

The first in the Johnny and Kate series.....



Second Chances

It was a clear, beautiful Sunday evening; there was a full moon and a cool breeze in the air. Johnny had been busy all day running errands, but, this evening, he only had one thing on his mind: seeing Kate. She had been gone for two weeks and he had missed her so much that he hardly knew what to do with himself while she had been gone. She flew back in to Los Angeles last night while he was on duty. Otherwise, he would have picked her up himself. But now, he was going over to her place to see her—finally. He grabbed his car keys off of the kitchen counter and started to run out the door. But something made him stop, turn around and go back into his bedroom. He retrieved a small box from his top-right dresser drawer and put it into his jacket pocket. He then grabbed a bundle of flowers he'd bought earlier that day, sprinted out to the parking lot, climbed into his Rover and drove off.

Johnny had first met Kate at Roy and Joanne's home about five months earlier. Roy had invited Johnny over for supper and that same night Joanne had invited Kate, a good friend of hers. Joanne had been playing matchmaker that night, unbeknownst to Kate, Johnny *and* Roy. Joanne had thought that Kate and Johnny might make a good pair. And, as it turned out, she had been right.

Kate enjoyed Johnny's company right away. She considered him to be good-natured, smart, funny, interesting and very handsome. And she was flattered that he listened so attentively whenever she spoke.

In turn, Johnny thought that Kate was very sweet, kind, intelligent and that she had a good sense of humor. He also found her to be very attractive and he loved the way her whole face lit up when she smiled. Like Johnny, she had grown up in the country—on a farm in Iowa—and so she loved nature and the outdoors. She had moved to California about a year ago when she landed a good job as a legal secretary. But they were different in just a few ways; Johnny was very outgoing and gregarious, while Kate was a little shy and reserved. In spite of that, they got along wonderfully. They felt completely at ease in each other's company.

During the course of that evening, somehow, in some way, Johnny knew that this woman he had just met was the one that he was destined to be with the rest of his life. He had heard other people talk of love at first sight and had thought it was all hogwash—until it happened to him.

Johnny and Kate had been seeing each other since that night and these had been the happiest months of Johnny's life. He had since stopped chasing the nurses at the hospital; he was serious about Kate and she was all he ever thought about these days.

Johnny thought that he and Kate made a great couple: they were completely comfortable in each other's company, they always got along perfectly and they always had fun together. In addition, total strangers on the street would sometimes even stop and tell them what a good-looking couple they were. They were a

striking couple, indeed: Kate with her flaxen-blonde hair and blue eyes and Johnny with his dark brown hair and eyes.

He arrived at her apartment less than a half an hour after he had left his place. From the passenger seat he grabbed the flowers and dashed up the steps to her building. When he got to her door he paused, ran his hand through his hair in attempt to tame it, rang the doorbell and waited anxiously.

When Kate opened the door his heart seemed to skip a beat. He quickly stepped inside, grabbed her, lifted her off the ground and spun her around.

"Hi gorgeous! Do you have any idea how much I've missed you?" he said as he gently put her down. His face was beaming. "I thought I was going to have to fly out there and drag you back!"

He had completely surprised her with his animated greeting. "I missed you too, you know!" Kate said, laughing.

He closed the door behind him and held out the flowers for her. He had brought her a bouquet of yellow roses—her favorite. "These are for you," he said, still grinning. He had missed her smile; it was like a ray of light in his life.

"They're beautiful! Thank you! You are so sweet, do you know that?" she reached up and gently brushed his thick, brown hair away from his forehead. She loved to run her fingers through Johnny's hair. He had let it grow a little longer since they started dating and she thought it made him look very sexy.

"Yeah, that's me alright," he joked. "Come here you." John took Kate's face gently in his hands, leaned over and kissed her lips. Gently at first, then more passionately. It was a deep, passionate kiss that they both had been craving for the last two weeks. When it was over he wrapped his arms around her and whispered into her ear, "Don't ever leave me again, Katie. Not even for a second!"

"That goes both ways, you know." His arms were strong and she always felt completely safe whenever he held her. She placed her hand on the back of Johnny's neck and pulled him down to her for another long kiss.

When their lips parted she stared deeply into his dark brown eyes which she adored. They were definitely what she called 'bedroom eyes.' "I was anxious to go back and see my family but it just was so lonely there without you, John."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "I know exactly what you mean. Is there anything special you want to do tonight?"

"Let's stay in tonight. Let's just be by ourselves tonight, just you and me. Is that okay?" She nuzzled her face into his neck. He always smelled so good. She had missed him so much more than she ever thought possible. For Kate, everything in her life had finally fallen into place—once again. She had been given a second chance at love.

"Mmm, I like that idea even better." His stomach did a 'flip-flop,' which it usually did when he was around her. He had dated a lot of women and no other woman had ever had that kind of effect on him. "I want to hear all about your trip and your family. I want to hear everything you did. Don't leave out anything!" They snuggled together on her couch and she told him everything he wanted to know. They also did quite a bit of 'necking.' It was clear that they had both craved each other enormously during Kate's absence.

"Johnny?"

"Mmm?" he murmured, kissing her cheek. Kate was breathing in his ear and it was having an *amazing* effect on him.

She whispered into his ear, "I missed you so much. Will you stay tonight?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he murmured, still kissing her. With his eyes half-cast he slowly leaned in towards her, gently kissed her, and then took her in his arms and held her tightly. He put his mouth against her cheek and softly kissed it. "And keep doing that ear thing. I love that!" he said with a sly grin. He kissed her passionately on the lips and slowly started moving down her neck.

Kate rose from the couch, took Johnny's hand and led him into her bedroom where they spent the rest of the evening—and the night.

The next morning when Johnny woke up he gazed over at Kate. She was sleeping on her side facing away from him, breathing softly. Her beautiful, blonde hair was cascading across her pillow. *Last night was unbelievable*. He thought about how lucky he was; he was in love with a wonderful woman and she loved him back. He had always wondered if he would recognize love when it happened to him. But it was unmistakable now. He had no doubts, whatsoever. Kate was the love of his life that he had been waiting for all these years.

He slid over next to her, put his arm around her waist and gently hugged her against his body. Kate stirred. .

"Morning sweetie," he whispered as he softly kissed her cheek. "How'd you sleep?"

"Mmm, I slept great." She smiled to herself as she remembered what happened between them last night. She pulled his arm around her more snugly. "This is nice, waking up with you here."

"For me, too." He nuzzled her neck and whispered into her ear, "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"I love you back," she whispered.

"Katie?" He was resting his cheek on hers; his arm still wrapped around her snugly.

"Mmm?"

"Have you ever thought what it would be like to wake up like this every day?"

Kate opened her eyes. She wasn't quite sure what he was getting at. She hoped it wasn't what she thought.

"Katie, have you ever thought about marriage? About us getting married?"

"Yes, I have thought about that." She had actually thought about it a lot. She turned over to face Johnny.

"Well?"

She brushed the hair off of his forehead lovingly. "Johnny, I love you more than anything and I would love to be married to you. But I need some more time. I don't think I'm ready for that just yet. Do you think you

can understand?"

Johnny closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers. He was afraid that she would feel that way. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

Kate knew that she had hurt him and she felt horrible. Caressing his face she softly said, "Johnny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. You mean so much to me and I love you so much. But it's just too soon. I'm so sorry."

He saw the pain in her face, pulled her closer to him and held her without saying anything. He knew why she had turned him down. She had once been engaged to someone else until he was killed in a car accident about a year ago. Losing him had totally devastated her and she had told Johnny that she didn't think she could live through another loss like that. So, she was afraid of taking that big step again in a relationship. But he cared very deeply about Kate and he ached to be with her all of the time; he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. But the time wasn't right for her yet, and he didn't want to rush her into anything.

After a few minutes he told her, "I wasn't sure if you were ready, but I had to try. I love you, Katie."

"I love you, too. Eventually, I'll be ready for marriage. But not now. So don't you give up on me just yet, okay?" She smiled at him.

Even though he was extremely disappointed he couldn't help but smile back. He just couldn't resist her.

"We can still have some fun in the meantime, you know." She softly kissed him on the lips and ran her hand through his hair.

He eagerly returned her kisses. It didn't take long before Johnny's breathing started getting heavier and Kate knew that she needed to stop things from going further, as much as she hated to. Then her alarm clock sounded.

"Let's just call in sick today," he murmured while he kissed her neck.

"I like your thinking, but we really have to get up and go to work. I don't want you to let Roy down on account of me. You don't want him getting stuck with Brice, do you?" She had heard plenty of stories about Brice from Johnny. And she liked Roy enough herself that she didn't want to inflict Brice on him either.

"Yeah, you're right," he groaned. He didn't want to leave Kate this morning. He didn't want to let go of her, but he knew she was right. And he now knew there would be more nights with her. Just like last night. Or so he thought.

"It looks like you're in a good mood today," Roy said to Johnny as Roy walked into the locker room that morning. Johnny was whistling while he buttoned his shirt. Roy gave Chet a quizzical look to see if he knew anything. Chet just shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes.

"You could say that! You might say that I'm in a *great* mood today!" Johnny said, grinning. He continued whistling as he bent over to tie his shoes. He *was* in a great mood today. He had never been quite this happy before.

"Oh, that's right. Kate got back this week-end, didn't she?"

"She sure did!"

"Is that the 'mystery woman' that we've never met? Are you still dating her? Are you even dating *anyone*? Or have you been putting us all on the last few months?" interrogated Chet.

"Eat your heart out Chet! It just so happens that she's someone very special and that's all I'm telling you!" he retorted. John strode out of the room towards the kitchen with a big grin on his face. *They just have no idea!*

Chet looked at Roy. "Okay, Roy. Give it up. What's he said to you about this woman? Is she for real?"

"Sure she is. She's a good friend of Joanne's. In fact, it was Joanne's idea to get them together. He's been seeing her for almost six months now and he's told me that she's 'the one.' But don't you dare tell him I told you anything." Roy already regretted telling him even that little bit of information. Chet couldn't keep his mouth shut about anything.

"Yeah, every girl he's ever dated has been 'the one.' Why should we believe him now?" Chet said sarcastically.

Roy just smiled and shook his head.

"Morning Cap! Morning Marco! Morning Mike!" proclaimed Johnny as he strolled into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of steaming coffee. He grabbed a donut, took a big bite out of it and took a big gulp of coffee to wash it down.

"Morning John. You're in a good mood. Did you have a good day off?" asked Captain Stanley.

"You bet! How 'bout you?" he mumbled through a mouthful of food.

Just then, Chet and Roy walked into the kitchen. Before the Captain could answer, Chet started in again. "Come on, Gage, just give us a hint about what this chick is like. Is it really true you've been dating her for six months? You're going to have to prove this one to me, man. I'm not gonna believe it until I see it! You've never been able to get pass six dates with a girl, let alone six months!"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Give it up Chet! Like I said, you'll meet her eventually. You're just going to have to wait. I don't want to jinx the relationship by having her meet you!" Naturally, he was only joking. Johnny and Chet went back and forth like this all the time.

Chet saw the smug look on Johnny's face. "Relationship! You? In a relationship with a woman? Yeah, right!" He snapped his fingers in front of Johnny's face. "You can wake up now, Johnny. The dream is over."

"Ha!"

Chet knew he wasn't going to get anywhere with Johnny today, so he decided to give up—for now anyway.

At that moment the claxon sounded. "Station 51. Engine 14. Structure fire at 1560 North Hamilton Road. 1-5-6-0 North Hamilton Road. Cross street Granger. Time out 8:15."

All six men scrambled into the garage, put on their turncoats and helmets and climbed into their vehicles.

Marco, Mike and Chet in the engine with Mike in the driver's seat; and Roy and Johnny in the squad.

"Station 51. KMG365," responded Captain Stanley into the handset. He wrote down the address on a slip of paper and handed it to Roy who passed it over to John. The Captain rushed around the front of the squad and climbed into the engine. Station 51 was off to their first run of the day.

It was a four-story apartment building on fire and there were a lot of people already standing around outside. Flames were licking out of most of the third floor windows. As soon as Johnny and Roy jumped out of the squad a woman ran up to them screaming hysterically.

"He's in there! My husband is still in there! You need to get him out! Please get him out! I just got home from the store and I know he's in there!"

"Okay Ma'am, just calm down. Okay? What's your apartment number?" asked Johnny.

"It's 305. Oh, please hurry! Please get him out of there!"

"Okay, just calm down. We'll get him out. Just don't worry." Johnny now saw a man running towards them.

"I'm the manager of the building. I made sure that everyone's out of the building! They're all out. All except for Jack! Other than that, everybody's out."

Roy turned to the woman. "Ma'am? Is that your husband? Is Jack your husband?"

"Yes! Please hurry!"

The guys from Engine 14 had already pulled a line and from the outside they began spraying water on the flames that were climbing out of the third floor windows. Chet and Stoker had taken a line inside the building. Johnny and Roy put on their oxygen tanks and facemasks, Roy grabbed the axe and they headed towards the burning building.

Once inside they found it extremely difficult to see. The smoke was so thick they could only see a few feet in front of them. Once they found the staircase they climbed up to the third floor and started searching for door number 305.

They had searched several doors before they finally found it. "Here it is!" Johnny shouted through his facemask, motioning to his partner. *Man this smoke is thick! I hope we find this guy in time. Nobody could last very long breathing this stuff.*

Roy ran over to Johnny. Johnny tested the door and found it unlocked so there was no need for the axe. Once inside Roy motioned to his right and shouted, "You take that side and I'll take the other!" Roy headed towards the left side of the apartment.

Johnny nodded in agreement and proceeded over to his side of the apartment. The first room he checked was a bedroom. He immediately found the woman's husband lying on the floor by the bed. Johnny stepped back out of the bedroom and motioned to Roy. "Roy! I found him!" Johnny went back in the room to check to see if the man was breathing. He was, but just barely.

Roy came running over. "Okay! Let's hurry and get out of here!" *I don't like the looks of this. This smoke is just too thick.* Roy hoisted the man over his shoulder as Johnny helped him. Then they started back out of the apartment into the hallway.

Roy was in the lead with Johnny not far behind him when all of a sudden Roy heard a large crash behind him. Roy immediately turned around and looked for his partner. "Johnny?" Squinting through the thick smoke he saw Johnny lying in the hallway, trapped under a pile of rubble. The ceiling had collapsed on top of John. "Johnny? JOHNNY!"

There was no response.

Roy ran as fast he could to get out of the building to get help. The first person he saw was Marco. "MARCO! JOHNNY'S TRAPPED ON THE THIRD FLOOR. SOMEONE'S GOT TO GO GET HIM. BRING THE STOKES!"

Instantly, Marco ran over to the squad and grabbed the stokes. "CAP! JOHNNY'S STUCK ON THE THIRD FLOOR!"

Roy continued running over towards the squad and carefully laid the victim down in the grass. The man's wife was relieved but still hysterical. "You found him! You found him! Is he going to be okay?" Roy tried to reassure her while he assessed her husband's condition. All the while he was wishing that he could be back in that building helping Johnny. *DAMN! Why'd this have to happen?*

Marco and Captain Stanley bolted into the building and up to the third floor. "CHET! STOKER! FOLLOW US WITH THAT LINE. JOHNNY'S TRAPPED UP HERE!" Captain Stanley yelled.

In a matter of moments they had found Johnny. His body was pinned to the floor by debris. His helmet had been knocked off of his head and he had a deep gash on his forehead. He was bleeding badly from his wound and he wasn't moving. Immediately, the Captain and Marco carefully started extracting the rubble off of Johnny while Mike and Chet sprayed water all around. The second that Johnny was freed they gently placed him in the stokes and ran back down the hallway.

"YOU GUYS BE CAREFUL! THAT'S AN ORDER!" the captain shouted back to Stoker and Chet. *It isn't safe on this floor and I don't want any more of my men getting hurt!*

Once outside, the Captain and Marco carefully lay Johnny on the ground next to the other victim.

Roy breathed a sigh of relief. *He's out of there but he looks in bad shape.*

"Tell us what to do Roy," said the Captain.

Roy immediately went into high gear. "Marco, keep the oxygen mask on that man's face. He's suffered smoke inhalation but he'll be okay. I've already talked to Rampart about him and there's two ambulances on the way."

The Captain of Station 14 came running over. When a fireman is injured it doesn't take long for the other firefighters to find out. "How is he Hank?"

"The ceiling collapsed on him and he was pinned pretty good."

Roy shifted his full attention to Johnny. "Johnny? Johnny! CAN YOU HEAR ME, JOHNNY?" There

was no response. "Cap! Can you get on the biophone to Rampart?"

Captain Stanley sprung into action. Crouching on the ground he picked up the biophone. "Rampart, this is County 51. How do you read?"

"Go ahead 51." It was Dr. Brackett on the other end.

"Rampart, we have a Code I!" Captain Hank Stanley's stomach dropped every time those words had to be used.

Each victim was rushed into an ambulance once they arrived at the scene. Roy climbed into the ambulance that was transporting Johnny. The Captain instructed Marco to drive the squad to Rampart for Roy.

Johnny's face was bloody and black from the smoke and he still hadn't regained consciousness. Roy had cleaned and bandaged the cut on Johnny's forehead and had determined that Johnny had a fractured left tibia and some fractured ribs on his left side. He started an IV per Dr. Brackett's orders, put him on oxygen and he kept continuous track of Johnny's vitals during the ride to Rampart. His blood pressure was low and dropping.

Once they arrived at Rampart, Roy jumped out and assisted with the gurney that held Johnny.

Dixie met them at the door and immediately directed them into Room 3. She was taken aback when she saw Johnny and the condition he was in. *He's so young! It's just not fair!*

Dr. Brackett and Dr. Early were in the Room 3 anxiously waiting for the patient. They all knew that it was Johnny and their mood was very somber and serious. Once Johnny was in the room, the doctors immediately got down to business. There was not a minute they could, or *would*, spare.

Roy helplessly stood to the side of the room and watched as Dr. Brackett and Dr. Early and their team started working on Johnny. Even with all that he had done for Johnny, he had never felt as useless as he did right now.

Dr. Brackett opened each of Johnny's eyes and shined his light into each. "Pupils are equal and responsive. Dix, let's get X-Ray in here and get a full skull, chest and abdomen. And I need a shot of that left tibia. Let's also get a new set of vitals. STAT!"

"Right away Kel. As she dialed the phone for x-ray she turned towards Roy. "Roy, why don't you go wait in the lounge. We'll keep you posted on what's happening. Is there anyone that should be called?"

Roy swallowed hard. "Yeah. Yeah, there is. I'll do it." He had to call Kate but he didn't exactly know what he would say to her. *I'll call Joanne first so that she can be here for Kate when she arrives at the hospital.* Roy headed down the hall to the lounge.

"Roy! How's Johnny?" It was Marco coming through the Emergency doors. The fire was now under control and the other guys from the station were right behind. Station 14 had stayed at the scene to finish up the job.

"Well, it doesn't look good. He's got a broken leg, some broken ribs, a slight concussion, and maybe some internal bleeding. He's still unconscious. Dix said she'd keep me updated."

"Roy, don't worry about the rest of the shift. I'll call in replacements. You'll keep us posted, won't you? And you let us know if there's anything we can do." Captain Stanley placed his hand on Roy's shoulder. "Take it easy pal. He'll be fine." He had to say those words to Roy even though he didn't know if he believed them himself.

"Thanks Cap. Well, I've got to go and call Joanne. Then I have to call Kate."

"Remember, you let us know if you need anything at all." He wondered who Kate was but he knew it wasn't the time to start asking questions.

Roy nodded, stepped into the lounge, picked up the phone and dialed.

"Joanne? It's me. Listen, Johnny's been hurt pretty badly. He's here at Rampart. I need to know Kate's number at work so that I can call her. Do you have that?"

"ROY! Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Do you have Kate's work number?"

"Oh Roy, we can't just call her. I think that under the circumstances someone should tell her this in person. I'll do it."

"You would do that?"

"I'll ask the neighbors to pick up the kids from school if we're not back by then. Then I'll pick up Kate and bring her right over to Rampart." Joanne paused. "Roy? Is Johnny really hurt badly? Is it really that serious?"

"Yeah, it is." Roy now had a lump in his throat. *How could he have let this happened? And how was Kate going to react?*

"Roy, have you heard anything?" It had been about 45 minutes since Roy had talked to Joanne, and now she was here and Kate was right behind her.

"No, nothing yet. Dix said she would update me when they knew more."

"Roy, what happened? How bad is he?" Kate asked. She was desperately struggling to keep her composure and her emotions in check.

"Well, we responded to a fire and we had to get a victim that was trapped inside. As we were leaving the building, part of the ceiling collapsed on him. He's got a pretty deep cut on his forehead, he's got some broken ribs and his left tibia, I mean his lower-left leg, is broken." Roy paused and stared down into his coffee cup.

"It's got to be more than that Roy. Joanne told me that you said his injuries were very serious. What is it that you're not telling me?"

Roy looked up at his wife. He took a deep breath and looked back at Kate. "Well, he has some internal

injuries and by the time we reached Rampart he still hadn't regained consciousness." He quickly added, "But he may be conscious now, Kate."

Kate gasped; she was jolted by the news. She could no longer hold in all of the emotions that she was feeling. She dropped her head into her hands and fell to her knees. "OH GOD! NOT AGAIN! PLEASE LORD! NOT AGAIN!" All of the memories of when she lost Tom came rushing back to her. After Tom was in the car accident he was brought to the hospital still alive, but he had died in the emergency room shortly after Kate had arrived. "WHY IS THIS HAPPENING AGAIN?"

Roy's eyes started misting and he turned away. It pained him to see Kate this way and to know that his partner was in such danger. *Shit!*

Joanne knelt on the floor next to Kate and put her arm around her shoulder. "Kate, listen to me. I'm sure he'll be fine. He's getting the best care there is." Joanne looked up at her husband. "Roy? Who's the doctor in with him?"

Roy turned around to face them again. "Both Dr. Brackett and Dr. Early. Kate, they're some of the best doctors around. Johnny's in excellent hands. I'm sure he'll be fine." He tried to sound convincing; however, he also knew the seriousness of Johnny's condition.

Joanne helped Kate off of the floor and over to a chair. Kate wept uncontrollably and was inconsolable. All Joanne could do was to keep her arm around her shoulder in a feeble attempt to comfort her.

Just then Dixie entered the room.

"Dix, what's going on? What's taking so long?"

"Roy, we just want to be sure we're doing a thorough job before we tell you any news. Hi Joanne." Dixie looked over at Kate—she didn't recognize her.

"Dixie, this is Kate Anderson. She's Johnny's girlfriend. Kate, this is Nurse Dixie McCall," offered Roy. "Dix, what can you tell us about Johnny?"

"Well, he's stabilized. His left tibia is fractured and he's got two broken ribs on his left side. The skull x-rays were fine and he did regain consciousness, but he does have a slight concussion. He also has a ruptured spleen and the doctors are removing that now."

Kate looked back up at Dixie through her tears. "When can I see him?"

"He's in surgery right now, but when he's out I'll let you know."

"Nurse McCall?" asked Kate.

"Yes?"

"Is Johnny going to be okay?"

"We have every reason to expect him to make a full recovery." She smiled at this woman who seemed so concerned about Johnny.

Kate dropped her head down and let out a big sigh of relief. They were all relieved to hear the good news.

"Thanks Dix," said Roy.

"Sure. Just let me know if you need anything, okay?"

After Dixie left the room it seemed like an eternity to everyone before she returned.

"Johnny's out of surgery now. Do you want to see him?" Dixie had directed her question towards Kate.

"Yes!" Kate was so relieved. "Can Roy and Joanne come too?" She turned towards Roy. "I know you probably want to see him too."

"Sure. Just follow me." Dixie led them to Johnny's recovery room. When Kate entered the room and saw Johnny, she had to stop to catch her breath.

Joanne reached over and grabbed her arm. "Are you okay?"

Kate took a deep breath and nodded her head.

Dr. Brackett was in the room reviewing Johnny's chart and had looked up when they entered. He knew Roy, of course. And he recognized Joanne. But he wondered who the other woman was.

Kate walked over to Johnny's bed. *He was perfectly fine this morning and now look at him!* He had tubes coming out of him, a cast on his leg, bandages wrapped around his chest and a bandage on his forehead. His face and hands were still stained by the smoke. He was totally motionless. She leaned over to get close to his face, gently brushed his hair with her hand and whispered, "Johnny can you hear me? Can you hear me, Johnny?" She waited for him to respond. "Johnny?" Her voice was broke. Slowly, the tears slid down her cheek and she thought of what he had asked her earlier that morning.

"Is he going to be okay?" Roy asked Dr. Brackett.

"We've got him stabilized and there's no reason to think he won't make a total recovery. We're just waiting for him to come out of the anesthesia."

"How long will that take?" asked Joanne.

"He should be coming out of it any time now."

"Can I sit with him for awhile, Doctor?" Kate asked.

"Sure. We'll give you some time alone," he said as he put down Johnny's chart. He was still wondering who this woman was.

After everyone had left the room Kate pulled up a stool next to Johnny's bed. She picked up his hand and held it in hers and whispered, "Johnny, I don't know if you can hear me or not, but I love you *so* much."

Once in the hallway Dr. Brackett looked at Roy. "Is that a relative of Johnny's?"

"That's Johnny's girlfriend, Kathryn Anderson. She goes by Kate."

"I didn't know Johnny was seeing someone. It must be serious."

Roy nodded his head. "Yeah, it is."

"Dr. Brackett, Kate was engaged to someone once before and he died in a car accident. I don't know what she would do if anything happened to John," Joanne added.

"Well, we won't have to worry about that. He's going to be fine," Dr. Brackett reassured her.

Back inside Johnny's room, he was starting to wake up.

"Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me?" asked Kate anxiously. She could see that Johnny was trying to open his eyes. Kate ran into the hallway "Dr. Brackett! I think he's waking up!"

Dr. Brackett rushed back into Johnny's room with Roy and Joanne right behind him. Dr. Brackett went directly over to Johnny and leaned over his bed. "John? John, it's Dr. Brackett. Can you hear me?"

"Where am I?" Johnny asked. It was barely audible. *Why is it so hard to open my eyes? I feel so weak.*

"Johnny, you're at Rampart. You were in an accident, but you're going to be fine. Do you understand?"

Johnny nodded his head weakly even though he couldn't remember anything happening to him. *What happened to me? Why does my head hurt so badly? And my chest!* Through the pain, he tried to focus on the faces in front of him. *It looks like Dr. Brackett.* He squinted his eyes; everything was blurry to him. Then he thought he saw Kate. "Katie?" he barely whispered.

"Hi Johnny." She took his hand, kissed it and held it up to her cheek. "It's about time you wake up, sleepyhead. Dr. Brackett says you're going to be just fine. Just rest."

"What happened?" All of a sudden his face cringed with pain.

"You were injured in a fire," responded Dr. Brackett.

"My head hurts—my chest. Everything hurts."

"Can you give him something for the pain, Doctor?" asked Kate with a worried look on her face.

Dr. Brackett nodded.

Kate whispered, "Don't worry, you're going to be fine. They're going to give you something for the pain. Just rest now." She kissed his hand again and stroked his hair. He was so helpless and it broke her heart to see him in so much pain.

Johnny closed his eyes. Knowing Kate was there was comforting and her touch was so soothing. He fell into another slumber for hours, and when he woke up he seemed quite agitated.

Kate noticed Johnny open his eyes and she saw the anxiety in his face.

"Hi you." She stood up, leaned over him and gently kissed his forehead.

"Katie?" His voice was still very weak.

"Yes, it's me. You're going to be just fine. There's nothing to worry about. You're going to be okay," she said as she stroked his hair.

Having Kate with him like that immediately calmed Johnny. His face relaxed as Kate nursed over him. With her halo of blonde hair and the calming effect she had on him, she seemed like an angel to him right now.

Just then Joanne and Roy walked into the room. Kate looked at them and smiled, "He just woke up. He's looking better."

"Hey partner, how are you feeling?" asked Roy as he approached Johnny's bed.

"Like I've been run over by a fire truck," he responded weakly.

Roy smiled. *That's Johnny's sense of humor!*

"What time is it?"

"It's about seven o'clock."

"When did I come in?"

"This morning, at about ten o'clock."

Oh, man," he moaned as he tried to shift his position in the bed slightly. He looked over at Kate. He needed to see her. But even in the state he was in he could see that she looked completely exhausted and that she had been crying. "Roy?" he whispered.

"Yeah?" Roy leaned in closer so he could hear John better.

"Do me a favor and tell Kate to go home."

"Shhh, Johnny. Just rest. I'm going to stay right here with you," Kate said.

Now it was Joanne's turn to speak. "He's right Kate. You need to go home and get some rest. He's going to need you when he gets out of here and then you'll never get any rest. He'll have you running in circles!" Joanne winked at Johnny.

"No, really—I would feel better if I stayed here."

"He's going to be okay," Roy said.

She thought for a moment contemplating what she should do. She didn't want to leave Johnny but she was totally drained. "Okay. But I'm going under protest." She forced a smile for Johnny.

They waited until Johnny had fallen back asleep before they left Rampart, which didn't take long for he was still very weak and sedated by all of the medication being administered to him.

The ride to Kate's apartment was quiet. Joanne and Roy tried to engage her in conversation a few times but Kate barely spoke a word. When they dropped Kate off at her apartment Kate asked if Joanne could come up for a few minutes, if Roy wouldn't mind. She needed to talk to Joanne.

Once inside her apartment Kate turned to Joanne with a distressed look on her face. "Joanne, how do you do this? How do you live knowing that Roy is in danger every time he goes to work?" Her voice started to quiver and she shook her head. "I had a lot of time to think at the hospital and I don't think I can do this. I don't think I can stand to spend any more time in hospitals. After Tom, it was so hard for me to open myself up again to someone—to let myself love someone again. And now that I've fallen in love with Johnny, *this* happens!" She had fought to keep her feelings contained during the drive from the hospital but she couldn't do it any longer. She finally gave in and broke down into sobs.

Joanne was taken aback. She wasn't prepared for this. "Kate, I don't know what to tell you. I love Roy and Roy loves his job. Of course I worry about him every time he leaves for work. But I wouldn't want Roy to quit doing something that he loves. And I know that the people he works with are his friends and that they all watch out for each other."

Kate shook her head. "But you're *strong*, Joanne. I'm not that strong."

"Yes you are. You *are* strong. You're stronger than you think you are."

"But I don't think that I can live my life this way! I can't live worrying every minute of every day that something awful is going to happen. I can't go through something like this again!"

"Kate, just think how much you love Johnny and how much he loves you. Roy told me that Johnny's never been happier since he met you. He said that Johnny's never felt like this about anybody before. You two were meant to be together." Joanne was desperately trying to convince Kate that everything would be all right.

Kate shook her head. "I do love Johnny. I love him so much! But when I heard about his accident, all those memories of the night Tom died came flooding back to me. And the funeral, the grief and loneliness I went through afterwards—*all* of that. It was so awful Joanne! And all I could think of was that he was going to die too. He didn't this time. But the next time, he could. He could die the next time!"

"You can't allow yourself to think that way. You can't let those thoughts run your life."

Kate shook her head. "I just don't think I can do this. You know, he deserves more from someone, too. He deserves someone that can give him more than I can."

"Kate, before you do anything, please think about this some more. Don't rush into anything. Don't do anything that you'll regret later. If you need to talk about this some more you call me—at any time of the day. Will you promise me that?"

Kate nodded her head. "Thanks Joanne, and thank you for being at the hospital today. I couldn't have handled it without you."

"You're welcome. You're my best friend and I'd do anything for you. So *please* call me if you need to talk. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

Joanne gave Kate a hug before she left. "Everything's going to be just fine. You just wait and see. It'll all look better in the morning once you've had some sleep."

When Joanne got back in the car with Roy, he asked, "What went on up there?"

"Roy, it's not good. She's thinking about breaking up with Johnny." She couldn't bear to look at Roy's face.

"Oh man." Roy tightened his grip on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. *Johnny's going to be crushed! Why would she do that?* But he was pretty sure he knew why. Johnny had told Roy about Kate's former fiancée. "Is there anything we can do to change her mind?"

"I don't know. I tried talking to her, but she's so tired—physically and emotionally. She has been through the worst thing that can happen to someone she loves once. And today, it almost happened again. I guess she just doesn't have it in her anymore. You know, she really loves him so much, but she can't bear to live with that constant worry that something bad is going to happen to him. The same thing that I try not to worry about every day you go to work."

I'm lucky to have such a strong and loving wife. I know that my job worries her yet she never complains. I wish Johnny could have that. He reached over, squeezed Joanne's hand and looked at her with his big blue eyes. "I love you, you know."

"I love you too."

Roy and Joanne drove home that evening in silence. Each was going over in their minds the events that had transpired that day.

Kate skipped work the next day to be by Johnny's side at the hospital. On the days following, she came straight from work to the hospital to keep him company during the evening until visiting hours were over. Roy and Joanne had also made it a point to stop by to visit every day. Each of the guys from the station had dropped by at various times, too. Johnny's co-workers now knew who Kate was, and Chet deeply regretted giving Johnny a hard time about his 'imaginary girlfriend' the morning of the accident.

The night before Johnny was scheduled to leave the hospital to go home was a sleepless one for Kate. All night long she kept going over in her mind whether she was doing the right thing. The next morning it felt like her stomach was twisted into a big knot. She felt nauseous even though she hadn't been able to eat anything for the last few days. She spent more time than usual getting ready that morning—there was no rush. And she dreaded what she had to do today. Finally, she decided it was time to leave for Rampart to take Johnny home. Roy and Joanne were also there. Kate had had requested they be there. Johnny was going to need Roy and Joanne today. Not just because of his injuries, but also because of the news that he was going to hear from Kate.

"Here you are Johnny! Home sweet home!" Kate said, trying to sound cheerful as she helped him through the door. He didn't need much help, though, as he was maneuvering pretty well—he had been on crutches before.

"Why didn't Roy and Joanne come up?"

"I'm sure they're on their way up. Let's put you on the couch. You need to get some rest." She helped him to the couch, lifted his leg and gently placed it on the coffee table in front of him. "You look tired. Do you want to go to bed? Or do you want something to eat?" She turned towards the kitchen.

"Katie, come here." Johnny reached out his arm towards her.

Kate stopped in her tracks and slowly turned around to face him. She took his outstretched hand and he pulled her onto the couch next to him. He put his arm around her as she laid her head on his chest. She closed her eyes and listened to the steady sound of his heart beating.

"Why were you so quiet in the car? Are you tired? You *look* exhausted."

Kate nodded her head. "Yeah, I guess I am a little tired."

"I want you to take of yourself, Katie. It looks like you've lost weight. Have you been eating?"

Heavyhearted, she replied, "I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Just concentrate on getting better yourself."

"Thank you for taking such good care of me. What would I do without you?" He put his hand underneath her chin, tilted her face up towards his and gently kissed her lips.

Kate's eyes were brimming with tears.

"What's the matter? What's the sad look for?"

"Johnny, did you ever think about what you wanted in a relationship?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, since you're a firefighter, did you ever think that whoever you decided to be with had to be a special kind of person? Someone who was strong emotionally? I mean, *really* strong?"

"Well, I guess I've never really given it much thought."

"I think you should. I think you deserve someone who is strong; someone who will be there for you. You need to be an exceptional person to be with a fireman. You know, like Joanne. Do you see how she's always there for Roy? She's as steady as a rock. You need someone like that, Johnny. You deserve someone like that."

"Whoa! Where's this coming from all of a sudden?" he asked, completely bewildered.

"Johnny, I'm not like Joanne."

"I don't *want* you to be like Joanne."

"What I'm trying to say is that I don't have what it takes to give you that emotional support that you need." She had an unbearable stabbing feeling in her chest as she said those words.

"What do you mean? I don't understand—."

She had gone over the words she would say during this moment a million times, but now she couldn't

remember any of them.

"Johnny, when I heard that you had been in an accident—a bad accident—I was so scared. All those horrible memories of when Tom died came rushing back to me. And then all I could think of was that you were going to die too. And I couldn't imagine what I would do if something happened to you." Her voice was quaking.

Johnny was stunned. "Kate, there's nothing to worry about. I'm fine now. I'm okay."

Tears started slipping down Kate's face. It pained her so much to look into those deep brown eyes that she loved; that now looked so sad and confused. "You deserve so much more, Johnny. You deserve someone strong, like the way Joanne is for Roy. You deserve so much more than what I can give you. And I can't live knowing that every time you walk out that door for work you may not come back. I just can't live my life that way. And I would never ask you to do anything else because I know how much you love your job." Kate turned away; she couldn't bear to look at him. She was afraid to look at him, afraid of the emotions she would see in his face.

Johnny's heart sank. *What's she saying?* "Kate, please don't do this. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you!"

"I'm sorry," she shook her head, still avoiding looking at him. This was torturing her, she felt like a monster right now.

Johnny was desperate now. "Okay then. I'll quit! I'll quit my job and find something else. We'll get a ranch out in the country that we talked about," he pleaded. "Remember? We talked about doing that someday. We could do it *now*, Katie."

Kate forced herself to face Johnny again. The despair in his face was obvious and it was killing her inside. "Johnny, you can't quit. I would never let you do that on account of me. I know how much you love your job. You *love* being a paramedic!"

"But not more than I love you!" His voice was shaking. He took her hands in his, took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly. "There's nothing more I love than you, Katie."

"There's no way I would ever let you give up your job for me. Please try to understand. This is killing me, too! You deserve so much more than what I have to offer." She felt as though the room was closing in around her. *I don't think I can stand this much longer! I have to get out of here!*

Johnny looked away from her as a tear rolled down his face. *I can't believe this is happening!* He held up his hand as a gesture that he needed some time to compose himself. After about a minute he turned back to face Kate and took a deep breath. He looked her in the eyes and quietly asked, "How am I going to live without you?"

Kate's heart literally ached as he said those words. *How am I going to live without you?* The tears were free falling down her cheeks. Swallowing her tears, she said, "You'll be fine, Johnny. You'll fall in love again. You'll fall in love with someone who will love you and who will be there for you, no matter what. And she'll be strong for you, stronger than I am. I promise."

He looked away again. It felt like his heart was being torn out of his chest and ripped into pieces. His entire world was crashing down on him.

They both sat in silence, each with their own mournful thoughts, until Kate spoke softly. "Johnny, I have to leave." She slowly got up and walked over to the door. She paused as she opened the door to leave and looked back at him. Choking back the tears she said, "I'll never stop loving you." She opened the door, stepped through it and quietly closed it behind her.

As soon as he heard the door click shut he picked up a book from the coffee table and threw it across the room. "NO!" The tears stung his eyes. His entire future had just walked out that door. He couldn't imagine his life again without Kate. He had waited his whole life for someone like her—*for her*—and now she was gone. His whole world had turned dark and cold.

Kate heard the noise of the book hitting the wall and it startled her. She started walking faster and ended up running to get outside. When she was out of the building she stopped, put her head in her hands and wept.

Roy and Joanne had been nervously waiting outside of the building. Roy's stomach dropped when he saw Kate; he knew what had just happened. He couldn't even imagine what his best friend was going through right now.

Joanne walked over to Kate and put her arms around her.

Kate could barely speak because she was sobbing so badly. "That was the hardest thing I've ever had to do! What have I done to Johnny? Oh God! What have I done?"

Joanne looked over Kate's shoulder at Roy. He knew that he had to go in and check on Johnny but he dreaded it. Reluctantly, he turned to go inside.

"Johnny?" Roy stepped into Johnny's apartment. "Johnny, are you okay?" He knew he wasn't okay though. Johnny's was quietly sitting on the couch; his face was as white as a sheet and he had tears rolling down his face. He had never seen Johnny cry before.

"Kate's gone, Roy. She left me," he answered quietly. "She tried to tell me it was for my own good. Go figure that one out." He forced a laugh, but he was not smiling.

Roy had no idea what he should do. "She's just been through so much, you know? She's already lost someone she loved and then you had your accident. That was more than she could take. Some people can take more than other people, but I guess she's not one of them." He didn't know what else to say.

"DON'T YOU THINK THAT SHOULD BE MY DECISION? Don't you think *I* should be the one to decide if I'm happy or not? DAMMIT! This should never have happened! DAMN THIS JOB! DAMN THAT ACCIDENT!" He slapped his cast and his face cringed with pain.

Roy knew that he didn't really mean that. The two men sat together in silence. After a few minutes Johnny took a deep breath and said, "I had asked her to marry me."

Roy was surprised. Johnny had talked to him about his relationship with Kate a lot and Kate had regularly confided in Joanne, but he had no idea that things had progressed that far. Roy shoved his hands in his pockets. "Johnny, I had no idea," he stammered. "What happened?"

"She turned me down. She said she wasn't ready yet. But she said I shouldn't give up on her—that I should just give her some time. Ironic isn't it? He laughed that laugh again. It was a sarcastic laugh. "She said I shouldn't give up on her and what does she do? She dumps me!"

"Man, I'm sorry."

Joanne had walked in the room and overheard this last part. *Oh God, I had no idea either. Poor Johnny!*

Joanne took a deep breath and with concern in her voice she said, "Hi, John. How are you doing? Is there anything we can do for you?"

"You can't do a damn thing for me. NOBODY CAN!" he snarled back.

Joanne knew he didn't mean what he said. "Well, are you hungry? Would you like me to fix you something to eat?" It was a flimsy attempt, she knew, to try to lift this dark mood and to get his thoughts off of Kate. "I brought over a hot dish for you. And Kate made sure you had enough food to last you a few weeks. She made sure that you had juice, and milk, and—." She stopped when she realized what she was saying. "I'm sorry, John."

Roy and Joanne stayed with Johnny for over an hour before they went home. They promised him that they would check in on him every day. They were determined to be there for him now—they were going to see him through this, no matter what.

Roy walked into Station 51's kitchen Wednesday morning carrying a handful of envelopes. "Morning Johnny! How were your days off?"

"Hey Roy! Pretty good. What about you?" he replied as he poured himself a cup of coffee and stood next to the stove. It had been about four months since his accident.

"Pretty good. Hey Cap. Hey Marco, Chet, Mike—."

Each man returned a greeting to Roy.

Turning back to Johnny, Roy asked, "So, did you do anything while you were off?"

"Nah. Nothing special."

"Well, what *did* you do?"

"Like I said, not much."

"You must have done *something*."

"For crying out loud, trust me, Roy. What I did on my days off are not that interesting." John wondered why Roy was always so interested lately in his activities.

Since he could see he wasn't going to get a conversation started with Johnny, Roy started distributing envelopes to everyone in the room. "Here you go Cap. Here you go Mike. Here's one for you Chet, one for you Marco, and one for you Johnny."

"What the heck is this?" asked Johnny turning the envelope over in his hand.

"Open it up and find out. You know, it was really all Joanne's idea but it might be kind of fun." Roy had a

funny smirk on his face.

Chet opened his envelope first and found an invitation inside. "What this? You're getting married? Aren't you already married? You *are* married, right?"

"Yep. We're renewing our vows. A lot of people are doing it these days. In two weeks it'll be our 10th anniversary and Joanne wanted to do something special. This is what she wanted to do."

"Hey! Well you can count me in. Sounds like fun!" exclaimed Marco.

"You can count me in too, Roy," said the Captain.

"Great! How about the rest of you guys? Can everyone else make it too?"

"Sure, I'll come. What about you Chet?" Mike asked.

"Okay. Yeah. I guess it'll be kind of fun. Renewing vows, huh? Boy, she really talked you into that one! That sure doesn't sound like you, Roy."

"Well, Joanne really wanted to do it." He noticed that Johnny hadn't said anything yet.

"Johnny, can you make it?"

He faced the counter, turning his back towards everyone. "I don't know. I'll have to check my calendar. I'll let you know."

Everyone in the room knew what was going through Johnny's mind; they all knew what had happened between Kate and him.

Johnny, for the most part, had been his usual self when he had finally gotten back to work. However, there were days where he was unusually quiet. It was those days when Kate was especially on his mind. Roy knew. He and Johnny were close and Johnny had confided in him.

"Come on, Johnny. It wouldn't be the same without you there. Joanne really wants you there and she would really miss you if you didn't come."

"Yeah Johnny. It wouldn't be a party without you there!" added Marco.

"Yeah, you can turn on some of that so-called 'Gage charm' and meet some chicks! And maybe they'll be a few left over for the rest of us!" Chet piped in.

Johnny braced his arms on the counter and dropped his head. Roy was his best friend and he and Joanne had really helped him out these last months. He couldn't even imagine what he would have done if they hadn't been there for him. He would feel extremely guilty turning down their invitation to such a special event in their lives. But he knew Kate would be there too. Could he face her? He still had not gotten over her—he didn't know if he *ever* would. But he had managed to pull his life back together to just get through the days—one day at a time. Finally, he took a deep breath, turned around, threw his arms in the air and said, "Okay, I'll be there. Are you happy? I'll come!"

Roy grinned. "Great! Does everyone know where the hotel is? If not, let me know. I still can't believe Joanne talked me into renting a hall in a hotel with a band. But you only have one 10th anniversary. You

know, our wedding was really small. So I guess we're making up for that."

"Man, you must be spending a pretty penny for this one Roy," said Chet.

Captain Stanley then interrupted. "Okay, men. Now let's gather around, we've got some business to attend to. We're due for an inspection any time soon so we need to keep on our toes."

Just then the claxon sounded. "Station 51. Car accident. 1425 Elm Street. 1-4-2-5 Elm Street. Cross street Jackson. Time out 8:30."

It turned out to be a pretty routine run. Luckily, there were no serious injuries. And Roy was relieved for the run because he knew that it had taken Johnny's mind off of the upcoming festivities—and Kate.

The night of Roy and Joanne's party had arrived. When Johnny showed up at the hotel everyone else from the station was already there: Chet, Marco, Mike, and Hank. He could also see some people from the hospital. Among them were Dr. Brackett, Dr. Early, Dix, and Dr. Morton. Actually, *a lot* of people were there. The room was practically full. *I had no idea that Joanne and Roy knew this many people!*

There were tables on both sides of the room with an aisle and a red carpet going down the middle. At the end of the aisle were huge bouquets of flowers. Off to one side sat a group of musicians.

Johnny saw the table where the guys from Station 51 were sitting and walked over to it. Hank and Mike had brought their wives along but the rest of the guys were dateless. "Hi Johnny!" everyone seemed to say at once.

"Hey everyone! This is pretty nice, huh? Joanne and Roy really went all out on this one!"

"Yeah! Roy's going to be broke after this, that's for sure!" exclaimed Chet. "If I ever get married, you can be sure that I'm never going to get talked into renewing my vows. Once is going to have to be enough for her, whoever the lucky woman is!"

"No woman would be lucky marrying you, Chet. But you keep thinking that, if you want," Johnny said dryly.

Just as Chet opened his mouth for a smart reply the music started playing indicating that the ceremony was starting. Joanne and Roy stepped into the room and Joanne had her arm in Roy's. During their walk down the aisle everyone could see how beautiful Joanne looked and how happy they both were. During the ceremony Joanne shed a few tears—everyone expected that, knowing her. Even Roy reached up a few times to wipe his own eyes. The ceremony had an emotional effect on everyone in the room. Everybody who knew Roy and Joanne considered them to be a very happy couple, the perfect pair.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife—again," said the minister as he smiled. There was barely a dry eye in the house. Roy wrapped his arms around Joanne and kissed her and the music started in again. Everybody smiled and clapped as Joanne and Roy came back down the aisle, and both Roy and Joanne were beaming from ear to ear. She had her arm in Roy's again and he had his hand resting on hers. It was a truly joyous occasion in their lives that they had shared with all of their friends.

Barely a second later waiters and waitresses were filling the room, placing plates of food in front of each guest.

Johnny rubbed his hands together and said with a mischievous grin, "Okay everyone. Now that the ceremony's over, let's dig in! I'm starved!"

"Sounds like a plan to me!" said Chet.

"Man, they really did go all out on this one!" Marco exclaimed after he saw the plate full of food that was placed in front of him.

Chet noticed that while Johnny ate he was glancing around the room. *You can bet he's looking for Kate. I haven't seen her yet. She probably decided not to come knowing John would be here.* Chet then noticed Johnny cramming a bun into his mouth. "Hey Johnny! Remember your manners, will you?"

"Yeah, right. Look who's talking!" Johnny replied with his mouth full.

After everyone had finished their dessert of wedding cake the band started playing, and the waiters and waitresses whisked the plates off of the tables and took them away. Roy and Joanne danced the first dance while everyone else watched them. It was obvious they were still deeply in love after all these years. Roy held Joanne tightly, whispered sweet things into her ear and kissed her cheek. Everyone in the room that evening was a little jealous of Joanne and Roy and the special relationship they had—especially Johnny.

After that first dance, which was reserved for Joanne and Roy, guests proceeded towards the dance floor, including Hank and his wife, and Mike and his wife. The rest of the guys stayed at the table, talking and watching everyone on the dance floor. A short while later Roy and Joanne approached their table.

"Hey guys! Thank you for coming! I'm so glad you were all able to make it!" exclaimed Roy. Roy and Joanne were holding hands and they were both grinning from ear to ear.

Johnny smiled that fabulous smile of his. "I wouldn't have missed it! Joanne, it was a beautiful ceremony and you look absolutely gorgeous." He stood up and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "And you don't look so bad yourself. Congratulations!" he said as he gave Roy a slap on the back.

"Well, thank you John Gage!" said Joanne. You're such a charmer! Will you do me the honors of having the next dance with me?" *Johnny's back to his playful self. I'm so glad!*

Johnny beamed at Joanne, held out his arm for her and led her to the dance floor.

They danced through a couple of songs and at the beginning of the third song Johnny felt a tap on his shoulder. "Excuse me, but do you think I could have a dance with my own wife?"

"Certainly!" Johnny placed Joanne's hand into Roy's. "She's all yours."

Johnny stepped over to the side of the room to watch the other guests on the dance floor. He was happy for Joanne and Roy. They had everything that he had always secretly wished for. As he stood there watching the others dancing, he didn't notice that someone was now standing beside him.

"Hi, Johnny," a voice said quietly.

Johnny looked to see who was talking to him. *Kate!* He clenched his jaw and he turned back towards the dance floor.

"How have you been?"

"Fine." *She caught me off-guard, dammit!*

"You look good. How's your leg? I saw you dancing with Joanne. It looks like it's not bothering you."

He stood in silence. He found it impossible to look at her, impossible to look into those deep, blue eyes.

"It's a nice party, isn't it?"

Johnny didn't respond. He couldn't. It felt like his heart was being ripped into pieces all over again.

"Roy and Joanne sure look great tonight."

"Yeah," he only said, nodding his head, still keeping eyes on the dance floor. He was avoiding any eye contact with Kate. He refused to let her see the pain he was still in.

It was obvious to Kate that Johnny did not want to have anything to do with her. She understood completely. Nevertheless, she continued to try to talk to him. She needed to.

She took a deep breath and quietly said, "I've missed you."

What am I supposed to say to her? That I miss you too? No way. I'm not going to make that mistake. He had been to hell and back and wasn't about to go there again.

"John, aren't you going to talk to me?"

"You know what Kate? I cannot have this conversation with you." He wouldn't look at her; he *couldn't* look at her.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I guess I should not have bothered you." She turned to leave but turned back again one more time and gently placed her hand on his arm. "Johnny, I'm sorry. I think about you all of the time. I always wonder what it would be like if..." She looked down and tried to compose herself as she felt tears burning in her eyes. Then she continued, "Well, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for everything." She then turned around and walked away.

As Kate walked away John could feel a stabbing pain in his heart and tears coming to his eyes. He fought to keep control of his emotions. *DAMN! Why did she have to do that? I shouldn't have come here tonight! Oh man, I've got to get out of here!* He couldn't breathe; it felt like he was suffocating. He quickly walked back to his table to grab his jacket.

"Hey man! What's the hurry? Are you leaving already?" asked Chet.

"Yes I am. Got a problem with that?" he snarled back.

"You're usually the last one at a party to leave, John. Come on, stay and keep us company," urged Marco.

"Find your own company! Go find some women to dance with for crying out loud! Don't depend on me to be the life of the party all the time!" Johnny was angry and he looked coldly at Chet and Marco.

"Yeah, right. All the women here are taken. They all came with dates," complained Chet.

"Yeah," chimed in Marco. "There's definitely more men here than women. I asked Angela to come with me tonight but she had to work "

"Well that's not my problem, is it?" he growled back.

"Hey man. Lighten up, Gage," said Chet.

Johnny needed some air, *now*. And their table was right next to the terrace. Johnny went from the bright lights of the party into the dark night on the terrace. He desperately needed fresh air. He loosened his tie, leaned his arms against the railing and dropped his head in defeat. Even though it was a beautiful summer evening—the moon was full and the stars were shining brightly—the whole world seemed dark, cold and empty to him once more.

"Johnny, what are you doing out here?" It was Joanne.

"Just getting some air," he said, clenching his jaw again.

"Are you okay?"

Johnny said nothing.

"I saw Kate."

Silence again.

"She was upset, John. She said she tried to talk to you," Joanne replied softly. Joanne knew that he was still hurting and she felt guilty for being so happy, while her closest friends were so miserable. "John, I wish you would talk with her. She's got some things to say to you that you really need to hear."

Johnny stood up and turned towards Joanne. "Joanne, there's nothing she can say that I would be interested in hearing! There is absolutely nothing we have to talk about." He gave her an icy stare and looked away.

"You are so wrong! Quit being so stubborn and just talk to her! Swallow your pride, will you? Just this once!"

Johnny heard the exasperation in Joanne's voice and it surprised him. He looked at her. He could tell by the look on her face that she was very angry with him. *Joanne's never been angry with me before. I've never seen her angry with anyone.* "What could she possibly have to say to me after what she did?" he challenged her.

"Go find out for yourself. Do it. *Please*. You know I've never lied to you, no matter what. And I'm telling you now that if you don't go and talk to her, you just might live to regret it."

He took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. He leaned his arms against the railing again, dropped his head and shook it from side to side. "I can't, Joanne. I just can't. You don't know what it's like. You just have no idea."

"You're right. I don't know exactly what you've been through or what you're going through now. But I have a pretty good idea. Kate and I talk, Johnny, and I know what *she's* been going through. She's going through the same thing you are."

He straightened his back and faced Joanne angrily. "Look, she's the one who broke up with me! Remember? So how could she possibly be going through what I've been going through? Tell me that!"

"Trust me, John. I know. I just know. And I promise you that things will be better if you two sit down and talk. Please. Just do it."

John lowered his head again. He was completely weary of the whole situation. There was no fight left in him anymore; he felt totally drained. Reluctantly, he finally replied, "Okay. I'll do this for you. Not for Kate, but for you." He really had no desire to do this. He had already been through the 'emotional wringer' enough times these last months and didn't feel like going through it all over again.

"Thank you, Johnny. Thank you." Joanne pointed down the hill from the terrace. "She's down there sitting on the bench by the garden. She doesn't know that I'm talking to you, so please don't tell her."

"Fine." Johnny ran his hand nervously through his thick, brown hair.

You won't regret it. I promise."

Yeah, we'll just see about that. He took a deep breath, shoved his hands in his pants pockets and started slowly down the hill. When he got to the bottom he could see Kate sitting on the bench with her head in her hands. *Is she crying?* He stood there for a moment, not sure what to do. He didn't want to be here, he wanted to turn around and go home. Just then, Kate noticed him and it was too late for him to leave.

"Johnny? What—what are you doing here?" she said, surprised. She started to wipe her eyes in an attempt to cover up the fact that she'd been crying. *I don't want him to see me this way!*

"You said earlier that you wanted to talk to me. So, I'm here to talk." His voice was cold.

"How did you know I was down here?"

"I just knew." Then he added, "Kate, I really don't think there's anything that we have to say to each other."

"I know you feel that way and I don't blame you one bit. I completely understand. But there are some things that I would like to say to you. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to." She motioned to the bench that she was already sitting on. "Do you want to sit down?"

John sat down on the bench, but on the other end of it. He cleared his throat in nervousness.

She could tell this was very painful for him and she wondered how she should begin.

"John..." She paused for a minute, turned towards him and then spoke deliberately. "John, I am so sorry. I regret everything I did to you, for everything that I've put you through. I never should have left you."

Johnny didn't say anything. *It's too late for this now, Kate.*

"I have missed you so much. I can't stop thinking about you. My life has been so empty without you."

Johnny turned his head and looked away. *He really didn't want to hear this.* He could literally feel his heart aching. He missed her too, but there was no way he was going to admit to it.

"Johnny, I've been completely miserable since the day I—well, you know."

"Since you dumped me?" he said bitterly.

That hurt! But he's right. "Yes. Since that day."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. They could hear the party going on inside the hotel with the laughing and the cheerful voices. But there was nothing cheerful about the conversation they were having.

Kate wondered if she should just stop right now. She was just making Johnny angry and she didn't want to make things worse if that was even possible. But here they both were, so she decided to keep going. She took a deep breath, paused and said, "Johnny, I still love you. It may not matter to you anymore, but I just wanted to tell you that I'm still in love with you. I don't expect you to say anything. I just wanted you to know this."

Johnny was definitely not prepared for that. He was getting a lump in his throat now. He wouldn't have been able to speak, even if he'd wanted to.

"I've realized that I need to spend time with the people I love, while they're still here, still on this earth. We're all going to be gone, sooner or later, and I know that I shouldn't waste any precious time dwelling on that." She was pouring out her heart to him and he wasn't even acknowledging what she was saying.

Kate continued speaking slowly and softly. "I know that I acted like a complete idiot and coward when I broke up with you. I wish I could take that all back, but I can't change that now. But, at the same time, I can't go on like this anymore. I just had to tell you how much I still love you. I would have regretted it my whole life if I hadn't told you. I already have so many regrets—," her voice tapered off. "John, I've never loved anyone as much as—." Her voice started to break. She stopped to wipe her eyes and struggled to regain her composure. "I've never loved anyone as much as I love you, John—not even Tom. Not even Tom, Johnny!" *Oh God!* Kate got up from the bench, walked towards the other end of the garden, looked skyward and started to sob uncontrollably. *God, I'm sorry Tom!* She had loved Tom so much. They truly had been in love. But it was nothing compared to being in love with Johnny. She didn't even think that it was possible for her to fall in love again after Tom, but it had happened, and it was different with Johnny. She couldn't really put it into words but somehow, in some way, she loved Johnny more than she had ever loved Tom. Her relationship with Johnny had been much more full and passionate than it had ever been with Tom.

Johnny felt tears filling his eyes. *Was that really true?* He finally looked over at Kate. She was crying her eyes out and her whole body was shaking. He got a wrenching feeling in his stomach. Instinctively, he got up and slowly walked over to her but stopped a few feet away from her. It tore him apart to see her in so much pain, even though he was in just as much pain. She couldn't see it, but his eyes were full of compassion for her. He had not *allowed* himself to really fully understand why she had broke up with him. He had just wanted someone to blame for his unhappiness and to wallow in self-pity. But the emotional wall that he had built after Kate left him was now beginning to crumble. *Why have I been so damn blind? She's been hurting just as much as I have!*

He walked up to her and put his arms around her and held her close. "Shhh, Katie. Don't cry. Come on. Don't cry, okay?"

But she couldn't stop crying.

"Everything's going to be okay. Don't cry. Shhh. Look at me Katie. Come on, look at me."

Kate wiped her eyes and slowly lifted her face to look at him. She saw that he was crying too.

He gently wiped the tears from her face. "I still love you, too. I'm so sorry!" he whispered. He pulled her to him. "God, I'm so sorry!"

Kate pulled away from him. "Johnny, you have nothing to be sorry about! It's all my fault. *I'm* the one who's sorry—for *everything*. You have every reason to hate me. But I just had to tell you how I still felt. I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't. I would always have wondered what would have happened, you know, if I didn't tell you. It would have been the biggest regret of my life."

"I'm glad you told me, Katie. And I don't hate you. I could never hate you. There's nothing you could ever do to make me hate you." He stroked her hair and stared closely at her face. *She's been crying so hard*. "So what are you really trying to tell me?"

"I want us to try it again, that is, if you want to. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to, but I can't get over you. I'm always thinking of you. I'm completely miserable without you."

"Could you be with me if I stayed with the fire department?" He looked longingly in her eyes for her answer.

She nodded her head. "Yes. I know that now. I don't want to spend a single minute—a single *second*—of my life without you. I want to spend it *with* you, no matter what. I swear I'll always be there for you. I'm not going anywhere—not without *you*, anyway."

Johnny's tears were flowing freely now. "You don't know how much I've missed you. You're the only one I've ever loved, Katie. I never stopped loving you. As much as I tried, I never could stop."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She dropped her head in shame.

Johnny took a deep breath. "Come here." He held out his arms for her and she walked into them. He wrapped them tightly around her. "There's no need to cry anymore. Okay? Everything's okay now. I missed you, Katie. I love you. It's okay. I want to be with you, too." He could feel her body relaxing. *It feels so good to hold her again*. He couldn't believe this was happening.

Kate couldn't believe this was happening either. It was as if a huge cloud had lifted. She rested her cheek against his neck. It felt wonderful being in his strong arms again. Like she had always done before, she reached up and ran her hand through his hair. "I've missed you so much. You have no idea how much I've missed you."

"Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea." He could feel her warm breath against his skin and he wanted to be alone with her so badly.

Kate looked up at Johnny and he bent down and kissed her. The kiss was salty from all of the tears that had been shed by both of them. He kissed her gently, at first, then more deeply. Then they held each other for a long time, both trying to absorb what had just happened.

After a few moments, he quietly asked, "What do you say we leave this place? What do you think? Do you want to leave or go back up to the party?"

She looked up at him. "I just want to stay here in this moment forever. It's nice just being here with you."

He held her more tightly, never wanting to let go. After a few minutes, he asked, "Well, will you at least follow me somewhere?"

"Where's that?"

John took Kate's hand and led her back up the hill, around the side of the hotel to his Rover in the parking lot.

"What are we doing out here?"

"Just a second." Johnny opened the door, got in the vehicle, reached over to the glove compartment and took something out of it. He put this object into his glove compartment that fateful Monday morning after he had left Kate's place for work.

What's he doing?

When he stepped back out of the vehicle he was holding a small box in his hand. He walked up to Kate and looked into her eyes. "Katie?"

"What, Johnny?"

Wait. I want to do this the right way. He bent down on one knee and took Kate's left hand in his. He pressed the mysterious object into the palm of her hand.

Kate felt her knees go weak. *Is he? No. He couldn't be. There's no way!*

Johnny looked up at her. "I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I can't ever—*could* never—imagine living my life without you." He closed her hand around the box. "Katie, will you marry me?"

Oh my God. I can't believe this is happening! But how did he...? She stared at Johnny incredulously and opened the box. Inside was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen. She looked back at him in disbelief. "Johnny, this ring...it's beautiful."

Johnny stood up, still looking into her eyes. His eyes were brimming with tears and they were pleading to hers. "Katie, this was my mother's wedding ring. After she died, my father gave it to me so that I could give it to the woman I would marry and I want that woman to be you. Will you marry me?"

She looked into those big brown eyes that she had missed so desperately. She reached up and gently brushed the hair from his face. "Yes, Johnny. I'll marry you," she whispered.

He wanted to be sure he had heard what he *thought* he heard. He searched her eyes and knew that he *had* heard her right. He whispered, "Are you sure?" He wanted to be sure that she was ready now.

"Yes, I'm sure. I want to be with you, Johnny. There's nothing I want more than to marry you and be in your life again. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"You don't know how happy you've just made me." His voice cracked with emotion. Johnny took the ring, carefully placed it on her finger and then kissed her.

When their lips parted they were practically breathless. "It's going to take some time for this to sink in, you know. I never imagined anything like this would happen tonight. I was just hoping to talk to you. And now, after all this, you ask me to *marry* you?" She was completely stunned. After a reflective pause, she then added, "So, I'm going to be Mrs. Johnny Gage?" She looked up at him and smiled which caused his stomach to do a 'flip-flop.'

Johnny, still holding her, put his mouth against her cheek and whispered into her ear. "Uh huh. I like the sound of that. It's going to be you and me, sweetie. Together, forever. I love you so much, Katie. I'll love you for as long as I live." They both had tears in their eyes. The difference was these were tears of happiness and joy. Neither one of them could believe this was happening; they both felt the same way about each other—after all this time and after everything that had happened between them.

Johnny finally spoke softly, "What do you say we leave this place?"

"I think we should go talk to Roy and Joanne before we leave. You know, let them know we're leaving and congratulate them one more time."

"You got it." He put his arm around her shoulder and they walked back around the hotel to the terrace. Here they stopped to watch the party going on inside while looking for Roy and Joanne. Johnny stood behind Kate, encircled her with his arms, and rested his cheek against hers. He closed his eyes and tried to take in everything about Kate: the way she smelled, the softness of her skin, the way she felt—everything. The dance floor was full of people having a great time. They didn't think that anyone noticed them on the terrace but they were about to find out that they were wrong. They soon saw Roy and Joanne approaching them with big grins on their faces.

Joanne had been the one who noticed them first from the dance floor. "Hi you two. Is there something I should know here? You've made up?" Then she saw something shiny on Kate's hand and she gasped. "Kate! Are you wearing what I think you're wearing?"

Kate held up her left hand to show Joanne and grinned. "Yep. Looks like I'm getting married!"

"Hey partner! Congratulations! That's great!" Roy vigorously shook Johnny's hand and gave him a quick hug. "Congratulations Kate! Are you sure you can put up with this guy?" Roy joked.

"It's a good thing your wife is persistent, Roy. Thank you, Joanne." *Everything she said to me earlier was right. Knowing what I know now, I would have regretted it the rest of my life if I hadn't talked to Katie tonight.*

"Joanne! You talked to Johnny?" Kate was embarrassed.

"Well, what are friends for if they're not going to help each other out? Besides, I knew what was best for both of you. You just needed some help, that's all! I am so happy for both of you!" She gave Johnny and Kate each a big hug. "I love you both so much. You two are going to be so happy. You're such a wonderful couple, you know that?"

"I'd like to think that!" said Johnny as he put his arm around Kate's shoulder.

Then an idea came to Joanne. "Wait here just a second. Don't move!" she ordered and then she quickly walked back into the ballroom and approached the bandleader.

"What's she up to, Roy?" asked Kate.

"I don't know, but I have a feeling we'll soon find out." He grinned.

Then they heard Joanne speaking into the microphone. "Listen up everyone! We have a special couple here tonight. Roy and I are celebrating 10 wonderful years of being married. But there's a couple here tonight that's just starting their lives together. And I've been informed that there's a wedding to come, so everyone had better clear your calendar! Anyway, Roy and I would like to dedicate a song to them. Would Kate and Johnny please come up here?" Joanne looked directly over at them.

Johnny and Kate stood there in disbelief. Then Joanne started walking towards them with a big smile on her face. "Come on you two. You knew you wouldn't be able to keep this a secret for long. Get on up there, will you?"

"You'd better do what she says!" Roy winked at Johnny.

Johnny smiled, took Kate's hand, led her to the dance floor and he took her gently in his arms. He held her as they slowly swayed to the song Joanne had requested.

The band was playing 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,' the latest song by Roberta Flack.

*The first time ever I saw your face
I thought the sun rose in your eyes
And the moon and stars were the gifts you gave
To the dark and the empty skies, my love
To the dark and the empty skies.*

The first time ever I kissed your lips....

With every verse, Johnny held Kate more tightly and he could feel her breath against his neck. He gently stroked her hair as they slowly moved to the music. He was holding Kate so tightly she could feel his heart beating. She lifted her head to look into his beautiful brown eyes and reached up to stroke his hair. When their eyes met he gently kissed her forehead. They were both lost in the moment and were totally oblivious to the room full of people that were watching them.

When the song was over everyone in the room started clapping. Surprised, Johnny and Kate started laughing. They hadn't known that they had an audience. All of John's friends from the station and the hospital started coming up to them to congratulate them. Then Joanne and Roy approached them.

Roy smiled and said, "You know, Joanne was bound and determined to get you two back together." *I'm so glad for Johnny! He deserves this kind of happiness.*

"You've got a terrific wife, you know that?" Johnny grinned back. "And thank you, Joanne," he said as he gave her a big bear hug. "What would I—what would *we* do without you?"

"Anything for you and Kate. You're both part of our family. You know that, don't you?" Joanne wiped the tears from her eyes. She was so relieved everything had turned out the way it did. "And you're very lucky to have Kate. She loves you so much. She really does. You know, she had me report back to her about you after practically every shift Roy had. She was concerned about you."

So that's why I got the third degree from Roy during every shift! Johnny grinned to himself.

Johnny could not believe that everything had fallen back into place. He was given a second chance with the woman he loved, the woman he needed, the only woman he wanted spend the rest of his life with. He leaned in towards Kate, put his mouth up to her ear and whispered, "Have I told you lately that I love you?"
