But I got along with him quite well, so I let him stay over at my place until her temper has calmed down. That's why she called last month," Mitch added in an afterthought.

Anderson didn't look particularly convinced and suddenly his expression turned vicious "Your cousin's temper seems to be quite enduring. And anyway, why can't he just get a motel room? Or do you get along with him too well? Is that the reason she has kicked him out?"

"What are you getting at?" Mitch hissed, dread gripping his chest.

"All I'm saying is that I know a pansy when I–"

"What is going on here?" A deep voice boomed and sheriff Hobbs walked into the office, his mustache quivering with the volume of his voice.

The surrounding policemen burst into a hectic bustle as the stern eyes of sheriff Hobs bored into them.

"Deputy Mitch?" sheriff Hobbs looked at him questioningly.

Mitch felt the words on the tip of his tongue, he could have called Anderson out for trying to expose him in front of his colleagues. But then, Mitch would have to admit that Anderson's accusations were true and he would meet the same end as if Anderson had proceeded. Then again Mitch could have lied and told sheriff Hobbs that Anderson just tried to put him into a bad light, but then he would be denying John and himself outright. That was something he wouldn't do that anymore.

"Anderson just asked after the state of my cousin, with having lost her husband and now having a fight with her current boyfriend," Mitch explained, his fists clenching at his sides.

"Always concerned for other people's lives, aren't you, Mr. Anderson," sheriff Hobbs said with an undertone and Anderson scuttled away to his desk.
When the sheriff had retreated to his office Mitch walked to his own desk with Thomas in tow.

Instead of saying anything, Thomas just gave him raised eyebrows and a troubled grin. It had been a close call. If Thomas hadn't shown up and helped Mitch out, things could have gone south very quickly.

This evening Mitch told John about what Anderson had done and he saw how it angered him. It wasn't that he got loud or launched into a tirade of insults, but his whole body tensed and his face darkened. As it turned out coming out to Mitch's relatives was only the start of a series of threats they had to face. Being exposed at work was the next ahead of them.

***

Mitch sprinted over the empty parking lot of the 7eleven down the corner. He had to pull a late shift again and hadn't managed to go grocery shopping earlier in the day. A heavy rain was beating down on him since the clutch of winter finally lessened and the snow gave way.

The air inside the store was dry and warm and Mitch unzipped his heavy police parka. Strolling down the isles, Mitch let his mind wander, as he put item after item into his cart. Luckily, Anderson hadn't pursued his endeavor to expose Mitch at work after sheriff Hobbs had cut into their conversation. Apparently risking his job to slander a fellow officer wasn't something Anderson was willing to buy into. At least not for now.

"Don't move!"

The shout ripped through the quiet of the store and Mitch flinched.

"Alright, now open the cash register," the voice commanded and Mitch recognized the deep tones instantly. Derek.

"B- but sir, I– I can't–" the cashier stuttered.

"I said: Open that damn thing!"

Tension gripped Mitch. Derek was here! After months of hiding from the police he had chosen this very moment to rob the 7eleven when Mitch was here. Without a gun. Without the possibility to call for back up.

Mitch trembled with fear and … eagerness. He couldn't let Derek go. He had terrorized his wife and this town for too long.

Oblivious to the danger, Mitch crept around the isle, adrenaline pumping heavy in his system. He was done running. He wouldn't run from his aunt and he certainly wouldn't run from his duty as a deputy.

Spying around the corner of a shelf, Mitch saw that Derek was aiming an old handgun at the cashier's head. There was a tremor in Derek's arm and a pasty cast to his face. Illuminated by the harsh neon light of the store it looked like a mask. Derek had been hooked on drugs for so long that even a short time without a dose would feel like withdrawal to him.

That was his chance. Derek was distracted and hadn't realized that someone else was inside the store. A pang of guilt ripped through Mitch's heart as he thought about John. If anything would happen to Mitch, John would be devastated. But hadn't John risked his life for his country because it was his duty? And wasn't it Mitch's duty to protect Fairview?
Casting all thoughts aside, Mitch pushed himself off of the shelf and dove for Derek. Their bodies collided heavily and with a grunt the bigger man went down, Mitch following suit.

"What the--" Derek boomed and started grappling with Mitch.

Due to the fall the gun had been knocked out of Derek's trembling hand and had skidded over the floor, a good way away.

"You! That pansy deputy!" Derek shouted and began grabbing for Mitch’s throat.

" Shut up!" Mitch spat and tried to get a hold on Derek's wrist as a punch to the gut drove the air out of him. He gagged and his sight went black for a second. Derek wasted not a single second and threw him on the ground. Mitch hit the floor with such force, that his lungs contracted anew and the loss of air made him nauseous.

With a roar Derek leaped after Mitch and pinned him down, sitting squarely on his chest.

"So," Derek mused as he had the upper hand and Mitch could only squirm beneath him. "Tell me, Deputy Fairy, where's your soldier boy? Why isn't he here to protect you."

"That's none of your business," Mitch croaked, gasping for air.

"Oh I see! Left you, hasn't he? Had enough of your whiney excuse for a man?" Derek bent low and grinned, his teeth yellow and rotten with neglect.

"No, he has not!" Mitch spat in defiance as fear and rage boiled in his chest. He had had enough of being treated like scum for whom he loved and being trapped underneath Derek's weight was so frustrating that Mitch felt his sanity slip.

"So you still take it up the rear from a baby killer? Suits you," Derek laughed and released the grip on Mitch's wrist only to backhand him.

The force of the blow split Mitch's lips and he screamed, "And what if I do?! What is it to you?!"

"What it is to me?" Derek's voice took on a threatening note. "I think it's disgusting to get down on your knees for a man like some slutty woman. And I'll enjoy beating the living shit out of you. Like I did with my wife."

Mitch froze. That was it then. He had doomed his life and John's at once. Growling, Mitch replied, "Yeah do that. But rest assured, John will find you and kill you for that."

"He can try," Derek whispered and punched Mitch in the face.

Mitch’s mind went blank with pain, with fear, with the primeval will to survive. With an earsplitting roar, Mitch tore his arm free, gave his body a violent twist and knocked Derek aside.

Blindly, Mitch went for Derek's throat. They tangled, grabbed, pushed, shoved at the other until a fierce sting to his upper arm sent Mitch staggering away. A syringe protruded from his arm in a sickening angle.

In his defense, Derek had pulled out a heroin syringe from his tattered jacket and struck Mitch with it.

Ripping the syringe out of his arm, Mitch threw a punch at Derek, who was coming haltingly to his feet. Mitch's fist gave a sickening crunch as it connected with Derek's face, driving him back down.
Derek stumbled and hit the ground. Mitch was on him in a heartbeat, got a hold of his arm and twisted it up behind his back.

"Let go!" Derek roared sluggishly and strained against Mitch's hold.

Pulling Derek's arm up a little further silenced him and Mitch turned and barked at the cashier, "Call the police."

The cashier stared at Mitch with a dumbfounded look.

"The police!" Mitch shouted.

In a rush the cashier fell into action and fumbled for the phone, tucked away beneath the counter.

Mitch sat across Derek's back, keeping a hard a hold as he could muster. Slowly, pain began to throb through Mitch's face as the adrenaline ebbed away. His stomach and ribs stung with each breath he took and an itchy feeling crept along his arm. The syringe.

The confusion and primeval instincts of the fight gave way to common sense and Mitch froze. What had been in the syringe? Had it been … used?

Suddenly the door of the 7eleven burst open and four policemen stormed in, guns at the ready. One of them Anderson.

"Over here," Mitch called with the little strength that was left in him.

In a flurry of shoves and pushes Derek was handcuffed, taken from Mitch and guided out of the store, while Anderson walked over towards the cashier to get his report as an eyewitness.

A hand was put on his shoulders and Mitch whirled around. The concerned face of officer Browne appeared in front of him.

"The ambulance is outside," he said, eying Mitch's bleeding face.

"Right," Mitch murmured numbly and walked outside only to be hit by a driving rain.

The paramedic got a hold on him halfway up to the ambulance, pushed him along the way and hauled him inside. He was inspected with medical precision, questions were asked, which Mitch answered them absentmindedly until he finally mumbled, "A syringe."

"What?" the paramedic asked in a clear, cutting voice.

Events swirled in front of Mitch's inner eye. Confusing, blurred and painful. Rubbing a hand over his maltreated face. "He … struck me with a syringe."

The paramedic's eyes widened with apprehension. "Right, you know what that means?"

Slowly, Mitch nodded and fought the upcoming tears. He might have survived this encounter, but he could have sealed his fate anyway. Derek was a regular user and there was no saying what kind of junkie disease he had.

"If it helps," the paramedic offered, while drawing blood. "That thug doesn't look like one of those fags, so the chances of him having that nasty plague are very small. Still, he was a junkie so we need to check for everything possible. Results will be there in a week."

Mitch watched silently as his blood flowed through the plastic tube into a small phial. The bright red
color was startling against his pale skin. Everything was so utterly surreal, Mitch felt the world coming undone around him.

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When John opened the door, he didn't say anything. His eyes sparked with worry and fear, but his face was collected and his hand gentle. He took Mitch's hand in his, lead him into the hallway and closed the door.

Mitch felt filthy and sick. He didn't want to touch John and accidentally … soil him. But at the same moment he yearned for warmth and security he knew he would find in John's arms.

John read all of this in Mitch's bedraggled pose with slumped shoulders and a stiff back. He put his hands on Mitch's shoulder and squeezed. "It is fine Mitch, you can lean on me."

And as if a spell had been broken, Mitch fell forward and let himself be held by John. His smell of resin, shower gel and … John, flooded Mitch's senses and he exhaled shakily. John held him close, his hands pressing firmly into Mitch's back and further into his warm embrace.

Mitch felt the lot of John's unvoiced questions hovering in the silence around them. But John wouldn't ask, in case Mitch felt forced.

"I … I arrested Derek Johnson," Mitch rasped and pressed his face more flush against John's chest.

The embrace tightened for an instant before getting even softer. "How?" John breathed.

"He robbed the 7eleven … I surprised him."

John hummed his understanding. Then he tenderly pushed Mitch away from him. Eyeing Mitch's bruised features with hurt clearly in his face, John brushed a hand along Mitch's undamaged cheek. Then his hands dropped to the zipper of the police parka and opened it. With soft and swift movements John had Mitch relieved of his jacket, shirt and boots. Taking Mitch's hand, John lead Mitch into the bedroom and made him lie down.

The instant Mitch sank into the soft mattress and blankets, enveloped by a familiar smell and surroundings, he began to ease up.

John climbed into the bed to face Mitch. A touch to his shoulder was all Mitch needed to make the words spill from his mouth as he recollected what had happened. But when Mitch came to the point where he was struck with the syringe, he began to falter and stutter and finally stilled his hoarse talking. He couldn't tell John. Not now. Not when this problem was unresolved. This time there wouldn't be no holding back for John. He would take his revenge on Derek and violate his terms of probation. And Mitch couldn't risk loosing John over his own stupidity.

"I think the sprained hand is the worst. And I did that myself," Mitch concluded lamely.

"What'll happen now?" John wanted to know.

"I guess … well, they arrested Derek, of course, and this time he will be locked up for good. I think the cashier already gave his witness report and so did I … Back to work as normal," Mitch tried a laugh, but it felt hollow.

John watched him thoughtfully as he ran his fingers through Mitch's hair over and over, sometimes brushing over Mitch's cheek or over the bandaged hand.
"Alright," John breathed and rested his hand on Mitch's neck, leaning in for a kiss.

Gripped by fear, Mitch jerked his head around and John stopped and drew back. Suddenly he looked insecure and guilty.

"I … Mitch, I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Seeing John hurt like that, Mitch could have kicked himself. But he couldn't risk getting carried away by John's kisses, he longed for so badly. One thing would lead to another and … He might infect John. If he was ill at all.

"Oh John, no. It's not what you think," Mitch grappled with his guilt of having hurt John and his fear of infecting him.

A smile appeared on John's lips. "'S alright, Mitch. I understand. It's fine."

Giving John a weak smile in return, Mitch scooted closer and buried his face in John's shirt. Maybe the paramedic was right, Derek wasn't gay … the chances of having contracted that elusive but deadly 'gay plague', as the media called it, were slim. But then again prostitutes and junkies were also known to carry said disease. Who knew, what people Derek slept or shared his needle with. Torn between hope and despair, Mitch drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

You folx are all lovely! Thank you all for reading!

Art
Littledozerdraw’s Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger’s Rambo art tag
It's gonna take a lotta love

Chapter Summary

Just before Mitch has the chance to tell John all about his arrest of Derek Johnson, two policemen appear on his doorstep. Ready to take John into custody.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe we are nearly through! This has been such a wonderful ride so far! Everyone who has ever read, commented or left kudos: Thank you! I know we've been slow with the updates, but don't worry, we'll finish this!

As always this chapter has been beta-ed by the best tattiosala (tumblr)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mitch groaned and ran a hand over his face. This night hadn't been good. He had woken up to nightmares every now and then and hadn't been able to get back to sleep for hours. John had been awake, too, and had drawn him into an embrace, so that Mitch could rest his back against John's chest. Like that they lay together silently and waited for the night to pass.

Sipping his coffee, strength only reluctantly returned to his weary body. In front of him sat John, contemplating over his own mug.

"You don't look well, Mitch. Maybe you should see a doctor again," John recommended.

"No, I … I'm fine. Just tired," Mitch lied.

John squinted and put his hand on Mitch's. "What is on your mind?"

"I … Well you see, when I fought with Derek--" Mitch began but stopped when the doorbell rang.

Confused, Mitch shrugged his shoulders and went to get the door. Standing on his porch in the musky morning were two fully clad and armed police officers. One of them Anderson.

"Hiya Pansy," Anderson grinned and hooked his fingers in his belt.

"What do you want from me?" Mitch spat, premonition slid over his back like ice water.

"Lucky for me, I'm not a sissy little cocksucker like you, so I want nothing from you. Get me that veteran of yours."

"What?" Mitch whispered. How did Anderson know about John being a veteran? Mitch and Thomas had told him that John was the boyfriend of his cousin. Their ruse had blown up.

There was a rustling behind Mitch's back and he spun around. John had walked up to Mitch and eyed Anderson with eyes like flat, hard stones. His face a mask.
"Ah, there he is!" Anderson jeered. "Right, soldier boy, you are coming with us."

"What! Why?" Mitch wanted to know and barred the path between Anderson and John.

"Because," Anderson intoned. "The cashier told me in his witness statement, that you confirmed living together with a soldier. In fact, that you take it up the arse from him. He also told us that you threatened Johnson that your baby rapist here would take revenge on him. And since Mr. Rambo is a well known man in our books, he is being arrested as an indirect threat, until we can figure out what to do with him. Nice try with your cousin's boyfriend, though."

Mitch choked. "Y- You can't do that … I made the threat."

"Aw, isn't it nice, how he loves him?" Anderson said to his fellow officer who just giggled. "Well in fact I can."

A crisply folded piece of paper was thrust at Mitch. He opened the missive and beheld the official seal of the county, some lines of writing and the signature of sheriff Hobbs. It was an arrest warrant. They were legally enabled to arrest John.

"I …" Mitch turned to John and made a grasp for his hand.

"Hold it!" Suddenly Mitch's wrist was caught and he was pulled out of the door. "No interaction with the suspect, pansy," Anderson hissed.

The second officer walked up to John, freeing the handcuffs from his belt.

"No!" Mitch shouted.

John's face slipped for a second as panic crashed over him. He would be arrested and put into a dingy, dark cell again. Just like Hope. This was Hope all over.

"Johnny!" Mitch called and twisted his arm against Anderson's grip but couldn't dislodge it.

But then like a broken beast, John extended his arms and let them be cuffed. His whole face had turned into the hard, unreadable mask from five years ago. He was withdrawing.

Anderson gave Mitch a shove back into the house. "If you don't want him hurt, stay put."

Then with a police officer at each side, John was walked up to the squad car. He turned his head and looked at Mitch with a desperate stare.

"John …" Mitch mumbled and grabbed the door frame for support and felt his stomach clench. "Don't … Don't hurt him!" Mitch shouted after the retreating people. He had wanted to say 'don't shave him', but that would have given them only ideas.

The car revved up, rolled onto the street and vanished into the morning mist hanging over the street.

***

Mitch kicked the gas pedal down until it hit the floor of the truck. The pickup sped over the wet and empty streets, screeched in the curves and roared when it accelerated again.

After Anderson and the other policemen had left, Mitch had closed the door of the house and screamed. Tears of anger, hate and desperation had run over his face as he crumpled down onto the floor and rocked back and forth. He had doomed John! He had gambled with John's well-being just for the sake of his own sense of duty.
Slumping against the wall, Mitch's tears ebbed away. What was he to do now? It had been an official warrant and there was nothing he could—

No. Mitch had told himself, that he sometimes made himself smaller than he was. He loved John. John was his responsibility and he needed him. Pushing himself off of the floor he grabbed for his jacket and made for the truck.

Mitch's heart was up in his mouth when he opened the huge glass double doors of the police station. When Anderson knew what Mitch had said to Derek, then the whole team would know.

Before Mitch could say anything upon entering, the officers at the front desk turned to each other and shouted, "Oi, look who's here! Our pansy officer!"

Mitch's hands trembled as he clutched them by his side. From everywhere in the office came cat-calls and hoots, jeering him.

A group of officers, among them Anderson, walked up to Mitch. To his surprise some officers hung back and eyed the scene awkwardly.

"Why, haven't I told you to stay put?" Anderson asked and bumped his fist into Mitch's shoulder.

Taking a step back but squaring his shoulders, Mitch shot back, "I'm here to speak to sheriff Hobbs. Get out of my way."

"Oooh, watch out, Anderson! That kitty's got teeth." A round of laughter followed.

When Mitch wanted to step around Anderson, the man pushed him back fiercely.

"Listen, buddy. We don't want your pansy ass here. I already told sheriff Hobbs about you. He'll discharge you for homosexual conduct as soon as he gets the chance. I'm sure," Anderson hissed.

Mitch swallowed. He knew that he was going to be discharged. There was no way around it now, so he might as well make the most of it.

Again he made for the corridor, but this time three officers grabbed for him.

"Oi! What is going on!" A voice barked.

The group of men whirled around as Thomas stepped out of the corridor and walked up to them in brisk strides. His face enraged.

"What do you think you're doing?! That man is a fellow deputy."

"Not much of a man."

"Won't be deputy for long, either."

"Shut it!" Thomas barked and took Mitch by the shoulder. "If you turn on a man just because he's gay, you're a piss poor excuse for a policeman. Out of my way."

Propelled forward by Thomas, Mitch followed his best friend and tried to choke down his tears.

When the door closed behind him, Thomas murmured, "I'm sorry, Mitch. I wasn't in yesterday and this morning I only heard about John's arrest when it was too late."

"That's fine. Thank you, Thomas," Mitch answered.
Thomas swung around and eyed him with painful blue eyes. Then he hugged Mitch.

"We'll work it out. Sheriff Hobbs expects you. I'll be down in the cell wing." With that Thomas vanished behind the securely locked metal door, leading to the three cells the police station offered.

Gathering his wits about him, preparing arguments and pleas in his head, Mitch walked up to the office door and knocked.

"In!" Came a roar.

Mitch entered and found the sheriff sitting behind his desk, littered with forms, his fingers steepled in front of his face.

"Sit."

Without a second thought Mitch took the seat in front of the desk, his hands shaking. It was getting harder and harder to stay conscious as the world spun around him.

"Sheriff Hobbs I–" But Mitch was brought short by a raised hand.

"Is it true, Deputy Mitch? Are you gay?" Sheriff Hobbs' eyes were hard and unreadable, his face schooled.

"Yes, sir," Mitch answered.

"I cannot tolerate that," his superior said and reached for a form.

"But sir! I can–" again Mitch was cut off.

"It has nothing to do with me. I don't care what you do in your private bedroom. But," sheriff Hobbs explained and suddenly his face grew softer, almost sad. "I can't guarantee your safety here, Mitch. No matter how much I despise it, but the men will take you apart sooner or later."

Thunderstruck, Mitch sat rigid and just stared at the sheriff. "You're …" he began but stopped.

"On your side? Of course. When I became sheriff I have sworn to protect the people of this city. I'll not partake in destroying your life. You have set a difficult course, granted. But I won't make it anymore difficult by throwing rocks in your way," the sheriff explained.

"But … you let John be arrested," Mitch stuttered, confused at what to believe.

"Sure. But only to let the boys believe that they are getting their way. Mr Rambo is innocent. I'll only keep him here for the time sufficient enough to get the official paperwork sorted out and to convince the other officers, that our job has been done properly."

Mitch pawed through his eyes, the shivering in his hands subsided. "Thank you. I … don't know what to say."

A small smile appeared beneath the sheriff's beard. "Don't thank me. It's my duty. As it was your duty to arrest that Derek Johnson when you had the chance. That was very brave."

"Maybe. But it also could cost me my life," Mitch stated flatly.

The sheriff's eyes darkened for a moment with pity. "We don't know anything yet. If it cheers you up, Johnson seems fine, leaving aside his drug abuse."
Mitch nodded tersely.

"Now," Hobbs went on. "I'll have to discharge you. But it won't be 'dishonorable'. I'll write something up along the lines of having suffered some stress after the attack of Derek Johnson and that you wish to work in different surroundings. Does that sound fair?"

Relief, that he wouldn't be cast out on the street, washed over him and he nodded again more enthusiastically.

"I'll ask for a transfer. What about Rosswood? I take it your relatives live there?" sheriff Hobbs wanted to know, scribbling away on the form in front of him.

Mitch remembered aunt Lisa and cringed, but he agreed anyway. Maybe they could work something out. "Yeah. Yeah, that would be great."

"Right. I'll handle the paperwork. Your discharge and transfer, I hope, will come to effect at the end of the month. Until then I'll put you on leave," Hobbs concluded and looked at Mitch. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"I …" Mitch halted. "I want to see John."

"I don't think that's a good idea. I don't want to give the men a chance to pick on you."

"No, you don't understand," Mitch pleaded. "When … when he was arrested back in Hope the small cell and his aversion for knives drove him mad with fear and panic. That's why things … got out of hand that way."

"Why?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"When he was a POW in Viet Nam they … they put him into a hole in the ground and … barred the entrance with bamboo poles. They … poured waste over him and tortured him with knives. You know, cutting up his chest and back," Mitch tried to talk around the lump in his throat.

"I see," his superior mused.

"He'll look calm on the outside, but inside he will be on the edge of breaking down. If the others … should start to hassle him, we'll have Hope all over again."

Hobbs gave a sigh and a nod. "Will he bear up until the end of the week, if you can see him now?"

Mitch wrung his hands. "Couldn't I come every day?"

Hobbs ' face twisted in pity and doubt. "I don't think that's wise, Mitch."

Hanging his head, Mitch submitted to the inevitable. "You're right."

"Go see him now, Mitch. Tell him … tell him I'm on your side and that only officer Magnussen will get the watch on the cell wing."

Mitch's head shot up. "Really?"

A good natured smile appeared on Hobbs' otherwise tough face. "Certainly. I don't want any more trouble and he is one out of two officers I can rely on. The other one I have to discharge."

Overwhelmed by the sheriff's kindness, Mitch stood up, saluted one last time and left for the cell wing.
Outside the metal door he saw Thomas. The other man was looking at the corridor's entrance with weary eyes.

"Thomas! Sheriff Hobbs says you can take me to John."

Thomas shoulders sank with relief. "That's good. He … isn't talking to me. But what about you?"

"Later," Mitch said.

Thomas nodded his agreement and opened the heavy door.

The cell wing always held a humid smell. Since it was a subterranean structure, there were only very slim windows high up under the ceiling, coming out on the outside ground level. It held all the right triggers to set John's nerves on edge.

The cell block was illuminated by harsh neon tubes, giving everything a cold, flat appearance.

Thomas indicated the furthest cell and remained standing in the waiting area, twiddling the keys.

"John," Mitch called softly and walked up to the cell.

The cell in question was barely big enough to lie down on the floor fully stretched out. People as large as Mitch had to constantly draw up their legs to lie on the rickety cot.

But John didn't sit on the cot. He had pressed himself into the furthest corner, his back braced against the bare concrete walls, the window behind him spilling daylight on the floor. His legs were drawn up and he had his arms wrapped around them. He looked like a wound up coil, ready to leap. Behind his knees Mitch could only make out part of John's face and that was enough. The eyes were haunted, his pallor ghostly.

"Johnny, I'm here," Mitch whispered and hunkered down in front of the cell bars, extending his hand.

For a moment John didn't react, but then, like a beaten dog, he got to his feet and crept towards Mitch in an awkward, animal-like gait. Now and then he flinched this way and that, as if he evaded invisible punches.

When he was close enough he sank to the floor, pressed his shoulder against the bars and grabbed Mitch's hand. Mitch willed down a gasp at the forceful hold.

"Mitch," John pressed forward between his teeth. His voice was flat and tense.

"Listen, Johnny," Mitch soothed him and ran his free hand over John's arm. "Sheriff Hobbs won't let anyone hurt you, alright? He is on our side and will release you at the end of the week."

"Why not now?" John's voice nearly took on an animal like whine with desperation.

"Because," Mitch tightened his hold. "Because he'll have to do it by the book … paperwork, bureaucracy, the lot."

"I'm. Innocent," his words were clipped now and his breathing just short of hyperventilation.

"I know that. Hobbs knows that. But everyone else don't want to believe it. Please Johnny, listen to me," Mitch pleaded.

Suddenly John looked up. His eyes brimmed with fear and uncried tears. His brow was knotted in
agitation. But he looked deeply into Mitch's eyes and the crippling hold on Mitch's hand decreased.

Mitch smiled reassuringly and pushed his face as far between the bars as he could manage. John reciprocated the move and pressed his forehead against Mitch's. His brow was clammy and cold and Mitch could nearly taste the fear and sickness that John emitted.

"Will you come back?" John whispered, nearly inaudible.

Mitch swallowed. His answer would make John despair even more. "I … I can't. Sheriff Hobbs advised against it." He felt John starting to shiver. "But I'll come and get you at the end of the week, Johnny. I swear, I--"

"You don't have to swear," John said. "I know you will, partner."

Their eyes met and Mitch saw, despite all of the fear and agony, that John's gaze was full of determined hope and love for Mitch.

Mitch smiled and a tear slipped from his eye. He had to go, it was inevitable. He brushed his hand along John's jaw for one last time and got up. John mirrored his movement and stood slightly more erect this time. His face was set but he gave Mitch an encouraging nod and with one last, feeble wave, Mitch walked up the cell block and Thomas followed him out.

***

The week leading up to John's release went by like an eternity. Mitch had been put on leave from work and had nothing to do. He sat at home and his mind either revolved around John and his unspeakable plight of being locked up in a tiny cell or the unknown state of his own health and what the medical tests would conclude.

Of course Sam was always at Mitch's side, putting his shaggy head into his lap to give and seek comfort at the same time. At night Sam would even sit in the living room and howl, missing John as much as Mitch did. Sometimes Mitch wished that he could join Sam in his plaintive cries, but then again he felt too weak and drained.

Thomas called him every day and told him that John was well, as far as the circumstances admitted. Once or twice the other policemen had tried to gain access to the cell, but sheriff Hobbs had put an end to that.

Finally Friday rolled around and Mitch drove up to the police station with a beating heart, not with fright but with determination. The moment he entered the station all eyes were set on him. But to Mitch's surprise the policemen said nothing but their stares were lightning bolts that pierced into Mitch. He didn't care. Squaring his shoulders, he walked past them to where Thomas already waited for him.

When John was let out of his cell Mitch had to suppress a gasp of shock. John's face was utterly pale and drawn, it looked even thinner with the dark shadows underneath his eyes and the even more prominent cheekbones. Across his jaw, the fine stubble had nearly turned into a complete beard.

"Johnny," Mitch whispered.

John looked up with eyes full of exhaustion and suffering. A dim smile appeared on his lips. Once he was close enough, he slumped against Mitch and drew his arms around him in a weak hug. Mitch hugged back as fiercely as he could.

"Oh Johnny … you made it, partner."
As their embrace broke, Mitch took John's hand and held it fast. He was damned if he should walk out of the station in shame.

Hand in hand they followed Thomas up the stairs. Sheriff Hobbs already waited for them with a small batch of forms.

"Mr Rambo, I apologize for all the trouble you have been put through. I wish you and Mr Rogers quieter times ahead," sheriff Hobbs said solemnly and extended his left hand, for John's right was firmly in Mitch's grip.

John took Hobbs' hand and held it for a moment while he looked him deep in the eyes. Then he nodded and released the hold. Followed closely by Thomas, Mitch and John walked down the corridor.

When they walked across the office there were some soft catcalls and insults murmured behind their backs, but nothing more.

Thomas walked both of them up to Mitch's pick-up and saw them off.

***

Back at home, John was instantly run over by Sam, who was barking and yapping as he jumped up at John over and over. In a flurry of limbs, John sat down on the floor and gathered the excited animal close to his chest and buried his face in the russet fur. Sam stilled his wriggling and just pressed his head against John's head.

Mitch watched them both with tears brimming in his eyes when he saw the slow tremor that began to work its way up John's spine. Suddenly the tremors burst into frantic, hitched sobs and Sam glid from his embrace.

"Johnny," Mitch exclaimed and knelt in front of him.

Carefully, he pulled him into a hug. John let himself be handled as if he had no will of his own anymore. He just slumped against Mitch and painful sobs wrecked his body. Mitch slung an arm around John's waist to keep him close and with the other he held the tear-streaked face.

Knowing, that he could do nothing, Mitch just rocked back and forth, murmured sweet nothings into John's ear and gave him time.

After a time John's crying ebbed away and he slipped out of Mitch's hold until his head lay in his lap. His eyes were open but far away. The tears had all dried up.

Cradling John like this, Mitch ran his fingers through the dark hair, hoping it would soothe him.

"Am I back?" John asked with a husky voice.

"Yes, Johnny. You're back home and you're not going anywhere ever again. Not without me."

"Good," John replied and grabbed Mitch’s hand and held it fast.

***

It had taken John the whole weekend to regain his strength and process the recent events and their effects on him. And Mitch figured it would take some more time still. In the nights John woke up frequently, plagued by nightmares and memories of his time in the cell. In the mornings he would get
up, have breakfast and then go outside with Sam for the rest of the day. He would throw some sticks for the dog to catch, repair some minor damage done to the shed over the winter or just sit on the veranda and look at the sky.

Mitch tried to give him as much room as possible, since it was clear that John needed to feel space around him again. So in order not to force him back into the house, Mitch made them some sandwiches which they ate in the slowly strengthening sunshine that spoke of the spring to come.

In the evening John sought Mitch's proximity and enjoyed having him running his fingers through his hair, while he rested his head in his lap until he dozed off.

They didn't speak of the time ahead. Mitch had told him, that he had been put on leave and would most likely be transferred to Rosswood. But he didn't want to discuss more than that and John had accepted it. Albeit Mitch had seen the slightly questioning look in his face. John sensed that Mitch was holding something back, but he trusted Mitch that it was in their best interest, so he never pushed.

On Monday Mitch had to do some serious grocery shopping, since his last foray into the supermarket had ended with him arresting Derek Johnson. And maybe sealing his own death.

John had asked Mitch if he should accompany him, fearing that Mitch wouldn't feel secure going into a supermarket alone or worse, that he would get hassled on the open street. They didn't know how far the news from the police station had spread.

But Mitch had assured John that it was fine. He didn't want to put John into harm's way anymore than necessary. Mitch regretted his decision when he walked up and down the supermarket isles and fought the feeling that everyone turned their eyes on him and murmured behind raised hands.

Feeling parched and drained of all his energy, Mitch returned home with two heavy bags. But instead of ringing the bell, Mitch used the keys and opened the door himself, guessing that John would still be in the garden, enjoying the sunshine. Swaying slightly, Mitch hauled the bags into the kitchen, where John already sat at the table.

"John," Mitch exclaimed and heaved the bags onto the counter with an audible thump.

John looked up at Mitch with a face like a mask.

"Johnny, what's w--" Mitch began but then spied a letter in John's hand. It was a grey thing with a bright logo and clearly stated return address. The local hospital. "I--" Mitch stuttered but didn't get any further. All of the withheld and repressed fears rushed back at him. In John's hand was the answer that would impact heavily on both their lives.

John stood up and walked over to Mitch, not a single emotion showing on his face. "Are you ill?" He asked with a flat voice and this time Mitch wasn't sure what John felt. Was he angry? Was he afraid? Or was he disappointed at being kept in the dark?

With a cry, Mitch crumbled to the ground and buried his eyes behind his hands. His face grew hot and wet with tears streaming over it. Between the agitated sobs Mitch gasped for air but his lungs were contracting so violently that he wasn't able to draw a single breath.

"I don't know," he wailed and choked on his tears.

Silently, John knelt down next to him and gathered him in his arms. Mitch buried his face in John's pullover and cried on, unable to calm down.
"Shhh, Mitch. I'm here. Please tell me what's wrong," John pleaded, his voice had taken on a concerned tone.

Mitch swallowed and gaged and swallowed again to get rid of the accumulating saliva in his mouth and tried to catch his breath. Then stammering and blathering Mitch spilled the whole story of his encounter with Derek Johnson at the supermarket. And the syringe.

When he was done, John turned his gaze back to the letter in his hands as if it were something vile.

"Why didn't you tell me?" John asked silently, his arm still steadily slung about Mitch's trembling form.

"Was … was afraid of troubling you with it and … and," Mitch faltered and cast John an apologetic look through his tears.

John's mouth twitched. "You thought I would hurt Johnson for this and risk my probation?"

Mitch whined in answer. Everything was slipping away from him; John was disappointed in him, there was the possibility that he had that explicable disease that killed junkies and gays alike and he had to leave this town for good. Crying uncontrollably, Mitch grasped for excuses and pleas but all that left his lips were moans and sobs as he rubbed his face in desperation.

"I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to," Mitch finally cried over and over.

Only barely did Mitch realize that John was talking to him. John had Mitch's face placed firmly between his hands in a steady but tender grip.

"Mitch. Mitch, listen to me," he intoned, his face full of concern.

Mitch grabbed John's wrist in a futile attempt to steady himself, but his shivering didn't abate.

"It's fine, I'm not leaving you. Right now, your health is more important than my feelings. Do you want to open the letter?"

Nodding, Mitch eased his head out of the hold and picked up the letter. His hands were trembling so bad that he only barely managed to open the letter. When he finally had unfolded the paper, he couldn't read the text through his tears.

John cupped Mitch's hand and steadied it. "I'm here, Mitch. It's fine."

With closed eyes, Mitch took a deep breath, willed away the last of his tears and looked back down on the page. He was negative. There were no indicators for a contracted disease.

With a startled cry of joy, he flung himself into John's arms, toppling him over. They both went down and sprawled on the tiled kitchen floor, laughing, crying. Mitch didn't know which one was best so he did both.

To his relief, John laughed too. It was the first open hearted and carefree laugh Mitch had heard from him in weeks and it was more than music to his ears. All the strain of being locked up in a cell vanished from his face as he pressed his forehead against Mitch's and kissed him over and over and over.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all for being patient!

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag

End Notes

Art
Littledozerdraw's Rambo art tag
ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo art tag
Music
Littledozerdraw's and ProfDrLachfinger's Rambo Playlist

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