



***Vegas, Baby. Installment #7***

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Phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Johnny?”

“Yeah, I just needed to talk – it’s bad today.”

“Have you been sleeping?”

“Not really.”

“Hang on Johnny, let me step outside, the race just finished and it’s really loud here.” She ducked into the bathroom. “Can you hear me now?”

“You’re breaking up sweetheart. Call me back. Okay? Please?” He hung up.

Ann raced down the steps, past the mezzanine and past the winner’s circle where Jude, Abe and Julie were beckoning to her to join them for the photo commemorating the win of Pax Kristi. Even the smiling jockey was waving her over. She waved her hand at them to indicate that she couldn’t join them and didn’t wait to see if they understood. She knew that she needed to find somewhere quiet to call Johnny back and, in that time, she needed to run. She raced into the barns and ducked into the tack room, closed the door and tried to steady herself. She fought the urge to call Dee, her best friend, to call her brother, she even thought about calling Mateo. She wanted to talk to someone to give her strength before she called Johnny back. He had been spiraling downward for the last few months. He sounded really bad this time. She swallowed hard and dialed.

“Johnny, what’s going on?”

“I’m in a parking lot and I’m not sure where I am.”

“Okay, we can figure this out, just breathe. What do you remember last.”

“Mark and I had a fight” he stammered. “I had some drinks, and some Vicodin.” He started sobbing “I don’t even know what the fight was about, but I think I said some really terrible things. I’m so tired of hurting him.”

“He always forgives you, you know that. Now, let’s figure out where you are and I’ll come pick you up. Can you see a freeway?”

“I’m just tired. So fucking tired,” he sniffled.

“I know, but you are going to be okay. Now look around and tell me what you see.”

Ann met Johnny and Mark at the gym when she was working out to recover her shoulder strength after crashing into the track rail two years ago. Something about the couple drew her to them and she adored having at least two friends who had nothing to do with horses or racing. They both loved cooking and forced her to come over regularly to their swanky Newport Beach condo for meals and parties. Both made her laugh long and hard with bawdy jokes and quick wit. Both had a gentleness that was lacking in so many people at the track. They were a committed couple whose only major flaw was Johnny’s binge drinking that had recently taken a dark turn.

This was not the first sobbing phone call she had received from Johnny, but her gut told her that he was in bad shape. All at once, she flashed an understanding of what her mom must have been feeling at the receiving end of those calls. No wonder she buried herself in church activities. Ann shook her head. Her father survived it and so would Johnny, once she rescued him from some taco stand in West Covina.

She decided she’d call Mark. The tricky part was to convince Johnny to stay put and not drive.

“Okay Johnny, now you listen to me. I’m coming to get you, I know right where you are. Don’t you dare go anywhere or I will hunt you down and kick your ass – and you know I can do it.”

Johnny’s laugh was gorgeous. “So I’m supposed to sit here in my car like a crying idiot and wait for my knightness in a shining pickup truck to come and rescue me?”

“Well you can order us both enchiladas at the taco stand if that makes you feel any better,” she said.

“You actually eat that shit?” He giggled.

“We’re both going to eat it today. Listen, I’m going to hang up and call you as soon as I’m on

the road. DON'T go anywhere – okay?"

"I'm so sorry. I'm a mess." He started crying again.

She realized it was better to keep him on the phone. She logged into the office computer, praying that the faulty internet connection would hold and looked up the address of the taco stand. It wasn't far away, but navigating around the traffic would be tricky. Next, she sent a message to Mark to let him know that she knew where Johnny was, that he was safe for now and that she'd be bringing him home. Then she wrote a note to Enrique saying she would have to leave the track, that she would call Jude soon and that she wouldn't be there to saddle for the 7th race. She had never taken off from the barn abruptly in the middle of the races before and had no idea how it would go over with with Jude. She walked into the barn, still hugging her phone to her ear and saying encouraging things to her struggling, sobbing friend and handed the note to Enrique. He read it, looked at her face, crumpled it up and threw it on the ground and stomped away. With her gone, the only person to take up the slack and to bear the brunt of Jude's famous wrath would be him and he'd had a hell of a day too. Jeezus, everyone in this barn needed a vacation.

Fishing her keys from the front pocket of her jeans she made her way to the parking lot, all the while keeping Johnny talking and not driving. Once inside her truck, she plugged the phone into the speaker and Johnny's stream of consciousness diatribe filled the interior. She plugged the address into her navigation system and programmed it to find ways around Los Angeles traffic. The afternoon sun had turned her truck's cab into an oven and as she started the engine, the air conditioner's noise was deafening.

"What the hell is that?" Johnny asked.

"Nothing J-man, tell me what your analyst said again." Adjusting the air conditioner down to a quiet trickle, she resigned herself to sweat it out for the drive as she swung south on Rosemead Blvd to avoid the afternoon traffic on the 210 freeway.

"Tell me a story Ann. Tell me some crazy ass story about the track."

“Wow Johnny, I don’t know any stories.”

“Tell me about the worst thing you’ve ever done to someone. I want to hear about someone else doing bad stuff. If I wanted platitudes, I’d talk to that smug bitch of an analyst.”

Ann’s truck was passing under an underpass. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a few bad kids smoking and waiting for something. A distant memory flashed in her mind, something she hadn’t thought of in years – a bad story she’d tucked away and she knew it was just what Johnny needed to get his mind away from the terrible place it was dwelling.

“Ok, I’m going to tell you a story, a true story, but you can’t tell anyone else.”

“Yeah?” Johnny sounded engaged and excited.

“Okay, so there was this guy at the track – a rough rider. That’s a gallop boy who is usually bigger and lankier and tougher than the rest. He gets on the crazy horses or the ones who really aren’t broke.”

“Broke?”

“Broke means trained to carry a rider.”

“Why would you call it broke – it’s like something you need to fix?”

“How the hell should I know Johnny? It’s just one of those goofy horse terms. In the old days, you took a horse out of the wild and you broke its will to be wild and the term just stuck I guess.”

“It’s a shitty term. Why would you break a horse that you are trying to get to do what you want?”

“Johnny, do you want to hear the story or not?”

“Tell me what he looked like? What’s his name? I’ll bet he was really handsome in a rugged kind of way?”

“Yeah, I guess so. He was tall and skinny and strong and nothing but trouble all over. But he was fun.”

“Were you ever lovers?”

“No, I went out with his best friend for a while. He was another rough rider but he was quiet and easy going and Vegas, everyone called him Vegas – I think his name was Tim or Tom or something, anyway because I was going out with his friend, he was always pretty cool with me. Anyhow, I was just finishing up some chores at the barn on a really nasty hot summer day. We were racing horses at the county fair in Fresno.”

“Fresno? Ugh, you lived in Fresno?”

“No, but they race horses there on the track at the county fairgrounds for a couple of weeks during the summer.”

“So you’re like a carny or something during the summer?”

“I guess. Everyone traveled around during the summer racing at the fairs. Some are kind of nice, like the fair in Santa Rosa and even one way up by Oregon in a tiny little town called Ferndale, but the fairs in Stockton and Fresno were hot and really, really rough.”

“Ann, I like this story. Keep going.”

“So Vegas drives by in his dusty old pick-up and sees me sitting outside a stall looking hot and tired and bored and he rolls up and says ‘Hey lil sister, let’s go get a beer and cool off.’ Which sounded like a good idea. So I hopped in his truck and we sped off. I didn’t know anything about the town and he knew everything and everyone.

He took us to some dark little dive and we had a few beers and a bunch of laughs. He paid for my beers and we headed back to the track so I could do afternoon chores. I was pretty buzzed I guess.

We drove for a few minutes and he says ‘do you mind if we stop and score some pot?’ I didn’t mind, it sounded like another good idea. He smiled and we drove to this underpass where a few different roads came together – it was this really seedy and stinky place and there were all these kids, like 10 and 12 years old, just leaning against the concrete walls of the underpass. Vegas slows down like he’s looking for a specific kid. I can’t figure out what’s going on and I don’t really care. ‘Little sister, I’m gonna pull up to that kid over there in the yellow shirt, he’s gonna dig up some dope out of the ground, they keep it buried so that the cops never catch them with anything on them. When he comes over to toss it in the truck, you just show him this.’

Vegas is driving this whole time and the kid is digging up a baggie just like he says and he’s walking over to the truck. Vegas hands me something from under his seat as the kid pokes his head into the driver’s side window. I don’t know how or what happened in my head because I was kind of buzzed and too hot and not thinking but my hand closed around the butt of the pistol that Vegas handed me and I picked it up and pointed it at the window. The terrified kid tossed the dope onto the seat and ran hard and fast as Vegas sped away laughing his ass off.”

“You f\*cking held up a kid?”

“I guess, it happened so fast, I didn’t really know what was going on but I guess that’s what I did.”

“Ann, my sweet Ann, you are a reprobate!” Johnny’s laughter always warmed Ann’s heart. She was glad that she shared her story, glad that she remembered it, it happened what seemed like a lifetime ago. She could only have been in her early 20s then.

“I’ve done some stupid stuff in my life, but I guess I never pointed a gun at a child!”

She was within a mile of where she was sure Johnny was parked when another call rang in. It was Jude and she assumed that he wanted to know what the hell was going on with her sudden disappearance. She wasn’t sure, but she was pretty certain that he wasn’t going to be understanding when she explained her sudden errand. So she ignored the call and continued to make encouraging noises to keep Johnny free-forming his way through this particular crisis.

“Oh hey, it’s Mark on the other line. Let me call you back. Thanks, Ann,” said Johnny and he clicked off. Just. Like. That.

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