

The background of the entire image is a deep purple with wispy, smoke-like patterns. In the lower half, a person's legs and lower body are visible, lying down in a relaxed pose. The lighting is soft, highlighting the skin tones against the vibrant purple background.

Summer of Love

Soul Journeys 1

A Torquere Press High Ball

by AJ Wilde

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Torquere Press

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Summer of Love: Soul Journeys 1

Chapter One: The Doctor

Rick Rathburn flicked through the assortment of magazines on the waiting room table. He chose a recent issue of 'Outdoor Life' and started to idly scan the pages. He looked at his watch, then up at the clock on the wall for what seemed like the thousandth time; it had only been twenty minutes, but it seemed like an eternity.

The referral had been in his own best interests, according to his therapist. Since 'the incident', as his superiors had begun to call it, Rick had been bounced from psych evaluation to psych evaluation, and frankly, he was sick of being treated like a wacko. He was a career cop; a detective, not some fruitcake. He'd been subjected to every kind of therapy known to man, and some that he swore they were making up on the spot just for him. And now this: regression hypnotherapy. Just what kind of a half-baked dink did they think he was?

He threw the magazine back onto the pile and snorted air through his lips like a horse.

"Mr. Rathburn?"

The young, blonde clinic assistant smiled too much and wore a white coat. Next there would be the balloons, teddy bears, and a nice padded cell.

"Yes, that's me." Rick rose to his feet, a little stiff in the right knee because he'd sat too long. He hadn't told anyone about his hands, either. If anyone had noticed he couldn't hold a coffee cup by the handle, or that he kept randomly

dropping stuff, no one had said anything; they were all too busy trying to sort out his head.

"Welcome. Come in and sit down; the doctor will be with you shortly." Mary (that was the name on her lapel) smiled serenely and floated out of the room, leaving Rick to creak slowly to the nearest chair.

The doctor. Since when did you need a medical degree to dish out hocus-pocus?

"Hypnotherapy my ass," Rick muttered to himself.

"Excuse me?"

Rick jumped as the door opened and a tall, willowy brunette wafted past his field of vision. Did everyone in this clinic float? The vision in a lab coat sank gracefully into a chair. Amused, green eyes sparkled at Rick.

"Good afternoon, Rick, I'm Dr. Martell, but you can call me Angela."

Rick shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Nice to meet you, ma'am," he mumbled.

"Look, Rick," Angela cut to the chase. "I know you're not up for this. You're sick to the teeth of doctors, therapists, being shuttled around like a parcel from one clinic to the next. I know your history."

You don't know the half of it, Rick thought. "Yeah well—you're not wrong. But hypnotism? Isn't that a bit..."

"Mumbo-jumbo?" Angela interjected with a grin. "Hocus-pocus? Those are the terms people normally throw at me on their first visit."

"Yeah, pretty much." Rick shuffled his feet. His knee was killing him.

"Your knee hurts." Angela blurted it out, just like that. Rick blinked.

"Yeah. I mean yes, yes it does."

"Right knee, yeah?" Angela slid her chair toward his and gently placed her hand on Rick's knee.

"Yes, but—how did you know? I haven't told anyone." Rick felt a subtle wave of warmth from Angela's hand. It felt good.

"It's part of what I do." Angela closed her eyes and cupped her palms around Rick's knee. The warm feeling intensified, until it was like someone had wrapped a heating pad around his knee. The tension and tightness melted away.

"Wow. Wow, that's amazing!" Rick was genuinely impressed. And he didn't impress easily.

"Sssh, just let it be..." Angela murmured, almost to herself.

Rick closed his eyes, and let the warmth and light (was it light? can you feel light? it felt like the glow of the sun, penetrating deep into the tissues, muscle, sinew and tendons) take over, melting away his pain. It was wonderful.

After about five minutes, Angela gently withdrew her hands and looked at Rick.

"There. How is it?"

"I don't know, let me try it," Rick said. He gingerly tried to get up from the chair. Right foot on the floor, spread the weight, brace yourself, wait for it...

"No pain—there's no pain. The pain is gone!" Rick said, astonished. "It's still a bit stiff, but that horrible, deep, gnawing ache is—well, it's just not there anymore." Rick stood up, putting his weight fully across both his feet, and

tested out walking a few steps. He shook his head. "How in the blue blazes did you do that?"

Angela smiled enigmatically. "Like I told you, it's part of what I do."

Rick gave her a wry grin. He was warming up to her, literally. "Shame you can't do that for other kinds of pain." He looked down at his feet. Now why the heck did you have to go say something like that for, Rathburn, he thought to himself. Damn, damn, damn.

Angela sat upright and looked Rick in the eye. "Oh, but I can."

* * * *

The hypnotherapy room didn't look like any doctor's office that Rick had ever been to. The room was about the size of a regular bedroom, thickly carpeted, with soft coffee-colored walls, antique pine cabinets upon which sat smiling, soapstone Buddhas with round, grey bellies, crystals of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and on the walls, beautiful photographs of dolphins, orcas, and wolves. Incense burned in a brass censer, and everywhere Rick looked, there were candles.

"Lie down, Rick. Take off your shoes and socks and lie on the daybed. I want you to be comfortable." Rick meekly obeyed. The white enamel-on-brass daybed was lavishly quilted and pillowed, and Rick felt like he was lying down in an old, southern, antebellum mansion.

Angela walked around the room, checking the candles and incense, and chose a cd from a collection in the corner. She

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pressed a button and a soothing, rhythmic sound began to reverberate softly around the room. She turned the lights completely off, so that the room was lit only by flickering candlelight. Then she pulled up a chair to Rick's side and pressed 'play' on her tape recorder. This last, Rick hardly even noticed.

The room was warm and Rick was suddenly aware of how very tired he was. He closed his eyes and laid his head back, sinking into the downy pillows. He hadn't slept through the night for months; the recurring nightmare of his attacker, a borderline psychotic parolee who he'd helped to convict, the cold barrel of a gun rammed against his forehead, the sneering voice taunting him over and over. The hours spent rip-tied to that chair, the hostage of a madman. Rick shivered, although it wasn't cold.

"Now Rick," crooned Angela in a strange, sing-song voice, "I want you to relax. I want you to listen to my voice. I want you to let go of all your doubts, all your fears, all your pain."

Yeah, I can do that. This feels nice. I can do this, Rick thought to himself. The strange music swirled around his mind. He felt like sleeping—but this was not like sleeping. What was this? He felt himself tense.

"It's alright Rick, it's alright." Angela's soothing voice never missed a beat. She took his hand gently in her own. That warm glow suffused Rick's hand and his tension melted away. "Nothing and no-one is going to hurt you here. You are absolutely safe at all times. I'm going to take you on a journey; and if at any time you feel uncomfortable, or you

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want to come back, all you have to do is squeeze my hand. Okay? Squeeze my hand Rick, if that's okay."

Rick squeezed Angela's hand, and let out a sigh. It felt so good to let go. It felt so good to be safe.

Angela began to murmur softly to Rick, but he couldn't make out the words. The warmth, the candlelight, the music ... he was floating, up and up, and there was an odd sensation in his head, like a buzzing—no, not a buzzing—like a whooshing, like his brain was flying out of the top of his head—like the top of his skull was being peeled off like a cantaloupe. Then he was falling, down—far down, but not falling ... a very gentle floating, down, down...

* * * *

Rick woke up in a field. He was covered in mud and he was hot; it was so hot. What the hell?

He wiped the sweat from his eyes and tried to look around. Something was oozing from his leg. He took a swipe at it and looked at his hand. It was covered in blood.

"Medic! Medic!!"

The voice was not his own. Rick's breath started tearing up through his throat in ragged gasps. Then he heard her.

"Rick. Rick! You're alright. I'm here, I'm with you. Talk to me. Tell me where you are. What year is it? Don't be afraid, Rick. You're absolutely safe. Where are you?"

Rick scrabbled at the mud, wiping the blood from his hand. He was lying at the bottom of a hole. A foxhole. Suddenly he knew. He forced his voice to work.

"I'm—it's 1965. I'm in Vietnam."

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Rick ducked down to shield his ears from the strange sound that seemed to be all around him. The humidity was stifling, and it was dark. It took him a few moments to realize that the sound he kept hearing was the zing of bullets whizzing past his head. He was drenched in sweat, the salt was stinging his eyes, and blood was pooling under him. Waves of nausea assaulted his senses. The platoon, Rick remembered, I have to get back...

Rick tried to climb out of the foxhole but his leg crumpled under him and he cried out in pain.

"Rick, you can come back anytime you like. You're in complete control. Do you want to come back, Rick? Squeeze my hand if you want to come back."

Somewhere in Rick's mind, Angela's voice became real. He squeezed the hand he was holding. A rush of light, a feeling like falling through space, and then...

Chapter Two: Another Chance

"What the hell?!"

"It's okay, Rick. You're safe, it's 2006. I'm Dr. Angela, remember me?"

Rick sat bolt upright, groaned, and clutched at his head. He looked down at his leg and felt it to make sure it was in one piece.

"What the hell was that?! What did you do to me? What do you do here, spike the coffee? What kind of a doctor are you anyway?!" Rick's voice shook with anger and fear. He jumped off the daybed and started to pace up and down.

"Calm down, Rick. Most people react in this way to their first regression. Just take some deep breaths, take your time."

"Take my time, sure! This is bullshit! If this is what regression therapy is going to be like, I don't want any part of it."

"Rick—listen," Angela's voice was patient and calm. "You asked what kind of a doctor I am, and you have a right to know. I'm a doctor of psychiatry, but I also have a degree in naturopathic medicine. I work holistically, which means I work with the whole person, not just the body or even the mind, but also the heart and the soul. Regression works on the deepest levels of your intuitive mind, which includes soul memory. What you experienced was a glimpse into a past life."

Rick, who was feeling a little better, snorted derisively. "Past life? You have got to be kidding me."

Angela shook her head. "No. I'm absolutely serious. I firmly believe in reincarnation, and some of the things I've witnessed—well, let's just say they're too fantastic to be imagined."

"So say I believe you—which I don't—what's the point? I mean, how could this possibly help me?" Rick looked up at Angela. Her clear, honest green eyes regarded him with concern.

"We all have a thread, a connection if you like, that follows us throughout all our many and varied lives. The time period changes, the country we live in, even our gender changes, but the connecting thread never does. It's the only constant, and it exists at a spiritual level—the deepest, most fundamental level of our being. Now, if we suffer a traumatic experience in this present life, and find ourselves struggling, as you do Rick, it can be very beneficial when all other therapy has failed, to explore these other lives and try to find that connecting thread. Often this is the key to healing in this life—the key to our deepest heart and soul."

"Sounds like you've been there yourself." Rick couldn't help it. It was a ridiculous notion, and he didn't believe a word of it, but for some reason, which Rick was at a loss to fathom, he trusted this oddball. She was the first medical person who had ever shown any interest in actually helping him, not just showing him inkblots that looked like brassieres and asking him inappropriate questions about his mother.

Angela looked down. "Yes, I have." She adjusted her lapel pin and then looked back at Rick. "I lost my only child a few years ago. She was six years old."

Rick felt as though someone had just hit him with a Mack truck, upon which was painted the word 'jerk'. "Oh, God. Angela, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's alright. It's been a while now. But I was a train-wreck for a long time."

"What did you do?"

"Therapy. None of it worked. I was a worse mess after they'd finished with me." Angela gave Rick an ironic grin.

"Don't I know it," Rick said with a wry laugh.

"Exactly. So when this guy from my CalMed alumni group approached me and said my past lives held the key to my healing, I told him he should check himself into the Clarke Institute pronto."

Rick laughed, heartily and genuinely for the first time in, well, it felt like years. The last time he laughed like that—it was probably when Jason, his partner at work, took the DNA swabs from Forensics and stuck them up his nose for a prank.

Angela grinned. "Anyway, I relented, felt like I owed it to my alma mater, you know. Help out a fellow alumnus, right. So I went along. The first time I was like you, scared myself rigid. But I went with it, and gradually—I began to see the thread emerging. It was amazing."

"So what eventually happened? How did it help you?"

"I discovered that I hadn't lost Emma. I would never lose her—I *could* never lose her, because she was a part of me—a part of my living soul. We had been together since the dawn of time—in different relationships, different genders—but always together. And we always would be. She is my thread, don't you see? I lost her in this life, to learn a lesson. Maybe

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even to learn this skill, so that I can help others. But I will see her again. She is my thread: my hope, my heart, my soul." Angela's eyes burned with conviction. Rick shivered.

"Do you think I have someone—I mean—a person who is my thread? Like that?"

Rick ran his hands over his face. He wasn't quite sure what to make of all this, but one thing was clear to him: Angela wasn't faking it. She really believed in this and it had helped her deal with the pain of losing a child. Was there really anything worse than that? Rick remembered looking at the tiny bodies that they occasionally had to deal with at work. He remembered watching Jason's face as he looked at one—a little girl, as he recalled—and the tears welling up in his eyes. Rick had fought his own tears that day, and he didn't even have a child of his own. He didn't have anyone of his own. And yes, he was lonely.

"Of course you do; everyone does. And we can find out. We can follow the thread backward through time, if you're okay to try. We can fast-forward a bit, from where you left off. I can tell your mind to start from a point where you're safe, not stuck in some foxhole in the Mekong Delta."

Rick stared. "You ... you knew where I was?"

Angela patted her tape recorder. "Got it all on tape. Never know when someone's going to turn out to be Jimmy Hoffa reborn."

Rick laughed again. It might turn out to be a huge waste of time, but it was the department's dollar, and he needed a break from the inkblots. What did he have to lose?

"Sure, why not? As long as I come back in one piece, I'm down with a bit of hocus-pocus." Rick grinned.

"Don't forget the mumbo-jumbo," Angela smiled.

* * * *

The next visit, Rick was more prepared. He'd done a little research on past-life regression, and he'd been surprised at what he found. Although the practice of hypnotherapy was not regulated in the United States, naturopathic doctors like Dr. Martell had a stringent certification process and adhered to all the usual codes of ethics and professional business practices. The doctors had high standards of education, most had medical degrees, and the testimonials of patients all bore witness to startling results. Rick was determined to give Dr. Martell a chance.

As he lay down on the daybed, the occasional flutter in his heart made an appearance. Rick coughed. His ordeal at gunpoint, although almost six months ago now, had left him with a stubborn niggle in his chest. He strove to ignore it. He'd had an ECG, all the blood tests had come back fine; he was fit and strong. Get over it, Rathburn.

"Are you okay, Rick?" Angela's soothing, sing-song voice crooned in his ear.

"Yeah, good to go, Doc, thanks." He couldn't quite get his head around 'Angela'. 'Doc' would do just fine.

The candles were lit, the delicate aroma of sandalwood incense wafted past Rick's nose, and the strange soft music played once more. Rick sank back into the pillows and let himself drift.

"Be safe, Rick." Angela's voice murmured. "Where are you? What year is it?"

"HMMMMM, mmmmm..." Rick mumbled. "San Francisco. 1967. Spring. It's cold. Man, I didn't know California was this cold?"

A soft chuckle from Angela. "Have you ever been to San Francisco, Rick?" A test question. The tape recorder was running.

"No. I'm from Brooklyn."

Angela's voice faded into the distance, and Rick's surroundings wobbled and shifted. He was there. It was April, and Rick was hemmed in by people on either side of him, pushing and shoving. In the distance he could see the graceful outline of the Golden Gate Bridge.

It was an amazing sight. Thousands of people, but all with one purpose: to speak out against the war in Vietnam. Rick, in his cop uniform, was arm in arm with a line of fellow officers, struggling to keep things from getting out of hand. Rick strained against the crowd, who kept pressing closer, stronger. If the police couldn't maintain control, utter chaos would break out across the city.

The marchers carried banners of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Every one of them was protesting the war in some way or other. The people themselves were like nothing Rick had ever seen. Of course he'd heard of hippies—but he'd been serving in Vietnam for the past two years. His tour of duty cut short by a bad leg injury, he'd come straight home and joined the police force. Thanks to his father, who had connections in the right places, they had overlooked his gimp leg and fast-

tracked him straight to lieutenant. But there's always a price to pay for favors—and so instead of staying in his native New York, Rick's father had convinced him to apply to the domestic front line: Haight-Ashbury.

Rick regarded the people who were pushing and shoving past him with distaste. Long, unkempt hair, sideburns, bizarre clothes, ratty jeans, bare chests, strange, Indian-style jewelry. And they smelled awful. This was the future of the human race? They could keep it. Rick wrinkled his nose.

"Give me a crew cut and a clean, white shirt any day, huh Roger?" Rick grimaced at the officer next to him.

"Yeah, these kids are animals. Just look at them! Haven't washed for weeks, I reckon."

"Watch it! Brace, brace!" Rick sucked in a breath and tried to place his leg so that it wouldn't give way under the surge of bodies pressing toward the police line.

"Stand aside, pig!" A large, extremely hairy hippy bore down on Rick and Roger. Pain was shooting down Rick's shin, but he gritted his teeth and ignored it. A banner saying 'Americans against War' flapped in his face.

"Outta the way, Brian, let me handle this." A voice from behind the hairy hippy caught Rick's attention. Just at that moment, the crowd surged forward and Rick's knee gave way. What seemed like a wall of people broke through the police line and streamed toward Golden Gate Park. Rick found himself on his back on the road. The owner of the voice followed in short order, collapsing on top of Rick with a startled 'oof'.

"Hi."

"Um, hi yourself." Rick stared up into deep brown eyes, framed with impossibly long, black lashes. The eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Sorry, man. You okay?" The owner of the voice and the eyes sounded genuinely concerned. Long, dark, wavy hair flopped in Rick's face, and an assortment of brightly colored love beads, silver chains, and peace symbols tickled his neck. The slender body to whom all this belonged was warm against him, and smelled—strangely good.

"Yes, I think so," Rick said, more than a little winded. "If you'll get off me, that is."

"Jesus! Sorry, man." The young man (despite the hair, he was male) scrambled to his feet, dodging the jostling crowd. He extended a hand to Rick. "Here, grab my hand."

"Hey thanks, I appreciate it." Rick, ever the gentleman, until it was time to kick ass and take names. "Richard Webster, pleased to meet you." He stuck out his hand.

"Same here, dude. Even squares like you pigs, I mean cops, deserve a little love in their morning coffee, know what I mean?" A smirk, and a look. A look like nothing Rick had ever seen before—not from a guy, at any rate.

"And your name is...?" Rick tried his best to look casual.

"Johnny. John Ross, really. Awful, square name. Wanna change it to something groovy, like maybe, I dunno, Summer, or Bliss, or..." Johnny trailed off as he caught the dumbfounded look on Rick's face. "Johnny, yeah. Just Johnny."

That smile, Rick remembered from somewhere—but where?

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Then a baseball bat swung, and Johnny crumpled to the ground, and the officer behind him was cursing, cuffing him, throwing him into the back of a cruiser, along with a couple of other hippies all crammed into the back seat; the car speeding away. And Rick, left staring open-mouthed after the departing cruiser, with the sweet scent of Johnny Ross on his police uniform. Rick breathed it in deep, and hobbled away.

Chapter Three: The Right Thing

By the time Rick arrived back at the precinct, there were rumors that the crowd at Golden Gate Park had swelled to One hundred thousand. One hundred *thousand* people. Rick could hardly take it in. Similar numbers had turned up in cities all across the country. Every one of them was marching to protest against a war that even Rick didn't understand, and he'd been brought up an army brat, taught from the earliest age to respect authority, revere the government, trust the rule of law. But this war—even he was beginning to have doubts.

The station was crammed with people: uniformed cops like himself, looking tired and stressed; assorted hippies, some in handcuffs, others complaining at the tops of their voices about police brutality; and ordinary citizens, trying to get a word in edgewise.

"Hey Rick," One of his fellow officers, Martin Conroy, slapped him on the shoulder. "Crazy days, huh?"

Rick nodded. "Yeah, never seen anything like it. Hey, Martin?"

"Yeah?"

"Gimble and Marsh should have come in a while back—they had a kid with them—a hippy. Long. dark hair, skinny; couldn't have been more than twenty-one, twenty-two." Rick scratched his chin and looked at Martin. They both knew the reputation of these two particular officers. "Might have been a bit roughed-up."

Martin shot Rick a look. "Yeah. Yeah, I did see that kid. Think you'll find he's a bit more than just roughed-up by now." Martin looked down and shuffled his feet.

"What do you mean?" Rick glared at his colleague and friend. "Martin!" Rick closed the gap between them in one stride and grabbed Martin by the collar. "Where did they take him? Come on, spill it!"

"Alright, man, geez! Don't hurt me!" Martin squirmed, but Rick only gripped tighter. There was a look in Rick's eyes that Martin had only seen on a couple of prior occasions: one was a murdered child, and the other was when Gimble and Marsh had beaten a prisoner so badly he ended up dead. Martin swallowed hard. "They took him into the basement. Down to the cells."

"Don't do anything rash, man..." But Rick was already gone.

* * * *

The constable at the security desk jumped to his feet as Rick approached. He knew better than to mess with Rick Webster. "Good morning, Sir," he said, nervously.

"Good morning my ass," Rick snapped. "You've got a kid down here. First name Johnny, last name..." Rick searched his memory.

"Ross. Cell seven." Constable McKay offered the missing information. Rick nodded curtly, grabbed the key for cell seven from the rack on the wall, and started down the corridor. "Um, sorry—Lieutenant Webster?" The young cop

called after him. He would never have dared call him Rick. Rick stopped and turned around.

"Yes?"

"Uh, he's a bit—messed up. You might want to..."

"Thank you, McKay. I can handle it from here."

Rick took the sharp right turn down toward cell seven. The last cell in the block, cell six was empty, a locked fire door at the end of the corridor—safely out of earshot, no witnesses. He knew Gimble and Marsh's m.o. better than they did.

Rick's hand trembled slightly as he turned the key in the lock. The heavy metal door creaked open. Rick's sidearm was loaded in case of trouble, but he had an idea he wouldn't need it. And he was right.

The slender young man from the earlier street scuffle, who Rick remembered as cheerful, friendly, and strangely alluring, was now anything but. He stood in the corner, leaning awkwardly against the wall, his hands cuffed behind his back, dirty and bruised. He had blood running down the side of his face, his cheekbone looked like it had been subjected to someone's right hook and the eye on that side was swollen shut. His lip was split and bleeding. To add insult to injury, he was stark naked.

"So. Come to see the dirty hippy, then?" he mumbled out of the corner of his mouth. Blood trickled from his lip and he tried to wipe it with his shoulder. Rick could see tear tracks in the dirt on his face.

"Jesus, what have they done to you? I'm sorry, Johnny. I'm so sorry..." Rick took a step toward him, carefully, as though he was approaching a wild animal.

"Sure you are. You're all the same. Pig!" Johnny hocked back in his throat and spat on Rick's shoe. Rick's face burned.

"I don't blame you for feeling that way. I had no part in this, you have to believe that."

"Why should I believe anything you say? You're part of the system; part of the problem." Johnny closed his one good eye and sighed deeply. His slim frame was covered in bruises and abrasions. Rick tried not to look, but his subconscious registered the long legs, lean muscular shoulders, flat stomach, and all the other things he wasn't supposed to notice.

"Look. I have no right to expect you to trust me. I know that," Rick spoke gently, as though he was talking to a child. "But I can get you out of here. I can help you, but you have to let me."

Johnny stared at Rick with his one good eye. He looked broken, like a horse whipped to the finish line one too many times. Gimble and Marsh had outdone themselves this time. Tears welled up, spilling over the long, black lashes and down the grimy, blood-streaked cheeks. Johnny slid down the wall and crumpled to the floor. "Please," he mumbled. "Please help me." His shoulders started to shake, and although his face was hidden behind a curtain of dark hair, Rick could tell that he was sobbing.

"Sssh. It's going to be alright. Here, hold still." Rick knelt down and undid the handcuffs, removing them as carefully as he could. Against his better judgment, he gently stroked Johnny's matted hair back from his face. "It's alright, Johnny,

I'll take care of you," he murmured. Johnny flinched at his touch, and hot tears streamed down his face.

"You haven't earned the right," he whispered, in between sobs.

"The right to what?" Rick asked, a little bewildered.

"To call me Johnny."

Rick was stung. He was at a loss to understand why he should care, or be hurt by the throw-away insults of some hippy kid, but he was. He resisted a sudden urge to stroke Johnny's cheek, and instead walked over to where Johnny's clothes had been thrown in a heap. He picked out a pair of madras-check boxers and tossed them over. The stench of urine rising from the rest of Johnny's clothes told Rick that Gimble and Marsh had made their point in the usual disgusting manner. He made a mental note to piss on their shoes next time he saw them.

"Here, put these on for now. I'll find you some clean clothes." Rick fetched a blanket from the supply room and wrapped it around Johnny, then picked him up and carried him out of the cell. He was as light as a feather. Johnny didn't protest, but slid his arms around Rick's neck and clung to him silently.

Rick marched up to Constable McKay. "Write down on the day sheet that this prisoner is released to my care. I'll take full responsibility." McKay went to open his mouth, and shut it again when he saw the look on Rick's face. "And if you see that asshole Don Gimble, and his little weasel sidekick Pete Marsh, you can tell them from me, I'll deal with them later."

Rick strode out of the cellblock, leaving McKay scribbling furiously.

* * * *

The back of Rick's car was warm and comfortable, and he laid his slender charge down as gently as he could. Johnny mumbled something unintelligible and wrapped the blanket tightly around himself.

As Rick got into the driver's seat and turned the key, a million thoughts raced through his mind. Why are you doing this? You know it's against the rules. You could have left him with the community officer to get cleaned up. He should go to the hospital. No, it's only bumps and bruises, he doesn't need a doctor. He just needs...

Rick's mind balked at the thoughts that came next. He needs comfort. He needs you.

His thoughts persisted in this vein as he drove, until he came to a conclusion that he hadn't bargained on. He shook it from his mind and carried Johnny up the stairs to his modest fourth floor apartment.

Rick ran a warm bath for Johnny and sorted out some clothes for him. They were too big, of course, and hardly hippy style, but at least they were clean. He took the opportunity to change out of his uniform and threw on a pair of slacks and a polo shirt. Then Rick peeked into the bathroom to check on the progress of his young charge. Johnny was trying in vain to wash his hair.

"Here, let me help you," Rick said, kneeling down behind him and taking the shower attachment from Johnny's

trembling hand. No words from the kid, just a mumble of frustration—but he allowed Rick to run the warm water over his head. His long, dark hair trailed in the sink. Rick squeezed the water out and gently massaged shampoo into Johnny's scalp. He sighed and leaned back against Rick. His warm, slender shoulders felt good against Rick's chest. Too good. Rick leaned closer and breathed in the herbal scent of the shampoo, and the clean smell of Johnny Ross.

"You smell great," he said, much to his astonishment.

"So do you," Johnny mumbled. Rick tried to focus on rinsing Johnny's hair. He ran the warm water over Johnny's head, and stroked it through the hair, trying to get all the shampoo out. "Man, that feels so amazing," Johnny murmured.

Finally Johnny's hair was squeaky clean, and Rick squeezed the water out and then carefully towed it dry. Johnny shook his head like a retriever and grinned at Rick from under a wild shock of ebony hair.

"Better?" Rick smiled.

"Heaps. Thanks, man, I owe you one." Johnny plunked himself down on Rick's couch.

"Nah. My pleasure." Rick replied, meaning it more than he could have ever let on.

Suddenly a thought occurred to Rick. "Uh, sorry, I probably should have asked you this before. Is there anyone you want me to call? Family, friends?"

"Yeah," Johnny said, matter-of-factly. "My wife."

Chapter Four: Don't Judge a Book...

Rick stared. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting Johnny to say, but it certainly wasn't that. Talk about mixed signals. And you've been barking up the wrong tree, he told himself—now don't you just feel like a dumbass. Silently, he showed Johnny where the phone was, and bit his nails while Johnny dialed, then chatted casually to the person who answered.

"Yeah, it's cool. Nah, I'm okay, don't worry. Sure, see you soon, babe."

"Your *wife*?" Rick stumbled over the word. His face must have betrayed him, because Johnny smirked.

"What? Didn't think I was old enough to be married?" There was mischief in his voice, and Rick felt certain he was being toyed with.

"Actually, no. You can only be what, twenty-one, twenty-two?" Rick struggled to keep his tone light.

"Nope. I'm twenty-seven. Old enough to know better." Johnny grinned, crookedly.

"And you're married," Rick said, flatly. He still couldn't get his head around the concept.

"Yeah. Met Brandy just before I was posted, got married real quick, figured I wouldn't make it back." Johnny shrugged, and rotated the silver ring on the third finger of his left hand—a ring that Rick had only just noticed.

"Wait—wait a minute. Hold on a sec. You *served*??" Rick sat down heavily in the nearest chair. His head was swimming.

"Yeah, man. '65, we were one of the first bunch of suckers in there. What, you thought you were the only one?" Johnny shot Rick a scathing look with his good eye. It was a look that cut Rick to the bone.

"No, of course not, no. Jesus. I was there, too. What unit?"

"Special Forces." Johnny rubbed his face, and winced.

"Christ, my eye hurts." Johnny's swollen eyelid was beginning to open up, and he touched it gingerly with his finger.

"Special Forces...?"

Rick wanted to kick himself almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth. He hadn't meant to sound that unconvinced. Evidently the tone of his voice touched a nerve, because a look of dull resentment washed over Johnny's face. He jumped up and started rummaging through the pile of assorted trinkets and miscellaneous junk that Rick had liberated from the desk sergeant's drawer.

"Where are my cigarettes? Fuck, you cops are all the same. Thieving bastards."

"Look, did I say I didn't believe you? Here, have one of mine." Rick fished out a pack from his uniform pocket and offered one to Johnny. "It's just that, well—you're so young, for a start. And Special Forces, they require, you know..." Rick trailed off. He didn't really know where he was going with this. To tell the truth, he still hadn't gotten past the news that Johnny had a wife.

"Smarts, you mean?" Johnny accepted the offered cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, and let Rick light him. A couple of puffs, a groan of relief, and he continued. The angry look was gone from his face. "Yeah, I get that a lot. I skipped

two grades in high school. Then on scholarship to Berkeley, then Cambridge, that's England not Mass., then straight into the Marines as an explosives specialist. Was crawling on my belly through minefields in the Mekong on my twenty-fifth birthday."

Rick sighed. What a jerk you are, Webster. Make a complete fool of yourself, why don't you.

"Jesus. Look, I'm sorry, alright?" Rick lit a cigarette and dragged on it gratefully. "So, I'm just trying to get this straight—why are you..."

"Why am I a hippy?" Johnny interrupted. "The war, man. You've got to know it's wrong. I mean, not just like, war is hell, that kinda thing. I mean it's all wrong. It's a con; they're conning the American people on a massive scale. I can't even begin to explain it, but the things I saw over there ... I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Rick nodded, silently. He did, of course, but his conservative upbringing was tough to break away from.

"Anyway, when my tour was over, I'd had it. I went to hear Allen Ginsberg speak, and I read like a demon. Kerouac, Leary: they made so much sense to me. It was like a light bulb going on in my head. I grew my hair, started to just hang loose, you know? And so, Brandy and I, we bought a few acres and started a commune."

"A ... what?" Rick couldn't believe he was this out of touch.

"A commune, man. It's the future, you gotta dig it. We all live together, about five families: guys, girls, kids, dogs, cats. We grow our own food, raise our own chickens, goats—heck,

we even have a cow. We share everything. Free love, man. It's where it's at."

"Free love?" Rick was officially stumped. He'd heard of it, of course, but had no idea that anyone actually did it.

"Yeah." Johnny smirked. "It's not just a propaganda buzzword, you know. It really works." His brown eyes twinkled with amusement as he watched Rick's face.

"So, you..." Rick had no idea how to even put it.

"We love who we love, man. Brandy has other lovers, and so do I. One human being can't own another human being, know what I'm saying? That would be a drag."

Rick bit his lip. He was being played, and he knew it. He wasn't that naive. "So, how many lovers do you have right now?" Two could play at this game. Rick dragged on his cigarette and narrowed his eyes at Johnny.

"Oh, you catch on quick," Johnny grinned and wagged his finger at Rick. "I don't keep a list. But I'm working on a new one. Not sure if he's gonna work out, though." Johnny turned away and gazed out of the window.

"He?" Rick coughed. He could see Johnny's reflection in the glass, smirking, despite his split lip.

"Can't put labels on people, man. Labels are for soup cans. Just be who you are. Sometimes I like girls, sometimes guys. Brandy's the same, she has girlfriends, boyfriends. Human beings gotta be free."

"And you don't get jealous?" Rick had to try and push some buttons.

"Nah. Jealousy is for squares, man. Can't lay that heavy shit on us, it's not cool." Johnny turned around finally and

looked Rick square in the eyes. "Make love, not war, Rick." Dark eyes bored into Rick's soul.

"Yeah—yeah, I heard that one."

The doorbell rang, and Rick didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed.

* * * *

Rick opened the door and was almost bowled over by a tiny person who bolted through his legs and jumped straight into Johnny's arms.

"Daddy, daddy!"

Johnny swung the little girl round until she squealed with delight. "Rick, this is my daughter, Dakota. And this is my wife, Brandy."

Rick had barely noticed the quiet, young girl who stood in the doorway. She looked about seventeen, but must have been in her early twenties. Long, auburn hair that matched her name, in two braids that reached down to her waist, a pretty face, and startling green eyes. She was dressed in ripped jeans, flipflops, and a flowered sundress. Rick noted the silver ring on her wedding finger. It matched Johnny's.

"Pleased to meet you, Rick. Thank you for taking care of Johnny. We're in your debt for this."

Rick flushed to the roots of his hair. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd been brought up better than this. He'd been brought up to be a gentleman. "I'm so sorry, Brandy, where are my manners? Come in, come in. It's nice to meet you. And you too, Dakota." Rick smiled at the little girl, who beamed back.

"This is my daddy." Dakota still clung to Johnny. "I'm three years old!" Johnny grinned and rolled his eyes. Rick couldn't help but grin back. A wife, and now a kid. Free love, indeed.

"Honey, I hate to lay this on you, but we have to go. The transmission's going on the pickup again and I barely made it here. I want to get it back to the barn, have Mike take a look, see if he can fix it." Brandy shot an apologetic glance at Rick. "Sorry," she shrugged.

"No problem," Rick replied, shaking his head. "It was great to meet you guys."

"Ooooh, I like his accent," Brandy murmured to Johnny, who grinned back at her.

"Yeah, me too."

"Ack-thent," repeated Dakota, pulling on her daddy's ears.

Rick looked at Johnny. He felt as though his stomach was turning inside out of its own accord; but he couldn't think of a thing to say.

Johnny put Dakota down, and she ran to her mommy. Brandy smiled. Johnny looked at Rick. He closed the gap between them in two strides and put his hand in Rick's. Rick, despite himself, closed his fingers around Johnny's hand. Dark eyes met; unasked questions hung in the air.

"Come with us." The look on Johnny's face made it clear that 'no' was not the answer he wanted to hear. His hand was warm and the pressure of his slender fingers made Rick's pulse jump. Now or never, Webster: make a choice.

Chapter Five: The Farm

Rick stood rooted to the spot. His blood seemed to have drained into his feet and he felt dizzy. Johnny's hand was warm in his. He could feel Brandy watching them from the doorway, a half-smile on her face, and Dakota skipping happily at her feet.

"Come with you? What do you mean?" Rick said, stupidly.

"Leave all this, man. Just leave it. Drop out. You're gonna get in trouble for what you did for me today, right?"

"Maybe. I don't really care," Rick shrugged. It was an odd feeling, but at that moment he was telling the absolute truth: he simply didn't care.

"So leave it. Come with us, back to the farm. We've got plenty of room, and you'll be very welcome. Seems to me..." Johnny looked away, and for the first time Rick thought he saw a slight crack in his cocky demeanor. "Seems to me, you could use the company." Johnny shuffled his feet. Rick glanced at Brandy, but she only arched an eyebrow and winked. Rick could feel his face burning.

"Well, maybe just for a couple of days. I've got some leave due—can't hurt," Rick faltered. What am I doing? I can't do this. I've got responsibilities. I've got a career.

Johnny smiled at Rick and murmured, almost to himself, "Dust in the wind, man. Dust in the wind." Johnny's face lit up like the sun coming out from behind a cloud when he smiled, and Rick noticed that his hair was drying in soft curls around his face. The long, espresso-dark strands settled on his lean shoulders. The look on Johnny's face shattered all Rick's

doubts into little pieces, and he shook himself in an attempt to will away the feelings that were welling up inside. Not to mention that getting a hard-on in front of a lady and a toddler really wasn't his style.

He grinned at Johnny.

"Alright, you persuaded me. Give me a sec, okay?"

Johnny took Brandy and Dakota down to the pickup while Rick gathered a few things into a backpack. He felt giddy, like a kid skipping school. And he felt guilty. But when he tossed his stuff into the back of the pickup and squeezed in next to Brandy, with Dakota on his lap, his misgivings melted away. A kind of strange euphoria began to flood his body. He was elated; he was free.

* * * *

Johnny drove like a self-taught maniac. The battered, old, green Chevy bounced along as they exited the Bay area and headed out into the countryside. They passed lush vineyards with rows and rows of grapes under netting, kitsch little mom-'n-pop bed and breakfasts, working farms, and sleepy villages. Dakota was fast asleep and warm in his arms, and as the ride smoothed out on the long, straight road, Rick's head began to nod. Suddenly the pickup made a sharp left turn, and Rick was jolted awake.

"Mommy?" Dakota squirmed in Rick's arms.

"We're home, princess," Johnny said as he anchored up in a cloud of dust at the end of a dirt road. Rick handed a drowsy Dakota to Brandy and rubbed his eyes. He jumped out

of the truck, stretched his cramped leg muscles, and looked around.

A gravel driveway opened onto a wide front lawn, bordered by dense woods on either side. A huge, old, rambling farmhouse probably built at the turn of the century, a garage, and behind and to the left, a big old barn. Further back, Rick could make out various outbuildings, what looked to be chicken coops, a vegetable garden, a greenhouse, and a number of tents, pitched at random in the large field, which opened out beyond the barn.

"We've always got visitors," Brandy explained. "Kinda like a permanent open-house."

"Come on, Rick," said Johnny, taking Dakota by the hand. "Let me show you around."

Rick grabbed his pack and followed Johnny, a strange sensation swirling in his gut. It was like—almost like panic; but not. What was it? Nerves. Excitement. Terror. He was losing his mind. He'd never done anything like this before—always done what he was told, never broken a single rule.

"We've got a hundred and fifty acres," Johnny explained as they walked. "It was pretty much derelict when we bought it, but we've had lots of help, and I think it's starting to turn around."

Beyond the woods was a fenced paddock with three ponies, a stable that looked in need of repair, and a byre full of fresh hay. At the back of the paddock was a meadow, bordered by a small creek. The land rose up an incline, the top of which opened onto a view of green fields and gently rolling hills. Long grass interspersed with bluebells, chicory,

buttercups, daisies, and all kinds of wildflowers grew in lavish abundance.

"This is my favorite spot," Johnny said, smiling. He lifted Dakota up onto a massive tree stump and she sat there, grinning.

"Spot," she repeated.

"And you're daddy's favorite girl," Johnny murmured, and kissed her on the nose.

Rick couldn't help but smile. The love in Johnny's face when he looked at his daughter was nothing short of complete and utter adoration. She had fair hair, curling around her little cherub face, and huge, dark brown eyes just like her daddy.

"Horsey. Daddy, horsey."

Johnny rolled his eyes and grinned at Rick. "Do you ride?"

"Yeah. Well, I used to, back home; my uncle had a few acres up in Ithaca. I'm pretty rusty, though."

Johnny swung Dakota off the tree stump and opened the paddock gate. "Come on, you can take April, she's fairly well-behaved."

Despite Rick's protests, Johnny slung saddles on a pair of ponies and leapt easily onto one of them, then leaned down, scooped Dakota up, and swung her onto his lap. "Here," he said, handing the reins of the other to Rick. "You still remember?"

Rick nodded and gingerly pulled himself up into the saddle. The chestnut pony whickered softly as he took the reins in his right hand and held onto the pommel with his left. Johnny made a clucking sound with his teeth, kicked the black mare

slightly, and took off at a trot. Rick's pony followed automatically and after a while, Rick discovered that he really didn't have to do a thing; the ponies knew the trails and all he had to do was hang on and remember to keep his hands and heels down.

If someone had told Rick when he got up that morning that before the sun set that day he would be riding through the California wine country with a new friend and his daughter, he would have said they were mad. But here he was, and it was wonderful.

"This is the lookout," Johnny called back over his shoulder. They had climbed a trail that led steadily upward, until they reached the crest of the hill. Johnny reined in his pony, set Dakota down gently, and dismounted, tying the reins to a tree. Rick followed suit. The view was breathtaking. "You can see practically the entire Sonoma Valley from here," Johnny said.

"It's beautiful," said Rick.

"Yeah, it is." Johnny walked over and stood next to Rick. Rick could feel Johnny looking at him, but he stared straight ahead at the view. Johnny smelled of wild heather and sunshine and it was almost unbearable to have him standing so close. Close enough to touch—but you can't touch. He's so high above you; forget it, just forget it.

Rick felt Johnny's hand on his shoulder and he finally looked round. Those kind, brown eyes gazed into his, and that quiet voice spoke. "It'll be okay, man. Just let it all go. Come on, I want you to meet everybody."

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Johnny walked away, untied his pony, swung into the saddle, then leaned down and scooped up Dakota with one arm. He grinned at Rick. "I may be skinny, but I'm strong," he said. "Don't let the long hair fool you."

There was something so intriguing about this young man, on the surface just another hippy, but underneath ... Rick shook himself, got back on his pony, and followed Johnny back down the trail to his new home.

Chapter Six: Fitting In

"Come on, I want you to meet the gang." Johnny set Dakota down, and she ran into the farmhouse. Johnny followed, and Rick trailed behind, a little nervously. He was acutely aware that he was out of his realm, and possibly, out of his depth.

The farmhouse was large and rambling, with high ceilings and spacious rooms. Johnny led Rick into the huge kitchen, which was divided into two levels and featured a long, solid oak refectory table, tall, leaded-light windows, and French doors, which opened onto a bright garden room filled with rows of plants in pots and a random assortment of wicker sofas and easy chairs, occupied by an equally random assortment of people.

"Everyone, this is Rick, he's a friend of mine, and he'll be hanging with us for a while." Johnny put his arm around Rick's shoulder, as though making a silent point.

Rick was aware of many pairs of eyes, sizing him up. Rick was suddenly painfully cognizant of the SFPD patch on his backpack. He tossed it into a corner.

"Any friend of Johnny's is a friend of us all." Rick started a little at the deep, booming voice that issued from the corner chair. An impossibly tall, blond man with a long ponytail, a wild beard, and kind, hazel eyes stood up. He strode toward Rick and stuck out a big, calloused hand. "Pleased to meet you, Rick."

"This is Stax. We call him that because his real name is impossible to pronounce." Johnny explained, grinning. "He's

one of the reasons we had to find a place with twelve foot ceilings."

"I'm only six foot seven," Stax shrugged. "Viking blood—all my pa's fault."

Johnny went around the room, rattling off names. "This is Mike, and Pam, and Liz, and Jimmy, and this is Brodie, we call him that because he's another Mike and we get confused, and this is Sarah, and Brad, and Jackie, and you already know Brandy."

Rick nodded and hugged and smiled until his face ached. Everyone seemed happy to meet a friend of Johnny's. Then a bundle of children careened into the room from the garden, and it all started again.

"Okay, now we've got the kids. I hope you like kids, Rick, because there sure are a lot of 'em—and we keep making more, so Stax and me, we built a nursery onto the east wing, so they can all sleep together," Johnny smiled and began counting off small tousled heads. "You know Dakota. And then there's Rainbow, and Spring Dawn, and Daisy, and Summer, and Angel, and Jasmine and Zack, and the twins Tamryn and Frieda. I'll let you figure out who belongs to whom."

Rick was quickly embraced into the warmth of the garden room, and, it seemed, into the hearts of those who made this place their home. Even though he looked so different from them, they welcomed him, and soon Rick was being fed green tea and homemade cookies, flirted with by the women and a couple of the men, and adorned with buttercup and daisy

garlands by the children, whose pealing laughter filled the room.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rick caught sight of Brodie, pulling Johnny aside and whispering urgently in his ear. Rick picked up most of the conversation—he had always had excellent hearing—and he filled in the rest by lip-reading. That surveillance course he'd taken had come in handy after all.

"You brought fuzz here? What the hell were you thinking? He'll rat us out."

"No, he won't. And he's not fuzz. Well—he was, but he's dropped out, man. Give him a break. He's one of us now."

"The hell he is! You're tripping, man. The pigs never change."

"Dude, you're wrong. He rescued me. He's cool. Let him be."

"What, just because you want him, right? That makes it okay? You want a pig in your bed, so you bring him back here, to our home?"

Rick no longer needed to lip-read as Johnny and Brodie's voices rose to a level that the whole room could hear. Everyone stopped what they were doing, and Stax drew himself up to his full height.

"You're way out of line, man. Back off, right now."

"Fuck you."

"In your dreams, man."

"Hell, if you wanna bang a square, go right ahead. Probably wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole anyway. Looks like a ladies' man to me."

"Go hump a tree, Brodie. It's about as close as you'll ever get."

Rick watched silently as Brodie stormed out. Johnny's face was like thunder.

"Stax, you got something on the burn there, man? I need a hit, like, bad. Like, right now." Johnny waited, tapping his foot impatiently while the big Viking rolled a joint and lit it, took a drag, and handed it to Johnny. Johnny inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out slowly, groaning with relief. "Fuck, man. Fucking Brodie, fuck him."

Stax put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Don't let him harsh your buzz, man. Be cool."

Johnny nodded and raked his fingers through his hair, taking another long, deep hit and sighing as the soothing effect of the weed took hold. "Sweet Mary Jane," he murmured, handing the joint to Rick. "Welcome to the family, man."

Rick hesitated. After what he'd just overheard, he had no desire to alienate Johnny. But he didn't smoke pot—it was illegal and he was still a police officer. "I can't, man. I just—I'm really sorry. I just can't."

"Suit yourself," Johnny shrugged, and walked away.

* * * *

Pam and Liz took it upon themselves to show Rick around the farmhouse. Inside, Rick was mentally kicking himself for rejecting Johnny's offer of welcome. A million different thoughts were pinballing around his mind and, frankly, he could have used a bit of mellowing out. But marijuana? He

couldn't be seen to indulge. If only he'd left that stupid backpack at home...

"So Rick," Pam crooned. "We have seven bedrooms, but we all share, whoever you want to sleep with, if they like you too, you just grab a room, and go." The tiny blonde with the long, blue sundress and bare feet gazed up at Rick adoringly. Liz, a gangly redhead with freckles and round glasses, giggled and pulled on Rick's arm.

"Yeah, it's far out, man. No rules, no squares telling you what to do. It's where it's at. Like, sometimes Pam and I sleep together. And sometimes we invite a guy to join us." Liz winked at Rick.

"So—how do you know when someone likes you?" Rick avoided Liz's predatory gaze.

"Usually they offer you a hit. But not the usual way. It's like a code, man."

"Like, how?" Rick imitated Liz's hippy way of speaking. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

"Oh, you'll know it when it happens, man." Liz smirked.

Rick sighed. He had a sinking feeling he'd already blown it with Johnny by refusing the hit when it was offered—but he'd seen practically everyone passing joints around in the way—so that couldn't have been it. He'd just have to cross that bridge when he came to it.

"You can stash your stuff here, Rick," Pam said, throwing open a door. "This bedroom is kinda spare right now, man. Knock yourself out."

"Thanks, I appreciate you girls showing me around." Rick threw his backpack in the corner, making a mental note to

remove the SFPD patch as soon as he could get a moment alone.

"And we appreciate you, Rick," Liz purred. Pam shot her a look and pulled at her elbow. Rick was staring out of the window.

"Come on, give the cat some space, man," Pam hissed at Liz, who rolled her eyes in response.

"Alright alright, geez! Just what's a girl gotta do to get laid around here, anyway! I'm gonna go get high, man. At least the weed never lets me down."

Finally, Rick was left alone. He fished out his pocketknife and cut the incriminating patch off his backpack. Next, he changed out of his conservative clothes, and instead put on a pair of faded Levi's and a T-shirt that read 'I do all my own stunts'. There was nothing he could do about the length of his hair, but he raked his fingers through it to tousle it a bit, or at least as much as a military short-back-and-sides could be tousled.

Rick looked out of the window, across the open fields bordered by dense woodland. The sun was setting behind the distant hills, and the whole world seemed bathed in gold. Rick closed his eyes and breathed in the delicate pine scent of the farmhouse, the faraway smells of cooking, the herb garden, jasmine and lavender, and the pungent, unmistakable aroma of marijuana.

* * * *

A knock at the door made Rick jump out of his skin. It was Johnny, dressed in his own clothes again: worn-out jeans

covered with random bleach splotches, a cheesecloth shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons, and his love beads and silver jewelry. He was barefoot, as seemed to be the custom for residents of the farm. He gave Rick a lopsided grin from beneath his long, black lashes.

"Hey man. Are we cool?"

Rick smiled. "Yeah, we're cool. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about Brodie, he can be an ass at times, but he's alright really. Rough childhood, you know. It's harsh."

"Yeah, I can see that." Rick took a step toward Johnny, and stopped. Johnny had the end of a joint in his fingers.

"Sorry. You know, if you don't partake, it's cool. You are the fuzz, after all," Johnny shrugged, and grinned. "Come on. Sunset means party time. Come and chill with us, man."

Rick meekly followed Johnny downstairs to the huge, rambling living room. There were people and kids everywhere, babies in arms, dogs, cats, even an iguana on a leash, and Johnny's pride and joy: his fish.

"This is Finn, and Mack, and Barry. They're Japanese fighting fish. I'm trying to breed them, but you have to keep the males and females separated otherwise they eat each other." Johnny tapped gently on the glass.

"*Barry?*" Rick made a face. Johnny burst out laughing. Just then, Brandy appeared at Johnny's shoulder. She reached up to Johnny on tiptoe, and he bent down to meet her, kissing her hungrily.

"Hey baby," he said gently, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Are we groovin'?"

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Brandy nodded. Stax had the bong bubbling and joints lined up for the taking. Liz had a stack of records picked out, and strange, ethereal music that Rick had never heard before was playing. The room was illuminated only by random groups of candles, and the floor was covered with scatter cushions and Indian rugs. Incense was burning on the window-ledges, adding to the ambience of altered reality.

"Come on, man. Just chill." Johnny walked ahead, his arm firmly around Brandy's waist, and Rick followed, slightly crestfallen. From what he could see, Johnny was with Brandy, and that was that. He flopped down on a floor cushion, lit up a cigarette, and closed his eyes. The strange music soothed his mind, and he began to realize just how tired he really was. Before he knew it, he was sound asleep.

Chapter Seven: Break on Through (To the Other Side)

Rick awoke with a start. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep, but the room was dark, lit only by a few flickering candles and the strange aura from a lava lamp, which sent colored shapes floating across the ceiling. The air was thick with swirling smoke from various bongos and lit joints. A thumping beat from the record player vibrated through the floor and sent shivers up Rick's spine, and he recognized the track as The Doors 'Break On Through'. He sat up, grabbed a beer from the cooler under the table, and twisted off the top.

As Rick's eyes got used to the darkness, he began to make out the forms of people lying on the various rugs and floor cushions. They were in various stages of undress, and he could see couples in corners, practically naked, kissing and touching, oblivious of the other people around them. Rick chugged his beer in no time flat and cracked another. This was going to take some getting used to. That's when he noticed Johnny.

Johnny and Brandy were together, lying close enough for him to see them clearly. Johnny was tracking kisses across Brandy's belly, in the gap between the hem of her T-shirt and the waistband of her skirt. She sighed and stroked his hair. Rick stared—and looked away quickly when Johnny saw him staring. Under the pretense of taking another swig of beer, Rick looked again. Johnny smirked and kissed Brandy full on the mouth. They whispered together, giggled, and then whispered some more. Johnny gave Brandy another quick

kiss, at which point Rick decided that he'd had enough of being a peeping tom and lay back down on the floor, closing his eyes with a sigh.

The next thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Johnny.

"Hey." Johnny climbed on top of Rick, effectively pinning him down.

"Hey yourself," said Rick.

"Haven't we done this before?" grinned Johnny.

"Yeah." Rick really didn't know what to say. His heart was starting to pound in his chest and he was certain that Johnny could feel it too.

"So, do you like anybody here?" Johnny had a fresh joint in his fingers. Rick could smell the slightly sweet, pungent aroma. He'd probably been breathing it in for hours.

"Yeah. Yes, I do, actually." Rick decided he could give as good as he got.

"Guy or girl?" Johnny smirked, and took a puff.

"Guy." To hell with it. He might as well know.

"I knew it. What does he look like?"

Rick looked directly into Johnny's eyes. "Beautiful." He's got to know now, he thought. I couldn't put it any more plainly.

Johnny smiled. "You're pretty damn cute yourself, Rick." Johnny waved the joint in front of Rick's face. "You've never smoked up before, have you?"

"No."

"Here. Now, when I breathe out, you breathe in, okay? Close your eyes and let me give you the smoke." Johnny took a deep drag of the joint, but did not inhale.

Rick closed his eyes and parted his lips slightly. He felt Johnny's mouth hover over his and he instinctively reached up to meet him. Very gently, Johnny breathed out the smoke into Rick's mouth. Rick breathed it in, and it hit the back of his throat with a sweet burn. He wasn't sure if he'd inhaled, mainly because Johnny's lips were so close to his own he could hardly think. Johnny gave him another hit in the same way, their lips brushed together, and this time Rick inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs. It was only then that he realized: this was it. This was the code.

Rick opened his eyes and looked straight into Johnny's. What he saw there shattered all his doubts to pieces. Johnny balanced the joint on the edge of a nearby ashtray and ran his hand through Rick's short hair. "You should grow your hair, man. It'll suit you longer." And then, Johnny kissed him.

Rick couldn't help it. He let out an involuntary moan and wrapped his arms around Johnny's waist, holding Johnny tightly. Johnny's lips were soft and insistent, but Rick didn't need any persuasion. They kissed, slow and deep, exploring each other's mouths, stroking their tongues together, breaking down what remained of the barriers between them. Rick ran his hands through Johnny's long hair and breathed in his scent as they broke their kiss. "Johnny—God..." Rick gasped.

"I want you, man. God, Rick—I want you so bad I can hardly see straight," Johnny murmured, stroking his palm over Rick's chest. Rick was aware of being watched.

"I want you, too. But not here. I can't do this here—not with all these people around." Rick looked into Johnny's espresso-dark eyes.

"Follow me." Johnny rolled off Rick and offered a hand to pull him to his feet. Rick cast a quick glance behind him to Brandy and noticed that Liz had taken over where Johnny had left off. Brandy winked at Rick and waved him away. "It's cool," she mouthed. "Go."

The cool night air hit Rick's brain and he realized just how spacey the weed had made him feel. Once outside, Johnny took off at a run. "Catch me!" he hollered.

Rick caught up with Johnny, or maybe Johnny allowed himself to be caught, at the wildflower meadow beyond the paddock. Rick threw Johnny to the ground and pinned him down. "Gotcha. Now get out of that," Rick said, sternly.

Johnny squirmed, giggling, under him. "Don't want to," he laughed. Rick settled himself squarely on top of Johnny and gazed into his eyes. Johnny's laughter ceased and his eyes became dark and unfathomable. Rick leaned down and kissed him deeply.

"Oh Rick—Rick..." Johnny breathed, sliding hands up underneath his T-shirt and stroking his broad, muscular back. Rick started to undo Johnny's shirt buttons, and tracked kisses over his smooth, hairless chest, down his stomach to his navel, then down the line of dark hair that led to his belt buckle. Rick deftly undid the buckle, and the jeans buttons,

as Johnny made soft, breathy sounds and arched his back. Rick stroked his palm over the bulge in Johnny's boxers as he covered Johnny's mouth with his own. Johnny moaned into his mouth and Rick breathed it in, just as he'd taken down the smoke. Johnny clutched at Rick's T-shirt. They shuffled off their clothes and soon both were naked in the long grass.

"God, Johnny, you're so beautiful," Rick murmured.

"So are you," Johnny breathed. The moon rose over the distant hills as they started to touch.

Stroking, touching, exploring, skin on velvet skin, deep searching kisses, bodies pressed together in the moonlight, soft moans, breathless gasps as they discovered each other; as their hands, lips, and tongues gave pleasure to each other's bodies. The universe itself spun above them, but they paid it no heed.

"Rick please ... oh Rick—Ricky..." Johnny panted, his cock hard against Rick's stomach. Rick looked down at him and growled.

"I want to see you ... I want to watch your face when I make you come..."

"Oh, Rick, yes..." Johnny gasped, stroking Rick's long, thick, hard cock. Rick let out a low moan and lifted Johnny's hips up until they rested along Rick's thighs. Rick gently slid his finger inside Johnny's waiting entrance, looking deep into those eyes as he did so.

"Baby, you're so amazing..." Rick slid a second finger inside, and Johnny arched against him.

"Rick, please—God, I want you in me, please..." Johnny panted, breathlessly. Rick slicked the head of his cock around

Johnny's entrance, then pushed carefully, slowly inside. Johnny closed his eyes and cried out as Rick filled him, then withdrew again, then plunged back inside, deeper this time, harder.

Johnny panted under Rick, holding onto his broad shoulders, looking up at him, eyes dark, lips parted, wanting more even as Rick filled him.

Rick groaned out loud at the delicious feeling of Johnny tight around his cock, the heat, the deep push inside, the exquisite sensation as he drove into Johnny, deeper and harder, faster and more urgent as his body craved the feeling, more and harder, more, more...

"Look at me, look in my eyes baby ... oh God ... oh I can't—I'm gonna..." Rick stroked Johnny's cock as orgasm overwhelmed him and he came hard deep inside Johnny, trembling with the power of it as he looked into his lover's face. Johnny moaned and clutched at Rick as his pleas for more and harder became desperate moans of pleasure.

"Rick Rick please ... oh God, Ricky, oh God ... oh I'm—oh, Rick I'm coming oh, Rickyyyyyy..." Johnny searched Rick's face, his eyes dark and pleading as the pleasure overtook him and he cried out, filling Rick's hand with hot cream.

They clung to each other, their hearts pounding wildly; two souls collided, two hearts now merged as one.

Chapter Eight: Field of Dreams

Rick lay in the long grass, with Johnny in his arms. He stroked Johnny's hair, gently, mindful of the bruises that Johnny had suffered from his encounter with the dirty side of the SFPD. Johnny looked up at him and smiled. "So, have I earned the right, do you think?" Rick said.

"Hmmmm?" Johnny murmured, sleepily.

"To call you Johnny."

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so," Johnny grinned.

"Good." Rick kissed him, but pulled away when he realized he was tasting fresh blood.

"I'm sorry, baby, I'm so sorry," Rick said, looking with concern at Johnny's busted lip, which had started bleeding again.

"It's cool, don't worry," Johnny said, swiping at it with the edge of his shirt. "Ricky?" He spoke softly, stroking the side of Rick's face with his fingers.

"Yeah?" Rick frowned.

"I don't ever want you to say sorry to me again. What those assholes did, it wasn't your fault. Forget about them. I want you to be happy, okay?"

"Okay," Rick nodded. "But no one's ever going to hurt you again, baby," he said, firmly. "If they want to try, they're going to have to come through me."

"Rick," Johnny breathed, stroking Rick's hair. "I want to give you everything, everything—I want to show you how life could be..."

"Show me," Rick growled. He was already hard again.

Johnny climbed on top of Rick and kissed him deeply. Johnny tasted warm and delicious, and Rick moaned into his mouth. Rick closed his eyes, and the next thing he felt was Johnny's long, clever fingers brushing over his nipples. Then Johnny's tongue, flicking his nipples until they stood erect. Those soft lips tracked kisses down Rick's stomach, over his toned abs to his navel and then down, to the hard evidence of Rick's readiness. Johnny looked up coyly at Rick, and fluttered his fingers over the skin of Rick's erection. Rick answered his look with a groan. Johnny smirked, and flicked out his tongue, taking a pearl of moisture from the head of Rick's cock. Rick rubbed Johnny's face with one hand and arched his back, pushing his hips forward, reaching for Johnny's mouth. He didn't have to wait too long.

Johnny took Rick's head into his mouth and lapped at it with his tongue. Rick gave a low growl, which Rick hoped would tell Johnny all he needed to know. He took Rick's cock down further, sliding his tongue across the hard ridge, breathing in Rick's scent and swallowing the flavor. Rick clutched at the grass and began to moan as Johnny sucked hard on his cock and fluttered soft fingers over his balls. Johnny closed his eyes and took Rick in as far as he could, sucking and swallowing, sucking and swallowing, with one hand firmly gripped around the base of Rick's shaft and the other caressing his balls.

As Rick's moans grew longer and more urgent, Johnny stepped up the rhythm, and as Rick's balls rose up close to his body and hardened, Johnny sucked harder, deeper, taking his hand away from Rick's balls and grasping his own cock,

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stroking up and over the head, stroking hard to catch up to Rick, making soft humming sounds against the head of Rick's cock as he sucked and sucked, stroked and stroked. Rick moaned like a wild animal, then began to pant and gasp, until a primal cry tore from Rick's throat as he pushed his cock deep into Johnny's mouth and the feeling took him over, he began to pulse and come, his shouts filling the night air as he shot into Johnny's mouth. Johnny swallowed greedily and knelt up, stroking his own cock hard and fast, crying out loud as he shot hot come all over Rick's belly.

They fell together, panting and gasping, hearts pounding, white-hot sparks dancing behind their eyes, delicious ecstasy tingling through every nerve. They clung to each other, bliss shared; love made.

Not a word was spoken for a long time. They held each other tight, as though they had just discovered what it meant to be alive.

* * * *

Rick woke up to find Johnny propped up on one elbow, gazing at him with a wistful half-smile. The moon had vanished and a million stars were twinkling overhead like shards of distant ice. It was cold.

"Hey, Ricky."

"Hey, baby."

"We're gonna freeze to death if we stay here much longer, dude. Better get back inside."

Dressing quickly, they ran back to the house. San Francisco in April is not the place to sleep naked in a field.

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* * * *

The farmhouse was warm and quiet as they snuck up the stairs. Rick headed toward the room where he'd left his stuff, but Johnny took his hand. "Stay with me, Rick. Sleep in my bed. I want to wake up with you."

Brown eyes, so beautiful, so in control, in charge, and yet, something hidden behind the beauty: a sadness. Rick felt it deep in his soul, as though—as though it had always been there. "I want to wake up with you too," Rick said. What he really meant by that, he couldn't say. The feeling swirling in his gut, in his heart, was beyond words.

Johnny's bed was warm and soft, and as they laid their heads on the pillow and snuggled into each other's arms, Rick felt a peace settle over his mind like a blanket. He stroked Johnny's hair, and felt Johnny murmur softly against him. Johnny's warm body, his soft hair, his scent, his heartbeat, his quiet breathing—all felt like home to Rick.

Rick slept, and dreamed, and in his dream he was with Johnny, every day, and sleeping in Johnny's bed every night, waking up to Johnny's smile, every morning, forever—and he was happy.

Chapter Nine: A Groovy Kind of Love

Rick woke up to sunlight filtering through rattan blinds, and Johnny, a sleepy smile on his face, and the first cigarette of the day in his fingers.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself," Rick smiled. The bed was warm and so were Johnny's lips as he greeted Rick with a lazy kiss. Rick stretched and yawned. He felt amazing.

Johnny gazed at Rick with a faraway look in his eyes. Then he reached up around his neck and unfastened a silver chain, upon which hung a silver, Japanese kanji character. He leaned over and placed it around Rick's neck. Rick looked at him with surprise. "This is my heart, Rick. And now, it's yours."

Rick swallowed hard, and looked up into Johnny's deep, brown eyes. "I can't take this, Johnny."

"It's mine to give, Rick." Johnny smiled, enigmatic as always.

"Thank you." Rick turned the silver charm over in his fingers. "What does it mean?"

"It's Japanese. It means happiness."

Rick searched Johnny's eyes, but they were inscrutable, unknowable. A kiss silenced all Rick's unasked questions, and by the time they had finished making love, Rick had forgotten what he had wanted to ask.

* * * *

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April turned to May, and the farm was suddenly covered in blossoms. The fields were filled with the sound of children's laughter, and the sun warmed the meadow. The ponies in the paddock were fast friends with Rick now, and he rode practically every day. He had called the station and told them he was taking a leave of absence, then called his father and asked him to smooth things over with the captain. Hopefully, when he got back, he'd still have a job.

When he got back. Rick couldn't imagine such a thing. His hair was growing longer each day and he was becoming accustomed to the *laissez-faire* way of life at the farm. There were parties every night, farm work to do during the day, and the rest of the time was spent eating, smoking, sleeping, and making love.

Some days he would go to sleep in Johnny's bed and wake up in his own.

It seemed to him that the only person who would be capable of lifting his dead weight was Stax, and so he asked him, point-blank. The tall Scandinavian scratched at his beard.

"Yeah. Figured you might get around to askin'. Sometimes Johnny and Brandy, they need some alone time, you dig? So I just haul you outta there and drop you back in your own bed." Stax shrugged, like it was no big deal. To him, it wasn't.

Rick nodded, and took the joint that Stax offered him. There was a strange, stinging sensation in his gut. He wasn't jealous. He had no right to be; he knew the score. But his gut still burned.

* * * *

One morning about a week later, he woke up in Johnny's bed—alone. Rick pulled on his jeans and wandered barefoot down the stairs. It was very early and the big, rambling house was quiet and still. Birds chirped outside the tall windows of the garden room; but Rick could hear something else. He followed the sound, down another flight of stairs, through a door, and into a part of the house he didn't even know existed.

The heavy, wooden door to the inner room was open a crack, and Rick peeked in. Shafts of morning sunlight danced through French doors, which led out to the lowest level of the terraced garden. In the far corner stood an old upright piano. The delicate notes that had reached Rick's ears came from Johnny's fingers on the ivory keys, along with Johnny's soft voice as he sang to himself. Rick listened intently as Johnny sang the first verse of 'A Groovy Kind of Love'. Johnny's husky vocals infused the Mindbenders' lyrics with a sensuality that Rick felt right down to his toes.

The old door creaked and swung open of its own accord and Rick cursed to himself. Johnny turned around and grinned. "You found me."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to intrude..."

"It's cool. Come in."

Rick stepped gingerly over to the piano. "I didn't know you played," he said, mentally kicking himself: just how lame are you going to get, for Pete's sake?

"An hour a day since I was seven, locked in my room, courtesy of my mom," Johnny grimaced. "Practiced until my

fingers fell off. Schubert, Bach, fucking Mozart. Now I play what I like." He grinned at Rick.

"You have a nice voice." Rick mumbled. "Carry on, I like this song."

"I can't sing in front of people," Johnny protested.

"I'm not people, am I?"

Johnny chuckled and shrugged. Rick sat down next to Johnny on the piano bench. His stomach was turning cartwheels and he had no idea why. Johnny closed his eyes, put his fingers on the keys and began to sing softly.

Halfway through the next chorus Johnny stopped abruptly, and turned to Rick. The kiss that followed said more than any words could ever say. When they opened their eyes, the French doors were flung open and a hoard of giggling children dashed through the room and up the stairs. Rick cast a glance at Johnny.

"It's cool, man. They understand that guys can kiss and care about each other. It's no big deal."

"What about him?" Rick gestured outside to the garden, where Brodie was throwing a baseball against a wall and glaring in their direction.

Johnny made a face. "Oh, Brodie's okay. Don't let him harsh your buzz."

"And he served, too, right? I've seen his special forces tattoo." Something nagged at the back of Rick's mind, but he couldn't figure out what it was. Then it hit him. "Speaking of which, where's yours?"

Johnny dragged on his cigarette and looked Rick square in the eyes. "I don't have one."

Rick wasn't quite sure what to say. "But, you said..." he mumbled.

"You really think that people who are actually *in* ops, want to advertise it with a tattoo? You might as well paint a bullseye on your forehead with a logo that says 'shoot me here'."

Rick felt like a complete idiot. Of course, he knew that Johnny was right.

"Brodie is a wannabe. He served, of course. But now he wants everyone to think he's some kind of war hero." Johnny blew smoke out in circles, which floated away on the morning air.

"So how do I know you were in ops?" Rick teased, as he ran his finger along Johnny's jaw.

"You don't. That's the whole point," Johnny said, simply. "Except, that I could flip you on your ass and you wouldn't even see it coming." Johnny smirked and stubbed out his cigarette. "Come on, I'm starving. Let's go see what Jackie's got cooking."

Rick followed obediently, his hand in Johnny's, to the kitchen where delicious aromas of fresh bacon, farm eggs, and grilled, homegrown tomatoes swirled in the air. Dakota squealed when she saw them and leaped into her daddy's arms.

"Daddy daddy, breakfast!" she yelled.

* * * *

Another day on the farm blended into the next. Rick's hair grew almost to his collar. He learned how to milk a cow. Then suddenly one day, Johnny disappeared.

Three days and three nights passed without a sign, and nobody seemed the slightest bit worried. Brandy simply shrugged. "He does this all the time. Just vanishes for days at a time."

"Don't you wonder where he goes? Don't you worry about him?" Rick was baffled by everyone's lack of concern.

"No," Brandy said. "He always comes back."

"I know where Daddy is," Dakota piped up, her blonde curls wafting in the breeze.

"Where? Where is he?" said Rick, gently.

"In fairyland. He told me," Dakota announced with finality.

* * * *

The first Rick knew of Johnny's return was when he rounded a corner to find Johnny locked in a deep, passionate kiss with Brandy. Dakota was hanging onto his leg for dear life. "I'll see you later, babe." Johnny ran a hand through Brandy's long, auburn hair, and she smiled dreamily at him with those strange, faraway, green eyes.

He smiled after her as she walked away, Dakota scampering around her skirts.

"Hey." Johnny smiled at Rick. He looked tired, very tired, and thin, like he hadn't eaten or slept in days.

"Hey." Rick tried to keep his voice normal, but it came out strained.

"What?"

"Nothing." There was a sick feeling where Rick's stomach used to be.

"You're jealous."

"No. No, I'm not."

"You are. I can see it in your face."

"Well, alright. Yes, I am." Rick wanted to throw up, but nothing was left of his insides.

"She's my wife, Rick, and I love her. You can learn to dig it, or you can leave." Johnny sighed wearily, turned on his heel, and walked away.

* * * *

The threat of tears prickled behind Rick's eyes as he threw his gear into his backpack. How could I have been so stupid, so naive? He tore the silver necklace from his neck and threw it on the bed. Then he took the stairs, two at a time, stormed past an astonished Stax and Mike, practically pushed Brodie into the door, and started walking down the driveway.

Once onto the dirt road, he just kept walking. He had no idea where he was going, or how he was going to get there. Get to the highway, bum a ride from a trucker, maybe head north to Canada. He couldn't go back. He couldn't do anything. Maybe he'd just jump off a bridge. Maybe—then he remembered he still had his service revolver in his pack—it wasn't loaded, but he kept spare ammo for emergencies. Rick swiped at the insistent burn at the edge of his eyelids, and kept on walking.

Chapter Ten: For You

Rick wandered in a daze, not knowing where he was going, or even why. Occasionally he had the uneasy feeling that he was being watched, but he couldn't see anyone, and chalked it up to ordinary paranoia. After a few minutes of walking aimlessly, Rick heard the unmistakable throaty roar of the old, green pickup approaching behind him, doing about ninety by the sound of it. He dropped his backpack on the dusty road and turned around.

"Rick, what the fuck, man?" Johnny screeched to a halt and leaped out of the cab. "What the hell are you doing?" He was out of breath and he was clutching something in his hand.

Rick looked down at his feet. "I'm leaving. Like you told me to," he said, dully.

"Like I—what? I never told you to leave, Rick!" Johnny looked genuinely shocked. Rick noticed that his clenched hand was trembling.

"You said. You said—learn to dig it, or leave." Rick stabbed at the dirt with his foot.

"I—I didn't mean..." Johnny's bottom lip began to tremble.

"I don't know how to dig it, Johnny, so I'm leaving." Rick frowned and stared down the road. His gut was churning over and over like a rollercoaster, and his eyes were smarting.

"Rick—why did you leave this behind?" Johnny opened his hand, and there was the silver necklace he had given to Rick.

"Why did you give it to me?" Rick muttered hoarsely. He couldn't look at Johnny.

"Because." Tears started to pour down Johnny's cheeks, but he didn't bother to wipe them away. "Because I love you."

Rick blinked and let the tears come. There was no point trying to hide it anymore. A sob tore up from his throat.

"Why are you crying, Rick?" Johnny asked.

"Because." Rick finally looked at Johnny. "Because I love you."

"Please Rick," Johnny whispered. "Please don't leave me."

Rick looked up at the blue sky above his head, as if searching for an answer. None came. But he already knew what he had to do—there was simply no choice. "I can't, Johnny. I tried, but I can't leave you."

Rick opened his arms. They clung to each other, as though each would die if he let the other go.

"I'm sorry, Rick, I'm so sorry, I never meant to hurt you. I was tired, and snappy, and I know that's no excuse. When Stax told me you'd gone, I nearly lost my mind," Johnny mumbled into Rick's shoulder.

"It's alright, kiddo. It'll be alright, we'll figure it out. I just have to get my head around it, is all." Rick wasn't sure who he was trying to convince, but he knew one thing: he could never leave Johnny.

"I can't leave her, Rick. She's the mother of my baby girl. I can't just abandon her like that, can you understand? Can you try?" Johnny looked up at Rick, his brown eyes shadowed and weary.

"Yes, I can try. For you, I can do anything," Rick replied.

"Where were you going to go?" Johnny asked, his voice still trembling a little.

"Nowhere. I was going to eat a bullet," Rick said, matter-of-factly.

"God, Rick, no! I'm not worth that!" Johnny looked up at Rick.

"Yes, Johnny. Yes, you are." Rick smiled, and wiped away the tears from Johnny's face.

"Can I give this back to you? Will you wear it?" Johnny stared at the silver necklace crumpled in his hand.

"Yeah," Rick said, simply.

Johnny reached around Rick's neck and fastened the necklace. "Love you," he whispered.

"Love you too," Rick said, smiling.

They stood on the road, just holding each other for a long time. Then Rick broke the silence.

"Baby?"

"Mmmm?"

"Where did you go?"

"What? When?" Johnny looked up at Rick, confused.

"These last few days. Where did you go? You look awful."

"Gee, thanks!" Johnny laughed, but there was a weariness to the laughter.

"Nobody seemed to know, or even care. So I wondered..."

"You cared."

"Yeah, I cared." Rick smiled.

"Rick—I'm assuming you know the meaning of the word '*classified*.'?" Johnny looked at Rick, and this time his face was serious.

"Well yes, of course, but..." Rick frowned.

"Come on, get in the truck. I'll show you."

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Johnny made a hairpin turn, throwing up clouds of dust as they headed back toward the farm, but instead of turning into the farm driveway, Johnny kept going. They carried on down the dirt road, coming in at the back of the property. Johnny pulled up in front of an old, derelict barn. "I hope you don't mind, Rick, but I pulled your file." Johnny said as they jumped out of the truck.

"My file?" Rick asked with a frown.

"Your service record. I had to be sure you had clearance. I had to be sure I could trust you."

"But how could you do that? Only service personnel have access, and only at the highest..." Rick stopped dead. A light bulb switched on in his brain and he stared at Johnny. "You're still in."

Johnny looked at Rick with a half-grin. "Yes, I'm still in. I told you before; don't let the long hair fool you."

The interior of the barn was dark and cool in contrast to the warm, sunny morning they had just left. When Rick's eyes had adjusted, he couldn't see anything special about the barn. It was just a barn—until Johnny pushed aside a pile of hay bales and revealed a trap door in the floor. "You must never tell anyone about this, Rick. It's classified, level three. I know you understand what that means."

Rick swallowed hard, and nodded. "Yes. I understand."

Johnny undid the padlock with a key hidden amongst the array of hippy jewelry around his neck, and pulled open the trap door. A set of stairs led down underneath the barn, and Rick followed, being careful not to trip and fall. It was like going down into a foxhole. The basement smelled musty, but

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there was an acrid smell as well, like chemicals. Johnny flicked on the light, and Rick took a step backward.

"Christ, Johnny! What is this?" Rick looked around at the rows of benches cluttered with glass beakers and racks of test tubes, vials of strange-colored liquids, and a very expensive looking, state-of-the-art microscope and centrifuge.

"This, Rick," said Johnny, with a look of pride on his face, "This is my lab."

Chapter Eleven: Of Hurt and Comfort

Rick looked around in awe at the spotlessly clean lab. He noticed a coffee percolator in one corner, and a cupboard with tin mugs, brown sugar, and packages of Sumatran coffee. "You don't eat when you come to work here, do you?" Rick said.

"Don't sleep either. The caffeine keeps me going." Johnny shrugged and started to adjust some of the equipment. The look of pride had vanished from his face and all that remained was exhaustion, and behind his dark eyes, the pain that Rick had wondered about.

Rick walked over and stood next to him. "Why, Johnny? What are they making you do?" Rick's cop-senses were prickling and he wanted to get to the bottom of this. He didn't like the idea of Johnny being used for some half-assed government project.

"Nobody's making me do anything, Rick." Johnny sighed—a deep, weary sigh, as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. "This is something that I have to do." He looked up at Rick, and the pain in his eyes was so palpable, the sight of it made Rick's heart ache. "Rick, have you ever been responsible for something so terrible, so dreadful, that you wish you'd never been born? And you'd do anything, pay any price, to have it undone?" Johnny looked away abruptly and continued, his voice trembling with unshed tears. "Every day it haunts me, and every night I lie awake, thinking of how I can make it right."

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Rick put his hand on Johnny's shoulder and felt it shake a little. "Johnny—whatever it is, it wasn't your fault..."

Johnny pulled away from Rick's touch and carried on talking rapidly. "They pulled me out of Berkeley, sent me to Cambridge to study with their think-tank: special projects, they said. They said it would help our troops. They needed my expertise in chemistry. I didn't think, Rick. I just didn't think to question them—our own government, didn't they want the war over as quickly as anyone? But it was all a lie."

Rick was silent. He watched Johnny blink back the tears, biting his lip to stop them from falling as he talked. And Rick listened.

"This stuff—the NATO code was BeeZee—the chemical name is quinuclidinyl benzilate, it's an anticholinergic compound, derived from psychedelics. It was supposed to incapacitate the insurgents and give our troops some breathing room. It was nonlethal, it would confuse the enemy for about half an hour, no side-effects. They were supposed to have an antidote made, and I was working on it, but then they pulled me off that and into other research. The antidote was never developed."

"But you said it was nonlethal, right?" Rick spoke gently, but his mind was racing.

"Yes, and it is. But they altered my formula. They blended it with LSD, and then..." Johnny broke off, and squeezed his eyes shut. "Then—they fed it to our own troops."

Rick stared. "Our own ... but why?"

"To increase their fighting power and improve their performance. It was supposed to produce a "super-soldier":

increased aggression, never got tired, incredible stamina ... What it actually did, of course, was something else entirely." Johnny sat down heavily on a stool. "The soldiers that are coming home—the official word is that they're suffering from something like shellshock. But it's more than that. It's systemic hallucinogenic poisoning. They're going slowly insane. A lot of them are killing themselves. But that's not the worst of it. Some of them went nuts over there and just flipped—wiped out whole villages, Rick ... pregnant women, little kids—for no reason at all."

Rick nodded slowly. He'd seen it. It was one of the reasons he'd been grateful to be sent home.

"Innocent people, nothing to do with the gooks—mothers, fathers, oh, Rick, little children, babies. They massacred women and children, because they were high. And it's all because of me." Johnny gave up fighting his emotions. He put his head in his hands and his shoulders shook as he sobbed.

"And what are you doing now? Here, in this lab?" Rick said, quietly.

"I'm trying to find the antidote," Johnny said, dully. "I'll find it if it kills me. They don't know, of course—they set me to work on another assignment, so I'm really doing two projects at once."

"Which is why you're so exhausted." Rick walked over to where Johnny sat and drew the man into his arms. Johnny clung to him, as though he was a lifeline.

"It's not your fault, Johnny," Rick said, stroking Johnny's hair. "This war—I mean, I like to think of myself as a patriot, and an American, but—there's something about this war

that's just plain wrong. And you and I, we got caught up in it—but we don't have to play their sick games. We have free will, and minds of our own. You'll find the antidote, make our boys better, and then you'll be the war hero." Johnny looked up at Rick. "At least to me," Rick added, softly.

Johnny buried his face against Rick's shoulder, and Rick let him. They stayed like that for a long time, until Rick was certain that Johnny was asleep. Rick gently moved him off the stool and onto the floor, where they laid down and slept.

* * * *

When Rick woke up, it was the middle of the night. The barn was pitch dark; the generator that worked the lights had long since powered down. Johnny was warm in Rick's arms. Rick felt for his face, and stroked the soft, dark hair away from his cheek. He had three days' growth of stubble. Rick ran the backs of his fingers over Johnny's lips and chin.

"I love you so much," Rick whispered. He bent down and kissed Johnny's sleeping lips, as gently as he could. He didn't want to wake him. But desire got the better of Rick and he kissed Johnny again, deeper this time, and was rewarded with a soft moan into his mouth, and Johnny's hands slipping underneath his T-shirt, caressing his skin, pulling at his belt-buckle, need overtaking reason as they clutched at each other's clothes, undoing buttons, zippers, hands feeling inside boxers and stroking the warm, hardening rods they found there.

They lay together, on their sides, pressing against one another, one hand grasped firmly around the other's cock.

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Rick breathed in the scent of Johnny's mouth, the soft huff of Johnny's breath, warm against his lips, tantalizingly close in the darkness. He could feel the steady pounding of Johnny's heart, getting faster as their lips hovered close, barely touching. Johnny's lashes fluttered against Rick's cheek, and their mouths met in the pitch black. They started to kiss, and stroke.

There was no need to speak: they both instinctively knew what they wanted—what they needed. They kissed long and deep, slow and open-mouthed, enjoying the taste of the other, the warm masculine scent, as they stroked each other, pushing their hips together, synchronizing their rhythm. Their hearts pounded together, the beat getting gradually faster, and breathed into each other's mouths, their breath becoming panting, and then gasping as they got closer...

Warm hands on hot, hard cocks, tongues in mouths, kissing and kissing, stroking and stroking, longer, harder, deeper, moaning low into each other's mouths as the feeling swirled and grew, kissing and kissing, gasping into each other's mouths stroking stroking kissing gasping kissing stroking pulsing surging pulsing coming kissing coming coming kissing coming coming coming...

Coming while your tongue is in someone else's mouth as they're coming is the sweetest, most intimate experience in the world.

And as Rick clung to Johnny in the aftermath, in the breathless heat of Johnny's arms, he knew: they would never be apart. Nothing else mattered—not Brandy, not Dakota, not the farm, not the war, not the government. All that mattered

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was that he loved this man who was laying in his arms, and that this man loved him back.

"I love you, Rick," Johnny murmured, as if in confirmation of Rick's thoughts.

Chapter Twelve: Truth or Dare

Dawn broke cold and clear, casting a thin line of light through the trap door and across the floor where Rick and Johnny lay wrapped in each other's arms. Johnny woke with a start. "Wake up, baby," Johnny whispered, stroking Rick's hair back from his face. "We have to get back before someone misses the truck."

Rick got to his feet, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Where do you normally hide it?" he asked.

"I don't. I normally walk here." Johnny helped Rick climb out of the cellar and locked everything up behind them. They jumped into the truck and headed back down the dirt road to the main entrance to the farm. The birds were in full chorus as Johnny cut the engine and coasted silently up to the front of the garage.

"Well, if it isn't the newlyweds, back from honeymoon." Brodie peeled himself off the hitching post he was leaning against and flicked his cigarette ash in Rick's direction.

"Cut it out, Brodie," Johnny said, with an edge to his voice.

"How's it going, pig?" Brodie sneered at Rick. "Enjoying being the latest in a long line of boy toys for our fearless leader?"

"Yes, thank you," retorted Rick, past caring what anyone thought, least of all a mean-spirited, bitter man like Mike Brodie.

"I suppose he told you he loves you," Brodie continued. Rick could feel Johnny tense at his side. "It's all very well, as long as it's on his terms. Just don't make the same mistake I

did." Brodie spat at the ground. When he looked back up, it was a stare of cold hatred—and it was directed at Johnny.

"Come on, Rick. You don't need to listen to this." Johnny took Rick's arm and hustled him through the door. Rick looked back to see Brodie throw down his cigarette and walk away.

* * * *

Once inside the farmhouse, Rick pulled his arm away from Johnny's grip. "What don't I need to listen to?" Rick whispered, mindful of the fact that the rest of the household was fast asleep. They climbed the stairs to Johnny's bedroom and quietly opened the door. Brandy was dead to the world, curled up in the middle of the bed. Johnny put his finger to his lips, gently gathered Brandy up in his arms, and carried her into the next room. When he came back, Rick was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring vacantly at the Jimi Hendrix poster on the far wall. "I gave up everything for you, Johnny," Rick said, his voice sounding flat in his ears. "My career, my life. I walked away from it all—just to be with you. Please don't tell me it's all been for nothing. Please tell me the truth."

Johnny sighed. "I couldn't lie to you, Rick, even if I tried. I used to be a player. I was young, and reckless. I got Brandy pregnant, and her parents went nuts. I had to marry her, otherwise they would have thrown her onto the street with nothing. But I did love her. I do, still, love her. Do you believe that, at least?"

Rick nodded. "Yes. I've seen it in your eyes when you look at her," he said, dully. Rick closed his eyes and took a breath. "And what about Brodie?"

"We met in Nam," Johnny said, quietly. "He was just a grunt. I kind of took him under my wing. And then, well ... things just kind of happened." Johnny sat down heavily on the floor, and crossed his legs.

"Do you love him?" Rick muttered.

"I did. I did love him, Rick. But he changed. He was jealous of everyone—I couldn't look at someone without him flying into a rage. Then he became cruel. He killed any love I once had for him." Johnny put his head in his hands.

"Did he hurt you?" Rick asked. There was a strange pain where his heart used to be.

Johnny laughed bitterly. "Not likely. He knew I could kick his ass blindfold."

"What happened?" Rick's throat was dry.

Johnny rubbed his face distractedly, and continued. "His unit turned rogue, ambushed an entire village. Raped the women, murdered the children—then burned it to the ground. Brodie was the instigator—and I was the one who ordered the court martial."

"Dishonorable discharge?"

"Yeah. Could have been worse—I managed to get the sentence commuted. But he's never forgiven me for turning him in."

"You did the right thing." Rick finally turned to look at Johnny. "Wait a second—*you* got the sentence commuted?"

"Yes."

"But the only rank that has that authority is..." Rick stared. Johnny smirked.

"Quite."

"You're..."

"Yes."

Rick was stunned. But nothing ought to surprise him anymore, when it came to Johnny.

"Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"There's still one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Why is he here? I mean ... why do you let him stay here?"

Johnny ran his hands through his hair. "Because I'm the reason he is the way he is, Rick."

Rick stared. "That stuff—the BZ."

"Yeah. Brodie was one of the first human guinea pigs."

"And now...?"

"Now, he's my test subject for the antidote. And of course, once again, he doesn't know it."

"Man. That's harsh." Rick shook his head.

"Tell me about it." Johnny gave an ironic laugh.

"Johnny?" Rick said, quietly.

"Yeah, man?"

"Do you love me?" Rick studied his hands.

Johnny shuffled over and sat in front of Rick. He took Rick's hands in his own and looked up into Rick's eyes. "Yes, I love you. I love you more than my own life, Rick. I'd die for you."

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"Love me forever." It was not a request. Rick's dark eyes searched Johnny's.

"I'll love you forever, Rick." The look in Johnny's eyes confirmed the truth of it.

"Promise me."

"I promise." The pact was sealed as their lips met.

Chapter Thirteen: Let It Be

The days stretched into weeks, and summer flourished under the California sun. Every weekend they all piled into the old bus and headed into the city for concerts, sit-ins, love-ins, be-ins, and countless other radical gatherings. They heard Timothy Leary and Neal Cassady and listened to the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin.

Rick understood it all on an intellectual level, even on an emotional level—but he didn't see how the hippy ideal could work in practice. Human beings were too capricious. You couldn't overturn corporations, even governments, with notions of utopia and free love. Society simply didn't function that way. But Johnny was determined to right as many wrongs as possible, and Rick didn't have the heart to burst his bubble.

Neither could he tread on Johnny's toes with respect to Brandy. Rick accepted the fact that Johnny loved her—and Johnny had made it clear that she wasn't a threat.

"I don't love her any more than you, baby," Johnny had said. "Nobody's first, or second, just—different."

But still, Rick was curious. He wondered if Brandy was curious about him, too. He had started to entertain strange thoughts—especially after a few rounds of Stax's homegrown weed. Then, on Midsummer night, Brad, Stax, and Liz announced that they were having a special party.

"Jimmy brought back 'shrooms from Canada—they're the best," Liz said excitedly. Rick raised his eyebrows.

"Shrooms?"

"Yeah, man. It's a real groovy trip—not like acid. That shit can freak you out, man. Had a cousin, thought he could fly, took a dive right off the Golden Gate Bridge. Sad. Wouldn't have done that if he'd a been doin' 'shrooms or weed." Liz nodded, as if agreeing with herself.

"Well ... I guess, if it's all natural..." Rick said, not entirely convinced.

"Yeah, man. I can dig that. Not like all those government chemicals, man. Fuck you right up. Mother Nature, man. Dig it."

* * * *

That night, Brad came back from town with his latest acquisition: The Beatles' much-anticipated new album, 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'. Everyone was freaked out about it, especially the track 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds', which was a thinly-veiled reference to an acid trip. The lights were dimmed, candles lit, and psychedelic music filled the vaulted party room. Stax put on a fresh batch of homegrown, and Liz passed around the 'shrooms.

"Smells like mushroom soup," said Rick, sniffing the mixture cautiously.

"That's because it is, silly," said Liz. "Go on, try it. Set your soul free."

Rick wasn't entirely sure whether he wanted to set his soul free, but he didn't want to look like a wuss in front of everyone—so he took a sip. To his amazement, it was delicious. The bowl was passed around in the usual manner,

with everyone sharing, which was the commune way of life in all things. Rick's head started to buzz almost immediately. He lit a cigarette and lay down.

The strange music from the new album washed over Rick, and it was almost as though he could touch the music. He could even taste it. 'Strawberry fields forever', sang Paul McCartney, and Rick could smell the strawberries vividly. The candlelight cast flickering shadows and shapes throughout the darkened room, and it was warm. Warm and safe, like he could do anything, want anything, and there would be no consequences.

"Baby," The voice at Rick's ear was husky and he knew the tone of it so well. "Are you diggin' it?" Johnny's earth-brown eyes smiled into Rick's.

"Yeah," Rick grinned. Johnny ran a hand through Rick's hair. The sensation was incredible, like every nerve in Rick's body was super-alive. He felt himself getting hard.

"Do you want me?" Johnny asked, his eyes sparkling. It was a rhetorical question.

"God, yes," Rick sighed. Then he saw Brandy, lying on her stomach, looking at him. As soon as he caught her eye, she looked away.

"Johnny," Rick said. His brain seemed to have lost the ability to censor what came out of his mouth. "Does Brandy ... does she want to join us?"

"Well well, tricky Rick!" Johnny smirked. "I'm sure she won't say no. Is it okay with you?"

"Yeah. I want her to see us. Watch us." Rick was so hard at this thought, he could have drilled a hole in the floor.

"Dude. As long as you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Then maybe you can watch us, too." Johnny's eyes were dark, and the growing bulge in his jeans wasn't lost on Rick.

"Yeah. Groovy." Rick's whole body tingled with anticipation. Rick followed Johnny upstairs, as he beckoned to Brandy and she followed, her eyes wide.

* * * *

The pulsing music radiated up to the bedroom, and Johnny lit incense sticks and a couple of candles. Brandy sat cross-legged in the corner, smoking a joint with a serenely blissed-out expression. She looked for all the world as though she did this all the time.

"Baby," Johnny laid down on the bed and pulled Rick down onto him. "God, Rick. I want you so bad."

Rick felt momentarily awkward, but it was a fleeting sensation. As soon as his lips met Johnny's, he knew just how right this was. How can you share a lover with another, when you never see them together? How can you understand the way that they love each other, if you never watch them making love?

Johnny moaned into Rick's mouth, and instinct took over.

They kissed and kissed, trailing fingertips over clothing, undoing buttons, revealing flesh. Rick stroked a palm over Johnny's smooth, hairless chest, and Johnny groaned, pushing his hips up against Rick. Pinned down by Rick's weight, however, Johnny had nothing to do but lie back and take the pleasure that was given. Rick licked Johnny's nipples

until they peaked under his tongue, and his fingers walked their way southward, Rick's kisses following their path. He paused at Johnny's bellybutton and kissed all around it, teasing. He felt, rather than saw, Brandy moving closer. The strange mushroom soup had effectively removed any inhibitions Rick had left, and he was aware that Brandy had snuck close enough to the bed to be able to stroke Johnny's hair. Rick's eyes met hers just long enough to know that she was into it. There was no trace of jealousy on her face—in fact, her deep green eyes were darkly aroused and her lips were parted.

The strange mood in the room was heightened by the incense and the pot smoke wafting up from the party below. Someone had put on a Hendrix album and his electric guitar was practically singing by itself. Rick couldn't wait any longer: he tore open Johnny's jeans and took Johnny's rock hard, hot cock down into his mouth. He heard Johnny cry out and felt him arch. He knew from experience that in this situation, Johnny wouldn't last long. He sucked and sucked, focusing on nothing but the long, thick cock that filled his mouth. He grasped his own cock and stroked it, squeezing the head a little and holding it, to keep the feeling at bay. He wanted to wait. Johnny thrashed and moaned, urgently now, then suddenly cried out with an animal wail. Rick felt the throttle open and there was no stopping the hot come that surged into his mouth from Johnny's pulsing cock. He swallowed it down, but not before he took some of it to Johnny in an open-mouthed kiss.

"Taste yourself," Rick growled. It was not voluntary. Rick worked his tongue around Johnny's mouth, relishing Johnny's ragged, panting breaths and post-orgasm gasps. Then he went back to Johnny's cock and licked the rest of the come from the softening head.

"Taste him," Rick whispered to Brandy, and kissed her deeply. Rick was expecting resistance, but to his surprise, she opened her mouth and kissed him back, eagerly and hungrily, allowing him to explore her with his tongue and feed her the sweet, musky taste of Johnny. Rick could feel Johnny watching them both, but his inhibitions were non-existent. Rick slid his arm around Brandy's slender waist and pulled her close, kissing her deeply. His fingers became entangled in her long hair and before he knew it, they were on the floor. He had meant to fuck Johnny, but before he knew where he was, Rick heard Johnny murmuring in his ear.

"Fuck her, Rick. I want to watch. I love you Rick—I love you and I love her, and I want to watch you fuck her."

"Johnny...!"

The word tore up from Rick almost like a sob.

Rick and Johnny kissed open-mouthed and gasping as Rick's hard cock entered Brandy. She cried out with pleasure as he filled her, Johnny's mouth on his as he pushed deep inside her, and she arched her back against him, Johnny's tongue in his mouth as the feeling started to build and crest and surge through his body and he cried out into Johnny's mouth as he came hard deep inside Brandy, and she clung to his shoulders and trembled all over as she came against him, with Johnny murmuring into Rick's mouth, "Love you, baby,

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God love you so much, so much Rick, love you more, love you forever..."

Then Johnny bent over a gasping Brandy and whispered "Love you, angel, love you so much..." and kissed her, and wrapped his arms around her and Rick, and pulled them close to him, and they slid their arms around Johnny and each other, and all three of them floated into satisfied sleep.

Chapter Fourteen: Keep My Bed Warm

The strange, long, midsummer night wore on. The house was filled with weird, psychedelic music and the pungent aroma of various blends of weed. Everyone's libido seemed on overdrive and Rick was no exception—he slept for a little while, but then woke up, hard as ever. It took one look from Johnny and a whispered 'Please, Rick...' and the bed was set in motion once more. Rick swore that Johnny's cry could be heard in the next county. Then Johnny used his clever mouth on Brandy, bringing her to the brink and backing off, over and over, bringing her closer each time, until finally he let her come in wave after wave of screaming orgasms. Then, Johnny fucked Rick until he was trembling all over and whimpering his name.

Whatever naturally-occurring chemical that was in the 'shrooms seemed to prolong and intensify arousal. Rick had never come so hard and so many times in the space of a single night. When Johnny fucked him, his heart beat like a hammer, sparks flew behind his eyes, and the white-hot pounding rush of his orgasm was so intense he almost passed out. And when Rick fucked Johnny, Rick swore that he left his body completely and soared above the trees, then came crashing back with a force of pleasure so strong that he sent a pulsing jet of hot come spurting into Johnny, deeper than he'd ever been before, and the intensity of Johnny's screams confirmed this. Finally, exhausted and utterly spent, all three of them were overcome with a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Morning came, like it always does, with hangovers and grumpiness—but not in the bedroom of Johnny, Rick, and Brandy. They seemed bathed in happiness, and there was not a single person who saw them that morning who didn't notice the way their eyes sparkled when they looked at each other, and the way they glowed when they were around each other. Brandy in particular had a radiance that wafted about her like perfume.

"She's pregnant again," Sarah whispered to Liz, who nodded sagely. Their sisterly mutterings produced a torrent of activity from Brodie, who had overheard them and proceeded to loudly open and close every cupboard door in the kitchen. Then he up-ended the drainer, dumping all the pots and pans onto the ceramic tile, where they clattered and spun wildly like a troupe of out-of-control dancers. He rounded off his tantrum by trying to wrench the kitchen door off its hinges and slamming it shut behind him with a tremendous bang that made the dogs jump and started half a dozen toddlers crying.

"What the flying fuck is his problem?" Liz remarked, hands on hips.

"Jealous," said Sarah, emphatically. The two girls glared after Brodie's departing figure as he stomped through the vegetable garden, kicking up the dirt as he went.

"Asshole," said Liz, picking up a peeler and attacking a potato furiously.

Rick watched Brodie from an upstairs window and made a mental note to keep a close eye on him. Once again, Rick had

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the eerie feeling that he was being watched, but try as he might, even with his cop instincts and a pair of Johnny's field binoculars, he couldn't see anyone. He tried to shake off the sensation, told himself it was a side-effect of the weed, but his sixth sense just wouldn't let up.

That afternoon, Johnny disappeared again. He left a note under Rick's backpack. Rick found it when he went to bed that night and read it softly to himself by the light of one of Brandy's home-made candles.

'Rick. Gone to Canada. Back in a week. Keep my bed warm. Make love to B if you like, she has a crush on you. Love you, J.'

Rick crumpled the note in his hand and stared at the candle. He was well aware that Brandy had a crush on him. He filed the words of Johnny's note away in his subconscious, climbed into his own bed, and went to sleep.

The next night, Rick had half a mind to take Johnny at his word, but at the last moment, thought better of it. As attractive as Brandy was, he wasn't the kind of guy to sleep with someone else's wife while they were away, even if he had a permission slip. He just wasn't like that. So he went to bed alone, despite blatant flirting and outrageous offers from Liz and Sarah.

* * * *

A dull thud and a muffled sound woke Rick out of a tangled dream. He hung there for a moment, in between sleep and waking. There it was again, he wasn't still dreaming. A half-second before he heard Brandy scream his feet were already

on the floor, and as her scream hit his eardrums he was tearing open the door to her room. Her scream was cut off as a drunken Brodie grabbed her by the throat and began to squeeze. He had her pinned against the wall, and with his other hand he was grabbing roughly between her legs.

"I'll teach you, you little bitch," he was mumbling, his words slurred and guttural.

"Get. Your. Hands. Off. Her." Rick's words, in contrast, were crystal clear. He approached slowly, as though Brodie was a coyote attacking a fawn. Careful, measured steps, no sudden movements or her neck would be broken. Rick wished he had his sidearm.

"Oh, here's the big hero. Come to save your whore. Or is it Johnny's? Either way, it's a whore."

Brandy's eyes met Rick's. He felt a pain tear through to his very soul. Brodie leered and bared his teeth, and Rick struck, so fast that he even amazed himself, and Brodie never saw it coming. Rick's fist impacted Brodie's kidneys so hard he loosened his grip on Brandy's throat and crumpled to the ground. A right hook to the jaw settled it, and Brodie was out cold. Rick dragged him bodily out onto the landing and dumped him at the feet of an astounded Stax, who had been woken up by all the commotion.

"Take this piece of trash out to cool off," Rick snarled. Stax looked from Rick to Brandy, to Brodie, then back to Rick, and nodded curtly.

"Take care of her. I'll deal with this." Stax was a gentle giant, but when he was angry, you didn't make the mistake of

getting in his way. Stax picked up the unconscious Brodie like he was a rag doll, and stomped down the stairs.

Rick closed the door quietly, and Brandy ran into his arms. He cradled her gently, not sure whether or how badly she had been hurt. His heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

"Thank you, Rick, thank you..." Brandy sobbed. Rick wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes. She smelled sweet and she was warm and trembling like a terrified kitten.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's okay now," Rick whispered. So small, so fragile. Rick stroked Brandy's long, auburn hair as she clung to him. He remembered Johnny's note: 'Keep my bed warm'. Rick picked Brandy up and gently laid her down in her bed. Then he climbed in beside her, gathered her into his arms, and held her tight. He didn't remember falling asleep, but knew that in the night she had kissed him, and he had kissed her back, and they had just slept, like the strange combination of friend-lover-kin that they had become to each other.

Chapter Fifteen: State Secrets

The whole week, Rick stuck to Brandy like glue. He didn't trust Brodie for an instant, and although Brodie's black eye announced loud and clear to the rest of the household that Rick was the alpha male, the others still gave Brodie a wide berth. Stax took to posting himself like a sentry outside Brandy's bedroom every night until Dakota was safely tucked up in the nursery and Rick had arrived to keep Brandy company. Then, and only then, after Rick had given him the nod, would the tall Viking take his own rest.

Rick and Brandy slept in each other's arms every night; no sex, just warmth and closeness and safety. They kissed, and Rick felt himself growing hard, but he still couldn't take advantage of Johnny's offer. Brandy would snuggle close and just lie there, her arms tight around Rick's waist, feeling his erection pushing against her stomach. Rick could feel her breathing quicken and her heart start to pound, and he would close his eyes, slide his hands into her long hair, and just hold her, breathing away the incredible sensations swirling through his body until he forced himself to fall asleep.

Then, on the fifth day, Johnny was back.

* * * *

Rick stood at the window, watching as the elderly pickup clanked up the lane and came to rest with a groaning sound as Johnny parked in front of the driveshed. Rick watched as Brandy and Dakota ran out to greet him, and he watched as a tired, disheveled Johnny swung Dakota up and around and

then wrapped his arms around Brandy and clung to her as though he'd been away for a hundred years. Rick watched as Brandy cried, and Johnny held her tight, and saw the anger in Johnny's face as she told him about Brodie. And that was when Rick realized how glad he was that he hadn't made love to Brandy, because it was one thing to share, but quite another thing to take. Rick stood and watched as the family came inside, and then he just stood and stared out of the window, looking out over the fields and pastures and the paddock, to the distant hills.

A soft hand on his shoulder roused him from his reverie.

"Are you okay, Rick?" Rick looked around into Brandy's green eyes. She was smiling at him, but there was a wistfulness to her expression. Rick felt the overwhelming desire to protect her that always welled up from somewhere deep inside him whenever she was near.

"Yes, I'm fine, just thinking, is all." Rick wondered if this was how Johnny felt about her, too. She was so small, so delicate. Fragile. Like a beautiful, gentle butterfly. Rick shook himself.

"Rick?" Brandy said, twisting the ends of her hair.

"Yes, Brandy?"

"It's Johnny. He ... I think he got some news, or something. He needs you. I can't—he says he can't talk to me about it. He needs you, Rick." Brandy blinked back tears.

"Where is he?" Rick's heart started to race.

"In the music room. That's where he always goes when he's upset."

Rick's feet barely touched the ground as he negotiated the three flights of steep stairs from the upstairs landing to the lower garden level where the music room was hidden. He hesitated at the door. A deep breath, and he walked in and slowly crossed the room to the piano.

"Hey, my friend." Johnny managed a smile. He wasn't singing, or even playing this time. His hands fingered the keys, as though trying to recall a forgotten melody.

"Hey, kiddo." Rick ran a hand through Johnny's long, dark hair. *So beautiful.*

"I'm done, Rick." Johnny murmured, his voice flat and colorless.

"What do you mean?" Rick asked softly.

"The project. I finished it." Rick could see tears threatening at the corners of Johnny's eyes.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Rick asked.

"No," Johnny blurted out. "No, Rick—it's not a good thing. It's a terrible thing, an evil thing, and I'm not going through with it. I'm not giving it to them."

"Not giving what? Who's 'them'? I can't help you, Johnny, if you won't fill me in."

Johnny let out a sob. "The project, Rick. Not the BZ antidote—I'll find that eventually. The government project that I'm officially supposed to be working on—I cracked it. It was eluding me, but the last piece finally fell into place the other day—so I reported back to HQ, and they put me on a plane to Canada."

Rick took Johnny's hand and held it tightly as he explained further.

"We can't afford this war, Rick. The administration—they want an edge. They're desperate. The German scientists from World War II—the Nazis—our government bought them, lock stock and barrel. They're hidden in Canada. Werner von Braun is there—they're all working for NASA now. They want a man on the moon before the end of the decade—and we have to beat the Russians. And, they want enough weapons to be able to blow the Soviet Union to smithereens before they can do the same to us."

"So—you're building rockets?" Rick's mind was racing. He vividly remembered the Cuban missile crisis and President Kennedy's assassination only a few years ago.

"No. Something much, much worse." Johnny put his head in his hands.

"Tell me." Rick's voice was steady, but his hands were trembling.

"I'm a chemist. My task was to develop a synthetic biotoxin that could be used in wartime—it's colorless, odorless—completely undetectable, and it kills instantly. No pain, no lingering death. The delivery system was to be a missile: to be dropped on enemy military installations, troop depots, foxholes—a clean, surgical kill. No more civilian casualties, no more messy artillery bombardment."

Rick waited as Johnny rubbed his face and let out a trembling sigh.

"When I got to Canada, that's when they told me. The final mandate for the toxin will be for what they call 'internal security'. What that really means is they're going to use it to eliminate anyone who they perceive as a security threat.

Communists, radicals, subversives. But the first place they're going to use it is Vietnam."

"What are you going to do?" Rick said, quietly.

"I've already done it, Rick," Johnny turned to look at Rick, his dark brown eyes rimmed with pain. "I destroyed the formula. I'm going to take the lab apart piece by piece, destroy all my samples, all my research. They won't find a single molecule. And then, I'm resigning my commission."

"You know they won't let you do that. You can't just walk away from them."

"I don't care. I'll go to the Pentagon if I have to. I'll go to the President. I won't be responsible for the murder of innocent civilians."

"I'll help you, Johnny. Whatever it takes—just let me know what you need me to do." Rick's voice was firm.

"Thanks, man. But I got myself into this—I have to get myself out. Just do me one favor?"

"Anything, kiddo."

"If anything happens to me—take care of Brandy and Dakota?"

"You know I will. But nothing's going to happen to you. I won't let it."

"Rick?"

"Yeah, man?"

"Thank you for saving Brandy from that asshole."

"No problem. Actually, I enjoyed belting the sonofabitch."

"Rick?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you and she...?"

"No."

"Oh."

"I know you said ... but I ... it just didn't feel right to me."

"She loves you. You know that."

"Yeah, I know. Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"I love her, too."

"I know."

"I love you, man."

"I love you, too."

"Come here."

"Oh, thank God."

Love you so much, so much, forever...

The keyboard jangled wildly when Rick pulled Johnny down onto the rug and proceeded to let him know exactly how much he was loved.

Chapter Sixteen: Memento Mori

July bloomed bright and warm. The grapes ripened on the vine in the Sonoma Valley, and the farm meadow was replete with out-of-control-gorgeous wildflowers. The whole world seemed fertile and bursting with life. And this phenomenon didn't restrict itself to fruit and flowers. A soft knock announced a visitor at Rick's bedroom door, and he looked up from his well-thumbed copy of Jack Kerouac's 'On The Road'.

"Hey," Rick said, smiling.

"Hey," said Brandy, her eyes turned to the floor. Rick knew immediately that something was wrong. Rick knew that Johnny had been gone all night and still hadn't returned, although it was almost noon. At the back of his mind, Rick knew what Johnny was doing, but pushed the thought away. The less Brandy knew, the better.

"What is it, honey?" Rick stood up and closed the distance between them in two strides. He cradled her chin gently in his hand and persuaded her to look up at him. Her smoky green eyes were on the brink of tears.

"Rick," she began, nervously.

"You know you can tell me anything," Rick said softly.

"Rick ... I'm going to have a baby." Brandy closed her eyes and a tear trickled down her face. She swiped at it, as though frustrated with herself.

"You ... we ... is it..." Rick stammered. In a way, he had already known.

"Yes. It's yours, Rick. Ours."

"Are you sure?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Rick kicked himself for asking. It was the kind of thing that a woman would know instinctively, he guessed. Although Brandy definitely didn't fit the 'earth mother' stereotype; she was way too spirited for that.

"Yes, I'm sure," Brandy said, smiling.

"Wow," breathed Rick, his head spinning. "I'm going to be a father?" He knew how stupid that sounded, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes, Rick, I'm having your baby, and you're going to be a father," Brandy said, patiently, as though explaining the facts of life to a preschooler.

"Are you happy?" Rick asked, stroking away her tears.

"Yes," said Brandy, laughing and crying at the same time. "Are you?"

"God ... yes—surprised, astonished even, but yes, I'm happy. Wow. Stunned, I think, might be the appropriate word right at this moment," Rick grinned. He gathered Brandy into his arms and held her gently, as though she was made of crystal.

"I won't break, Rick," Brandy protested. Her sparkling eyes shone.

"I love you." Brandy was the first, and in his heart he knew the only, woman who would hear those words from Rick's lips.

"I love you, too."

"Does Johnny know?"

"Not yet. I don't quite know how to tell him." Brandy looked at her hands and twisted her wedding ring.

"We'll tell him together." Rick ran his fingers through Brandy's long hair and held her against him. He had never meant for this to happen. But life had a tendency to throw a curve ball once in a while.

"Rick?" Brandy looked up at him, her eyes wide.

"Yeah, honey?"

"Something's wrong. I don't know what, but ... I just ... I've got this horrible feeling. Do you feel it, Rick?" Her bottom lip was trembling.

"Yes, yes I feel it. It'll be alright. Everything's going to be alright."

"Rick?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared."

"Sssh, it's okay. It's okay. We'll look after you, Johnny and I. Don't be scared, angel."

Rick felt a little weird, calling Brandy "angel" just like Johnny did. But that's what she was: the closest thing to a pure, innocent human being he had ever met. It seemed odd to call her 'pure', when she smoked weed, slept with random women, had a husband and a boyfriend—but it was her soul, her aura, that shone with a white light into which no shadow could encroach.

* * * *

The heat made everyone feel languid; everyone that is except for Johnny. Rick knew that he had spent the entire night and half the next day destroying every speck of research and samples from the lab underneath the barn.

Johnny wouldn't allow Rick to help him, and it was only when Rick spotted a black plume of smoke billowing from the back forty that he knew Johnny was finished. The barn was burned to the ground, nothing left, not a scrap of paper, not a molecule, as Johnny had sworn. When Rick met him halfway down the dirt road, Johnny looked exhausted, but content.

"It's done," Johnny said, flatly.

"Everything?" Rick asked.

"Everything. And I'm out." Johnny wiped his face with the edge of his sleeve.

"You told them?" Rick whispered. He wasn't sure whether to feel elated or wary.

"Yes."

"How did they take it?" Rick took Johnny's hand as they walked toward the house. Johnny held on tight, grateful for the contact.

"Pretty well, I think," Johnny said. "They've got plenty of geeks working for them. I don't think they were really that comfortable with a pinko, Commie hippy anyway..."

Something prickled at the back of Rick's neck and he swatted at it. He still wasn't quite used to his collar-length hair or his sideburns. He looked at Johnny.

"Baby."

"Ricky?"

There was nothing else to be said. Rick wrapped Johnny in his arms and they kissed; a slow, deep, open-mouthed, desperate kiss. Johnny clung to Rick like the world would end if he they let go.

* * * *

With his face buried in Johnny's hair, Rick thought he heard a strange, faraway sound.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Johnny.

"What?" said Johnny, raising his head from Rick's shoulder to listen.

"That. There—there it is again." They stood stock still on the path, straining their ears to hear the faint sound.

"It's Dakota," gasped Johnny, breaking into a run.

The unintelligible sound morphed into a child's screams as they ran full-tilt toward the house. Rick's heart was thumping in his chest and adrenaline was rushing through his body.

"Mommy mommy mommyyyyyy!!!! Daddy, daddy!! Mommyyyyyyyyyy!! Mo—" Dakota's shrill wailing was cut off by a dull thud. Then there was silence.

Rick ran as though in a nightmare, taking forever to get there even though he was sprinting alongside Johnny. It was like running through molasses. Time seemed to slow to a crawl, and then they rounded the corner of the house. Johnny stood stock still, swaying slightly as he stared at the ground. Rick stopped behind him and instinctively put his hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"Brandy...?" Johnny whispered, the word catching in his throat. Brandy lay still on the grass, a neat hole in the centre of her forehead, green eyes staring blindly at the sky, her blood already drained into the earth. Dakota lay over her, a fresh bullet wound in her back, her tiny body limp and pale and her mother's dress beneath soaked in red.

Rick swallowed hard. He barely had time to register the reality of what he was seeing before the bullet whizzed past his ear and into Johnny's chest, crumpling him to the ground at Rick's feet.

"Johnny! No ... oh God, no, Johnny...!" Rick's mind was racing; his heart was pounding, but he couldn't breathe. He fell to his knees and gently pulled Johnny into his lap, cradling Johnny's head in the crook of his arm. He ripped off his T-shirt and stuffed it hard against the wound, but he was already surrounded by a pool of blood that was spreading at an alarming rate across the ground.

"Hang on, kiddo, it'll be okay, help will come, just hang on..." Rick said, his voice sounding panicky. He looked from the sky to the horizon, and back again, but there was no one. An eerie silence had descended upon the compound, and even the air seemed heavy.

Johnny shook his head slowly and gazed up at Rick. "I'm sorry." The pain in his dark eyes seemed to ebb away as Rick looked, and was replaced by a kind of peace.

"No, Johnny, you can't die, you can't! Stay with me! I won't let you die Johnny, do you hear me?" Rick pressed his blood-soaked T-shirt into Johnny's chest and held him tight.

"I love you, Rick," Johnny murmured.

"I love you, too," Rick said, his voice trembling.

"I'll see you again, Rick. Promise."

"I promise," Rick whispered. Johnny smiled and his long black lashes fluttered and closed.

"Oh, no, Johnny—don't go, don't go! Don't leave me here all alone, please, I need you, what am I going to do without

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you, please Johnny!" But it was too late. Rick stroked Johnny's hair back from his face and kissed him one last time. Then an anguished cry of rage and grief tore up from Rick's chest and he wept for his beloved Johnny, and for Brandy and Dakota, and for his unborn child.

* * * *

When the black-clad CIA operatives came down from the hill, they had to pry Johnny's body from a sobbing Rick's arms, and he struggled and lunged at them as they handcuffed him.

"Dirty hippy filth," one sneered as they threw him into the back of a blacked-out Hummer. "Commie," said another.

"Pigs," Rick spat.

Brandy and Dakota paid the ultimate price for Johnny's actions. The child hadn't been a mark, she'd simply run to her mother at the wrong time. The rest of the children were rounded up and escorted to safety, and the surviving members of the 'Communist hippy cell' arrested on multiple charges, including drug trafficking and espionage. The farm was burned to the ground—not a trace left behind—and Rick's freedom carried a heavy price tag.

Brodie, who had betrayed them all, earned a sniper bullet in the back for his trouble, and a posthumous Purple Heart; the Department of Defense couldn't afford too many loose ends.

Major John Ross, U.S. Marine Corps, was buried as a war hero with full military honors at Arlington—yet another part of the cover-up that whitewashed the murky truth of Vietnam

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and the Cold War. As the neatly-folded flag was delivered into the trembling hands of Johnny's bewildered mother, together with his Silver Star and Purple Heart, Rick stood in the cold Virginia rain and closed his eyes. Then, slowly and deliberately, he reached up and unfastened the silver chain from around his neck and placed it on top of the casket. *Lest We Forget*, said the memorial stone. *"At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them,"* the preacher intoned. Rick would never forget.

Rick Webster took the consequences that were handed down by his disappointed father. He shaved off his hair, re-enlisted, and was plunged back into the offensive. And when the gook bullet slammed into his heart, he was grateful. Second Lt. Richard Webster died August 14, 1967, at Binh Thuan, South Vietnam: the Summer of Love was over.

Chapter Seventeen: Dust in the Wind

"Rick, you're absolutely safe, nothing can hurt you," Dr. Angela Martell's voice soothed in a soft, sing-song tone. "Rick, you can come back now, come back, on the count of three: one—two—three."

The light from the flickering candle danced in front of Rick's eyes as he came to. Nothing could have prepared him for this: to come face-to-face with his own fear—no, terror—of death. Not of pain and suffering, but of the void; Rick's all-pervading fear that there was nothing beyond—no heaven, no hell, just—oblivion. A body on a slab.

"Oh, God, Doc, it was Jay, he was Jason..." Rick sat up shakily and started to sob bitterly.

"Who is Jason?" Dr. Angela asked gently. Though the name that Rick had been using in his narration of events while regressed was a different one, Dr. Angela knew from experience that the soul's memory recognizes people in their present incarnation. Dr. Angela had no doubt that this Jason was one and the same soul that he had lived with and loved back in 1967.

"Jason Kovacs, my partner. He ... we work together. He's a colleague—but he's also my best friend," Rick said, wiping the tears from his face. He looked up, into Dr. Angela's strange, green eyes. They were full of nothing but kindness.

"What does Jason mean to you, Rick?"

Rick sighed and put his head in his hands. "Everything."

"Explain that to me, Rick." Dr. Angela's voice was infinitely patient.

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"Jay is my whole world, Doc. He's the reason I drag my sorry ass out of bed every morning and go to work. And I think I only realized that just now."

"Does he know?" Dr. Angela smiled. She'd handled epiphanies like this before, many times.

"Does he know what?" Rick looked up, confused.

"Does he know how you feel about him?"

"Oh. No, no, of course not. We're buds, you know. He beats the pants off me at Super Mario Kart, and I whip his ass at Donkey Kong."

Dr. Angela laughed. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean? What can I do? He wouldn't believe me if I told him about this regression stuff. He'd laugh until he puked."

"You never know with people, Rick. Just try getting a little closer to him. Take baby steps. If he is your thread—his soul will remember."

"So what do we do now, Doc?" Rick asked. His hands were still trembling, and Dr. Angela placed her hands over his and held them tightly. Rick felt as though he'd been struck by lightning. He had an overwhelming feeling—a memory—and then it was gone, melted away like a dream upon waking.

"We go further back. Back to the life before the one you just recalled, and see if Jason—or whoever he was then—is still there. Then you'll be sure, that he is the one."

Rick nodded. He couldn't risk his friendship with Jay on a whim. He had to be certain.

"Doc?"

"Yes, Rick?"

"Uh, nothing. Never mind."

"Take care, Rick. I'll see you again, same time next week."

"Yeah. Yeah, thanks, Doc."

A brisk north wind was blowing as Rick walked out of the clinic and into the parking lot. It was definitely 2006, but he couldn't shake off the feelings of the last few hours. By the time he got home he was exhausted. Rick flung himself on his bed fully-clothed and slept without nightmares of the gun at his head for the first time since it happened.

* * * *

Day shift started at eight am and Rick was in the locker room bright and early. He checked his sidearm and sorted out his kit, whistling softly to himself.

"Hey, man."

A shot of adrenaline kicked through Rick's body as he looked up. "Hey, Jay." Don't act weird. Just be normal. He's your friend, he's just your friend.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that. You're never here this early." Jason leaned casually against Rick's locker door. He was wearing his habitual goofy grin.

"Neither are you," Rick countered.

"Touché."

"Jason?" Here goes nothing.

"Yeah, Rick?"

"Do you—this is going to sound wet, but—do you believe in past lives?" Rick studied his gun slide.

"Hell, yeah. Mama Elsa used to read the tea leaves when we were kids. She used to tell us who we were."

"And who were you?" Rick couldn't look at Jason. His heart was pounding.

"A showgirl in Paris," Jason said, smugly.

Rick let out a breath. "Figures."

"Rick?" Jason ran his hands idly over the stitching on Rick's Kevlar vest, which was lying on the bench beside him. Rick watched the long, slender fingers tracing out his name—and shivered inside.

"Yeah, Jay?" Rick looked up into unfathomable, dark brown eyes.

"Aren't you just the teeniest bit sorry that we missed Woodstock?"

Rick's heart shot up into his throat. "What?" he croaked.

"Woodstock. You know, 1969. Would have been a total blast."

Rick's voice was stopped up in his windpipe, and he opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Jason seemed oblivious.

"Yeah. Shame because, well—you were born in what, 1971? And I was born in 1975, so we're part of the rave generation, I guess. But it would have been so much fun to be a teenager in the sixties, don't you think? Well, apart from Vietnam of course. That would suck."

Rick stared as Jay rambled on in his inimitably Jay-like way. Rick nodded at the appropriate moments, but he wasn't really listening. He was lost in espresso-dark eyes and long, black lashes, in soft lips and long sensitive fingers. It was

only the last thing that Jason said that struck into Rick's consciousness like a ray of burning light.

"Dust in the wind, Rick."

"What?"

"All we are is dust in the wind. Kansas, 1977. Covered in this century by Linkin Park. Great song. Really makes you think."

Rick sat and stared after Jason as he sauntered away. *I'll see you again, Rick. Promise.* "I promise," whispered Rick, to the empty locker room.

The End

"Soul Journeys" will continue...

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