

Marco Antonio Lopez*

(Ooze Pain, Clamor Not)

Chapter 6

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"There is evil, and there is good." - Dr. Ronald Wright to John Walsh, father of Adam Walsh and host of America's Most Wanted

A/N: Because of the above truth, be warned. Early reviews indicate that even without graphic details some readers may appreciate the caution flag. Bad things do happen to good people, and since these stories center around children...

**Another A/N: Okay, I know that technically I made Marco's middle name up, but since the actor who played him is Marco Antonio Lopez, I don't think it's too much of a stretch to have them share the entire name.*

Dime con quién ands y te diré quién eres.

Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are. - Mexican proverb

His earliest memory was of green. At the age of three, and loose for possibly the first time in his life, he had been caught up in the sensation of running pell-mell down a row of shoulder-high-to-a-toddler bush beans. The sea of leaves stretched before him for a thousand acres of rows that undulated with the roll of the landscape. That first mad dash of freedom ended when he found himself alone, standing in a trough that dipped deeply enough to block his view of anything orienting, specifically his papa. For a middle child used to being surrounded by siblings and cousins, aunts and uncles, the feeling of isolation was entirely novel. Alone for the moments it took the trailing adult to appear at Marco's new horizon, there had been a feeling of rising terror before his papa swept him up in a panic-dousing swing to broad shoulders.

During the following year, he learned to play with the older children and a great portion of that play took place in the farmland surrounding their homes. He learned to navigate the bean field, collecting clinging leaves on clothing as he raced past and he took the initial steps toward learning how to navigate life.

The December before he turned four, his parents emigrated from the fields of Mexico to Gardena, a suburb of Los Angeles. Though his landscape changed, many of the lessons learned in the bean field mirrored those he would learn as he grew to be a man.

Years later, he occasionally found his subconscious, sleeping self running through that field, to or away from a variety of monsters and goals. Even now, it was a familiar setting of his dreams and nightmares. To or away, he sometimes woke to the mind-echoing smell of crushed chlorophyll.

A fuddled brain struggled for a split second, grasping at fleeting scenes and sensations as it made the disorienting transition from sleep to wake. The tiny portion of Marco's dream-fogged mind that expected to find a bean-leaf badge still plastered to a shoulder anchored instead on the ache deep within that joint, a souvenir of a past fire. An alarm clock received a slap and vaporous images fled as he worked his legs free from twisted and hobbling sheets.

He hustled through his morning routine to allow time for a few errands on his way to work.

It took the subject of the latest anagram a few hours to notice what graced the blackboard because the paramedics started the shift at a dead run and it was early afternoon before they managed to sink into a chair and onto a couch for a break.

John was off the couch the moment he read,

Johnny Roderick Gage

Oh, Raggedy Inner Jock!

"Whadaya mean, 'raggedy inner jock'? That makes it sound like I'm still trolling the halls of my old high school looking for cheerleaders to pick up." John strode into the bay where the engine crew polished chrome and brass. "And who's raggedy? *I'm* not raggedy," he spun in place for a moment under silent gazes that admitted nothing. He started to swivel back to the kitchen and nearly ran over Roy who leaned against the door jamb, a man who also had nothing to offer other than the amused smile he wore. John whirled around again as a new thought animated him further. "Wait a second! You mean we can add punctuation like that? I think I want a do-over. No one told me..." He turned to face his captain who had poked his head out of the office to see what the ruckus was about. "Cap, no one said..."

Five firemen blessed the tones when they dropped.

They'd been called to a two-story, balloon-framed residence, which, from a firefighter's point of view, meant that architects and construction engineers had conspired to create channels of free access for fire originating in a basement to reach unimpeded straight up to the rafters. With no fire stops in place, flames could skip through an attic crawl space and right down another side, taste-testing anything combustible along the way. The potential for hidden fire spread inside the wall cavities of such a structure was always a very real possibility.

But not today, today what greeted them was an impressive display of the term "fully involved"; the feeding monster had moved beyond stealth tactics and was settling in for a feast. One look told an experienced eye that once the central battle for containment was won, there would be little need to open this home's walls to search void spaces for traces of lingering danger. Odds were, the snapping, smacking flames would leave little *but* open void and skeleton for the bulldozers to claim.

Since Station 51 was one of the later companies to arrive as part of a second alarm, Hank felt comfortable sending Chet and Marco to the end of a neighboring driveway before he took himself off to check in with Command for a face to face. 51s would all meet back at staging in a few minutes.

In the meantime, Hank thought it would be entirely possible to track the fire's gnawing progress by turning away from chaos and flame to focus on the family of four huddled beyond the beast's hot breath, where two of his men were headed with yellow blankets and, he trusted, a hefty dose of compassion.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, the dragon proved she could multi task, as did a fire department.

51s were pulled off the house fire and re-assigned to a working fire at an apartment building closer to their usual stomping grounds. By the time they arrived, Hank and his crew had already reviewed the structure's particulars which were meticulously recorded in a binder that was kept on the engine. They had toured the building in the past during inspections and pre-plans, but it had been awhile. Aside from wanting to refresh memories, Hank had checked for recent entries that might chronicle pertinent changes since their last visit before passing the binder with its rough diagram of the floor plan back to the jump seat.

A sooted window shattered, casualty of a force that had managed to self-vent. The outside ladder crew would never have chosen this particular window to break intentionally, not with active flames on the other side of the building and search and hose teams working in between.

Roy heard the pop and cascade of glass from an alcoved portion of the room to the far left of where he stood. The flashover was nearly instant but Roy had used his head and his head-start to bail out of an opposite window, grateful that they had taken the time to remove the wrought iron bars. As he made his diving escape, the firefighter/paramedic had no time to ponder whether the world and his loved ones could do without his clay pots and beef bourguignon; without a husband, a father, or a friend.

As trust and momentum carried him into the arms of a partner who had remained on the landing of the fire escape, Roy did spare a thought for the asphalt waiting three stories below. John was able to stop Roy's flying trajectory, but fell back against the wrought-iron rail. Both firemen scabbled for glove-covered hand-holds.

In spite of the glove, the iron of the grating bit the fingers of his left hand. Roy's right hand started to cramp at the grip he maintained on the front of Johnny's turnout coat. It didn't take any higher math to realize that had John gone over the rail, no amount of determination could have held over 235 pounds of partner and gear if it was dangling from such an unorthodox rescue hold. Luckily, both paramedics had been pretty motivated to twist and throw themselves away from the edge. John lay on his side with his SCBA braced against one of the widely spaced vertical posts. Roy rolled to his knees without loosening his grip.

"Johnny?" Roy nearly shouted, not only to be heard through his facemask, but because the situation warranted some higher expression of concern than a lower tone could impart.

John's mouth opened in a struggle to breathe until with a gasp, he managed to suck in a few molecules of air. Pulling his own mask off, he used his exhalation to voice an understated "ow", and before Roy could stop him, he too rolled up to his knees in a maneuver designed to carry him away from post and edge.

In answer to the look of concern on Roy's face, John gasped, "just give me a sec," as he ran through a quick self-head-to-toe and re-inflated the corners of his lungs.

"I'm good, I'm good. What'd you do in there, break a window?"

Elsewhere, during the same battle but on a different front, 51's engine crew was advancing an attack line. Stoker was stationed at a side door of the ground floor where a hose was stretched from Engine 110. He stooped to ease a bend and guide another opening loop while he kept a firm grip on the second line they'd stretched to protect the egress, should such an action become necessary. Ed Donahue was standing vigil at the gauges.

Mike had a good visual on Cap and the guys, since they had been brought up short by the need to deal with flames showing in the first apartment on the left. The engineer was keeping track of conditions out in the hall as well as those in the living room where his crew mates worked.

Smoke, to a fireman was suspended fuel in a breathable form. It was toxic, it was combustible and it could build to the point where visibility was so poor anyone trying to move through it was navigating blind. It was one hell of a defense mechanism for a force fireman sometimes caught themselves thinking of as a sentient being. But if it protected the enemy, it could also be used to wage battle against her.

Here, there was smoke, but it hung in a haze that signified that these flames, at this location, were fairly new and had not converted a large amount of material to carbon, smoke and gases. Mike kept an eye on that smoke, reading it for changes and cues as to what to expect next.

Hank read the smoky grey curtain that hung in lazy, gauzy wisps to about eye level.

He motioned for his linemen to finish with the last of the glowing red, trusting them to end the final twisting licks of flame that stubbornly reached and searched for a better stronghold. He moved off, on the prowl for clues. Conditions in this room just weren't all that bad. The smoke was unchanging, and keeping an eye on his crew, he noted Marco had closed the gated nozzle, in effect declaring this skirmish ended. *For the moment.* Hank knew he was not the only one in the room with sweat dripping from neck to kneecaps. Marco and Chet stood at ready, clearly expecting him to find something to attack very close and very soon. *Where was all this heat coming from?*

Hank ran an experimental hand along the opposite wall and then tugged a glove off to try it with a bare hand. Glove back on, he quickly moved around the living room until... *Bingo!* A captain's signal and his ducking retreat had Marco swinging the nozzle around. Chet followed with practiced rhythm, back braced against Marco's, minding the trailing hose and shifting it out from under foot while supporting most of the weight. Because his back was to the confrontation, he was relying heavily on Marco and Cap to keep them out of trouble as he shifted his stance again and repeatedly wrangled the hose to keep it in line with the nozzle.

Freed from having to worry about anything other than nozzle operation, Marco was able to apply the stream exactly where experience, instinct and a watchful captain dictated.

After taking the initial step of cooling the wall somewhat by converting some of the heat to steam, Cap punched a hole with the ax he carried to check for the fire extension he expected to find.

And so the firemen advanced, checking each room thoroughly. 110's relieved them for an air bottle exchange and they returned the favor. After they'd run through two sets of bottles, they reported to rehab where they spent twenty minutes cooling down and re-hydrating before hoofing it over to staging for reassignment.

Search, discover, extinguish, repeat; put the wet stuff on the red stuff; hunt and chase and grapple with the enemy until this building, these people were safe; this time.

They were released from the scene and made themselves available at 2205. They were back at the station at 2216. By 2218 they had located the source of the stench that greeted them the moment they stepped foot onto the apparatus floor.

Someone had gifted them with a dead skunk, which waited for them behind the latrine door. 116's A-shift was the obvious culprit since 51s had been trading pranks with them for well over a year.

By 2235 the skunk's remains were double-sealed in plastic garbage bags, and placed outside. Six firemen tumbled into their respective bunks; some of them might have been asleep before the last head hit a pillow.

They all woke to exclamations of disgust as the first arriving member of C-shift entered the station.

"What the *hell!* Somebody run over a family of skunks with the engine and then try to flush the evidence?" Billy Winston called as he brought his complaints into the bunk room, forgetting that station SOP when entering a quiet, seemingly empty station at change of shift was to let sleeping firefighters lie.

A-shift answered C's youngest crew member with grumbled moans and a pillow flung in the sleep slayer's general direction.

"Sorry, guys, tough night? How can you all snooze through that *smell?*"

"Exhaustion is a time-honored sleep aid," Captain Stanley yawned as he stood to snap suspenders in place. He braced himself on extended arms against the low brick dividing wall next to his bunk and surveyed the stirring troops.

No coughs met his ears, surprising, considering what they'd subjected bodies and lungs to during the two big fires they'd been called out on yesterday. *Gotta love a functioning SCBA*. Then there'd been the sleep-robbing 3 a.m. mattress fire - mostly bluster and fuss, but they hadn't gotten back in until nearly 0430.

Paramedics perched on the edges of the closest bunks, neither one having gathered enough momentum to join their leader in becoming completely vertical. The engine crew behind the other dividers were standing, but hadn't managed that feat without various mutterings and groans. It had been a long, hard shift.

"Time to work the kinks out fellas, I'll start the coffee."

"It's not like we need to catch them *con las manos en la masa*," Marco continued to explain to the growing ranks of a disgruntled on-coming shift.

"With their hands in the dough," Roy answered questioning looks as both shifts gathered over coffee in the kitchen. "It means the same as 'catching them red-handed'. 'Work with Marco long enough and you'll be well on your way to becoming bilingual.'"

"This is A-shift's fault," came Dwyer's *almost* good-natured accusation. "It was you that cornered 116s down in the basement of the training center and soaked them to their wool socks with a Bresnan distributor nozzle." The paramedic held up both hands to still a clamoring defense. "Not that those clowns didn't deserve some pay-back after the way they spent weeks messing with your lights and sirens whenever you weren't looking."

"That's the thing," Dwight Appleton called from where he leaned against the refrigerator. "Until they left a dead *skunk* in our latrine, it was just between the A-shifts." His voice was drowned by the rest of C's grumbled agreement.

"Yeah, since we're all gonna have to live with that stench until someone figures out a way to get rid it, we'd like to know what you have planned in the way of retribution," Medford, one of C's linemen weighed in with his two-cents worth. "That, and how the hell we're supposed to live with... hey, it's already smelling better, maybe the fans we set up are helping."

"Wishful thinking, Medford," Chet said, figuring full disclosure was best at this point. "It's only that your poor beleaguered nose has thrown in the towel. Professor Stoker over there says that no matter how strong a smell is, if it's constant enough, our brains just shut down and refuse to acknowledge what we can't change in favor of being able to detect any new input that might be necessary for survival."

"Yeah, I read about that in Scientific American," Pete Fern piped in. "It's got to do with smell fatigue and receptor saturation."

Chet rolled his eyes. "Scientific American? Pete, you're pulling my leg, right? If all engineers are such geeks, maybe I'm glad I bricked the exam. Anyway, just don't count on not being able to smell it again every time you come back from a run. It seems when you walk into the station after being away it's a fresh slate as far as your nose is concerned."

"Well, guys," John patted Dwyer's shoulder as he nudged his way by on a return trip to the coffee pot. "You should look on the bright side: at least they didn't let a *live* skunk loose to wander the whole station."

"How 'bout you stay over and work a double so you can revel in the knowledge that they were so thoughtful?" Dwight challenged.

"Hank," Captain Hookrader interrupted the sparring between the two shifts with a resigned but somehow energized sigh. "You and your men might as well be on your way. A bit of elbow grease, and we'll have the situation ship-shape and under control, won't we, men?" He clapped and rubbed his hands in contemplation of the challenge ahead.

A-shift headed for the locker room with heart-felt condolences to the crew that would be applying that 'bit' of elbow grease to Hookrader's exacting specifications.

"You got any big plans for tomorrow, Marco?" Johnny's voice floated from where his head was buried deep in his locker as they all changed and gathered uniforms that needed a trip to the dry cleaners.

"Just some catching up around my place. Saturday afternoon Alex Brandon is covering part of a shift for me so I can help chaperone my niece's belated sixth birthday party at the LA zoo. Since Noel's birthday is on Christmas Eve, Maria and Will usually plan something after the holidays to celebrate it."

Chet straightened from tying a shoe. "How'd you get roped into agreeing to that?"

"Remember I told you my little sister broke her leg skiing? Well, she was supposed to be helping out on Saturday. Since Noel's dad is out of town on business, her mom begged and I caved."

"Lizzy still doing okay?" John asked, stepping around a locker to face Marco and Chet as he buttoned a worn plaid shirt.

Marco shut his own locker and led the exodus to the parking lot behind the station wearing a fond smile. "When I checked on her yesterday morning on my way to work, all she wanted from me was to help her get set up on the couch. As I left, she was planning her pain meds around a busy social calendar of daytime soaps and Gilligan's Island. It's a good thing she's on semester break from college. She'll still be in a cast when classes start up again, but we've got time to figure something out. "

"Let us know if there is anything we can do," Roy offered as he lifted his duffel bag from the bench he'd just stepped over. "...anything short of taking your place on Saturday, that is. I've already survived my own family's yearly pilgrimage to check out the lions and tigers and bears. That zoo is set into a hillside and the inclines are killer if you have to pack tired kids."

Hank turned his face up to assess the January sky, and then dropped his gaze to make a different sort of assessment as his men started to fan out toward their vehicles. None were limping or seemed stiff enough to warrant a captain's concern. "Well, Marco, my pal, I hope the weather holds and it stays nice through the weekend - unless, of course, you are hoping your zoo adventure gets called on account of rain."

"Guys, it's not going to be a big deal," Marco declared with confidence. "They're four little girls. We'll spend a few hours checking out the exhibits, make sure we visit Noel's favorites, the lions, and then we'll open a few presents and have some cake; in and out, *no hay problema*. I'll be back by late afternoon."

He raised his voice to make sure the owner of the vehicle parked three spots away wouldn't miss his next comment. "The worst that is going to happen is my smell sensors will have to re-saturate themselves with skunk pheromones before my brain can register the more important stuff of daily survival, like what Johnny might be trying to cook for dinner."

John indicated he had indeed heard this dig at his cooking skills as his left hand followed his crooked smile into the front seat of the Rover.

After pulling their cars into the rear parking lot, one after the other, Marco and Roy exchanged wary glances as they entered the station. An experimental sniff had Roy's face breaking into a relieved smile. "Either my smell receptors have completely given up the ghost, or Hookrader made good on his promise to vanquish the skunk smell."

They made their way to the latrine door and cracked it open enough for Marco to stick his head in and gingerly test the atmosphere inside. "All clear," he pronounced. "Never underestimate the will of *un despótico* drill sergeant. I may not like to work under his command, but you've got to give credit where credit's due."

"In or out, ladies," C-shift's Medford muttered as he slid by. His chuckled call of, "the closest powder room is at Denny's down the street," beat the closing of the latrine door.

Just before noon, Marco breathed a sigh of relief when Alex arrived at the station right on time and the changing of the guard went without a hitch. There was always a chance of catching a run right before your relief arrived, which could throw a wrench into the best laid plans; try explaining *that* to a child. As it was, he'd had plenty of time to clean up and grab something to eat out of the fridge. The trip to the Raith's home in Torrance should take him just under twenty minutes.

He opened the door without knocking and caught his favorite, "I'm your *onliest* niece," mid-flight as she launched herself from the arm of the sofa.

"ThankyouThankyouThankyou, Uncle Marco!"

He carried the chattering girl through to the kitchen where her mother was placing an assortment of snacks in her voluminous purse.

"...and I am going to be a lion trainer when I grow up, but not the kind with a whip. I am going to go to A-fair-ica and take care of the lions that live there. Have you seen *Born Free*, Uncle Marco? I am going to be just like Joy and adopt orphans like Elsa; only my lions aren't going to eat baby antelopes. I'm gonna teach them to eat lion kibble. I might adopt orphan other-animals too, but not if my cubs want to eat them."

Marco met his sister's long-suffering smile over Noel's head.

"...and...and Awwntie Lizzy said..."

"Hold on, there, motor mouth, when did your *Auntie* Lizzy change her name?" Marco swung his squealing niece upside down.

"Put her back down; she has a dress on." Maria softened the order with a tolerant smile as her younger brother complied and set the child upright on her feet. "She picked that pronunciation of "Auntie" up from a friend. Who's to say which is correct? A dialect is neither right nor wrong, it just 'is'."

"Spoken like a true Speech Pathologist. I knew Mom and Dad put you through college for a reason." Marco refrained from the tempting pursuit of yanking his sister's chain about her chosen profession in favor of snatching a cookie from behind her back. "That reminds me of the argument John and Chet had over whether it is 'Root 66' or 'R-out 66.'"

"I've heard it pronounced both ways."

"Believe me, so have I, *now*, only those two were practically shouting it at each other at the time."

Maria handed him her purse. He let it slide to the floor with a dramatic thump.

"I hope you're bringing a wheel barrow to pack this thing, 'cuz I'm not coming along to be your Sherpa."

Maria ignored the remark as she rinsed a few utensils in the kitchen sink. "How is Johnny doing, by-the-way? You said he spent a night in the hospital a few months ago after his road trip."

"He's back at work to fight another day with good old Chet. Those two would argue over a dead fly if that was all they could find. John was lucky he didn't come away with longer lasting souvenirs from Arizona than a twisted knee and a minor concussion. They mostly just kept him overnight for observation and to warm him up."

"Thank the Lord he's alright," Maria said over her shoulder as she headed towards Noel's bedroom.

Marco snagged a second cookie and turned to wink at his niece. "Hey, what happened here?" Marco interrupted the mind numbing flow of Noel's stream of consciousness which had filled each and every gap in the adults' conversation. He swept his niece's bangs away from her forehead to reveal the rest of the angry red welt that flowed into them.

"Mommy burnt me with the damn curling iron when she was trying to make me be-oo-tiful for my damn birthday pictures."

Marco gave the door his sister had just disappeared through a speculative look. "I bet she was pretty upset when that happened."

"No *I* was upset. *She* just threw the damn curling iron in the garbage can."

Marco squatted down to a niece's eye-level. "Come here little El. You know you're not supposed to use that word. I bet your Mom only said it because she was so upset that you got hurt."

"Uh huh," a French-braided head nodded in agreement, "and she said when it shows up in the pictures, we'll have proof of what a squirmy little..."

Maria brushed past the pair and took her daughter's hand before holding out a set of car keys. "Time to go, Noel Maria. Marco, you're driving and we need to stop and pick up the other three party-goers on the way."

Marco took pity on his red-faced sis, and let her bossiness slide.

The adventure started out well enough with a hike to the backside of beyond because Noel wanted to see the lions first. By then all four of the shorter females had to use the restroom.

"You be here when we get out; I mean it little brother." His sister was being bossy again, but Marco took it in stride.

Amethyst Truegale came skipping out first and perched her innocent-looking self on the picnic table. He'd turned his back for less than fifteen seconds and the little girl managed to pull a piece of gum from under the table top while Marco was standing three feet away. She swallowed it before he could make her spit it out, and then bent to look under the table to peruse the smorgasbord of flavors available for her next selection.

"Cut that out, you're gonna get sick, and you're gonna get me in trouble," Marco hissed as he plucked the miscreant up and away from the table. He cast a worried glance over his shoulder as he made her rinse and spit at the fountain three times.

Maria found them there because after the second time Marco caught Amy searching for her next selection he wouldn't let her within five feet of the table.

"*Hijole*, what is wrong with this child? *Clandestino* gum eating..."

"She's five, brother, she needs no other excuse. I suspect they don't let her have it at home, you know: forbidden fruit and all..."

"So, do you have anything in that Mary Poppins-bag of yours that might help? Does she need to go on antibiotics?" Marco dropped his voice. "Do we have to tell her mom?"

"What? Tell her that you let her only daughter eat ABC gum from under the picnic table at *the zoo*? I thought you were watching her. How much gum did you let her swallow?" Maria kept a straight face as she leaned down to peer into all corners of Amy's mouth. She held out her palm and with an impish grin, the girl deposited a wad in a waiting hand.

Marco muttered something in mixed dialect that his sister missed.

After she'd let him fret for another minute, Maria gave in, mostly because she couldn't keep a straight face a moment longer. With a sigh she decided she must be getting out of practice in the little-brother-teasing department.

"Look, calm down, *hermano*. Think about it. The way she honed right in on the under belly of that table, she's probably done it before and lived to tell about it."

Marco turned to face his sister, who was calmly pulling out boxes of animal crackers. "How can you be so blasé about this? What rule book are you working from these days?" Marco's eyes narrowed at the obvious enjoyment she was deriving from the situation. "Just exactly when did you go from scrutinizing labels for artificial ingredients and empty calories to adding recycled gum as *un legítimo miembro* of the four food groups? You practically had kittens when I fed Noel a bowl of fruit loops."

Maria shrugged a shoulder and dangled a box by its string in offering. "You fed her those before returning her that same morning to my house. You weren't the one who was going to have to ride the sugar-wave with a three-year-old. Fast forward, little brother; I am learning to choose my battles. Ask yourself, one: will Amy live? Two: can you get that wad of gum back by any means that does not necessitate a trip to an ER? Three: why yes, I *do* happen to have a small bottle of Listerine in my bag." She handed him one in triumph. "And don't knock my purse. You only *wish* you could pull off such a utilitarian fashion accessory. If it will ease your guilt and lower your blood pressure, have at it. Try to get her to gargle, don't let her swallow, and don't get caught having her spit in the bushes." Seeing the dubious look on Marco's face, she snatched the bottle back and said, "Oh *fine*, you big wuss. But you're watching the other three while I take her back into the ladies' room." Maria made eye contact with Wren, Noel and Heidi. "Behave, you three; keep your Uncle Marco entertained and we'll be right back."

"We'll be right over here," Marco called over his shoulder as he followed three little girls bee-lining for the monkey exhibit.

He had always been uncomfortable around the zoo monkeys. Chalk it up to a childhood traumatized by the flying monkeys of Oz. This theatrical element of creepiness was reinforced by *The Planet of the Apes* and its four sequels. Finally, their experience with Koki, the real-life Capuchin Typhoid Mary of primates had nothing to offer in the way of healing for previously inflicted cinematic scars.

Marco had nothing against *wild* monkeys; he could watch an entire documentary on Jane Goodall and her gorillas with nary a shudder. Those critters were safely tucked far, far away in a jungle, not flinging monkey poo through the bars to an impressive radius. He picked Noel up to swing her out of range. He did the same for Heidi and turned to herd Wren away...*Where the hell did Wren disappear to?*

"You owe me big time," Marco said as he opened the station's front door for Maria and Noel after parking his own car in the rear parking lot.

Maria breezed in carrying the left-over birthday cake. "Nah, little brother, payback comes when you need babysitting for your own *bebés* someday." Noel was skipping, almost as excited to get to visit her uncle's fire station as she had been about the trip to the zoo.

Marco led them back to the kitchen and held the door open for the pair before following them through. "Whoever says I am ever having kids is *muy loco*. This afternoon was enough *control de la natalidad* to last a lifetime."

"I'll be sure to let Mama know how you feel about her. Just last week she was telling Mrs. Luna at the church bazaar what beautiful babies you would have someday."

Maria had been in the station's kitchen on a few occasions in the past and opened a cupboard in search of a platter. She settled for the shallow pan her brother handed her, and transferred most of the cake to it. "And if she heard you, Mama would wash your mouth out for talking like that."

The glare a sister received in response would have sent a weaker advisory scurrying for cover. Instead, Maria continued with a smug grin, "I foresee a chat with Father Michael about the evils of birth control." She punctuated that prediction with a sharp smacking of her lips as she licked a bit of hot pink icing off a finger.

The entire crew was witnessing this exchange with undisguised amusement as Noel twirled in the kitchen, arms swung wide while belting out "*Born free, as free as the wind blows, as free as the grass grows, born free to follow your heaaart!*" Chet swung the irresistible elf up and carried her over to see if Henry was only pretending to be asleep. During the ride to the couch she continued singing with abandon. "Staaay free and life is worth living, but only worth living..." Chet added his tenor to help bring the number home. "... "*cuz YOUR'RR BORRRN FREEE!*"

"The animals in that zoo aren't the only ones that need to be confined," Marco declared with conviction as the whole crew stood on the cement apron in front of the station to fold the salvage tarps that had finally dried after an earlier run. Mike was on the other end of the tarp Marco held as they worked in tandem to form crisp accordion folds. "Those *ninás*, those sweet little angels should have been the ones behind bars. I'm telling you, guys, it will take me weeks to recover."

"And you thought it would be a walk in the park. 'Not a big deal, *no hay problema*' you said. Well I warned you, pal, didn't I?" Chet called from where he and Cap were folding the tarp they held between them.

Marco was building steam and felt the need to vent further, so he let Chet's comment slide as he warmed to the continuing tale of his harrowing afternoon. "So besides having to re-locate little Wren Read not once but *three* more times, there was Heidi Markens.

"*Mierde*, that tiny girl has a set of lungs on her that put the Howler Monkeys to shame. She shrieked at *everything*...the lions, the swooping birds in the aviary... she even shrieked at how cute the little goats in the petting zoo were." Marco added a newly folded addition to the growing stack. All five of his shift mates were content to be silently entertained as they finished the chore.

"Sometime after I lost my hearing, she stuck her tongue out at me and dropped her glasses into the penguin's enclosure *on purpose*. When she realized she might not be getting them back anytime soon, she started to *really* make a fuss. I was about ready to go over the fence to get them when an employee showed up to see what all the commotion was about; it sounded like someone was getting eaten alive."

Having run out of tarp to fold, the crew assumed various relaxed positions as Marco finished his tale. "After she got her glasses back, the little *ella diablo* pretended to have a crush on me which only gave her an excuse to clutch my leg every time she felt a shriek coming on." The lineman placed a finger in one ear and shook his head. "Cap, I may need to have my hearing checked before our yearly physicals are due. I think that *niná* did some permanent damage."

"You know, Marco, my nieces would probably love a trip to the zoo. Since you're an experienced tour guide and all..." Mike let the suggestion drift on a teasing note. Marco made the engineer carry their stack of tarps to the engine and stash them by himself.

"Well, did Noel get to see her lions?" Roy asked as they tucked into a dinner of John's taco surprise and the yeasty rolls that Cap's wife, Rosie, had dropped off half an hour earlier. They were still warm and Chet closed his eyes at the smell that wafted up when he broke one open and lifted it to his nose with an appreciative sniff.

"Let me tell you, you haven't lived until you've watched a 275 pound lioness size your niece up for snacking possibilities." Marco was buttering his own roll and caught a melting drip with the edge of his knife. "They were separated by a cement grotto and a chain link fence and Noel was totally oblivious, but I'll be afraid to close my eyes tonight in fear of having nightmares about that kitty and her twitching tail."

Chet reached to serve himself a second helping of casserole and decided he needed to balance that action a bit. "Gage's cooking will probably keep us all up tonight, so you'll have plenty of company."

Cap bounced his pen on the clip board he held as they waited for an uncharacteristically late lineman to join them for roll call.

"There's our zoo-safari hero, now," Roy called when Marco slid into place. "How're those hamstrings feeling after a day of rest, Bwana?"

"Glad you could join us Lopez. Looks like the only chore left on the duty roster is..." Hank pretended to check the list, and smiled at Marco's resigned sigh. "Sorry, pal but the latrine is all yours."

Marco was working safely behind the closed bathroom doors when Chet discovered the newest anagram as he mopped the day room floor.

Chester Kelly

Thy Cells Reek

Chet took the insult in stride and chalked an additional anagram right below it.

Marco Antonio Lopez

Olé! Mr. "No Panic at Zoo"

Mike placed a small pottery peacock on Chet's bunk after he had neatly smoothed the blanket. In the days following their response to the Crenshaw mudslide, Chet had gone on and on about how beautiful the Palos Verdes peninsula was. More than once he'd waxed poetic about the feral colonies of peafowl that were the controversial icons of the area. The entire crew had suffered through repeated soliloquies on the birds' history and the pros and cons of living with these lovely but noisy and messy, non-native residents. In retaliation, his shift mates had joined forces in picking up suitable peacock-themed kitsch at yard sales and church bazaars. It was amazing how prevalent and varied the little figurines were. Chet had curtailed his Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom-like tutorials by the time the third or fourth peacock showed up on his pillow, but he had yet to cry "uncle", and until he did there would be no foreseeable end to the swelling of his flock; Mike himself had three more samples waiting in the wings in his locker.

Late afternoon found both rigs pulling up to a building that coughed clouds of light tan smoke from several windows and an open receiving dock.

"Kelly, see if you can get the keys to that semi and pull it away from the building. Lopez, Gage, each of you pull an inch-and-a-half," Cap ordered before he lifted his HT. "LA, this is Engine 51 at scene. We have smoke but no fire showing at our location; continue all units."

Marco stretched his right arm above his head, catching the top edge of the cab's frame to swing his weight down to the pavement below, something they'd all done untold times. This time his index finger caught and his arm jerked in resistance before gravity and momentum won and he landed in a balance-catching stumble. His body took three strides toward the back of the engine before his brain registered the searing pain that lanced down his finger, slashed behind his thumb joint and continued halfway up his forearm.

On autopilot, Marco lifted a left foot onto the rear tailboard ready to boost himself up to pull a shoulder load of hose. Loops of the inch-and-a-half that John was stringing were already sliding off the hose bed. Instead of gaining altitude, his left shoulder made a jarring contact with the rear of the engine. Marco closed his eyes for a moment and willed himself not to allow a pair of knees to fold. It took Stoker's hand on his shoulder to turn him away from trying a second time, and Mike's concerned gaze to make him look down to what was causing that concern. The end of his index finger was spurting bright red in time with the pounding heart beat behind his eardrums.

"Ah, Mike, I think I might need a band-aid," he said absently as the engineer grabbed his wrist in what felt like a vice and jerked it above his head.

A call brought Roy and Cap as Mike nudged and guided him to sit on the engine's tailboard. There was some receding commotion as his world narrowed and centered on the throb and pulse of radiating, mesmerizing pain.

Marco sat out the rest of that fire, winning a trip to Rampart and some paid vacation time while his shorter-by-half-an-inch finger healed.

A few days into that recuperation Marco watched the guys bowl and tried to figure out how to keep score for them with a right index finger bandaged to the size of a small burrito. Chet stood close, complaining about how gruesome it had been having to retrieve the tip of a finger from the rain gutter that rimmed the engine's cab.

By the time Marco returned to work, a few weeks later, Charlie-the-mechanic had retrofitted the department's entire fleet of Ward LaFrances with strips of wood to fill the sharp-edged gutters until a more permanent fix could be implemented.

"I'm telling you, the least they could 'a done was reattach your whole finger tip. I mean, I was *traumatized*. I had to use a Phillips screwdriver to pry..." Chet flinched in a turn-and-duck maneuver when Cap frapped the back of his head with a sudsy hand. "*What?* I'm just saying'..."

"Knock it off, Chet," John cut in from where he dealt another hand at the kitchen table. "The only *trauma* that's happened since Marco tore off *part of his finger*, has been to everyone's ears as we listened to you whine about your delicate sensibilities. Anyone'd think you were the one that ended up in ER."

"Look who's talking, Mr. Sensitivity. Who was it that thought of plastering his locker with Snoopy band-aids?"

The loser of the first hand of poker turned away from washing the last dish to meet Marco's eyes in an assessment of how he was taking John and Chet's argument over the loss of a finger tip a few weeks earlier. Hank was able to read tolerance and more than a touch of humor there so with a roll of his own eyes he let the conversation continue and turned back to the chore of drying the dripping dishes he'd just racked.

"*Que es lo que es*," Marco said mildly. "The doctors did what they could and managed to salvage a bit of skin to cover the wound, so your heroic rescue efforts were not in vain, *mi amigo*." He held up his hand and turned it to contemplate his finger-cot-encased digit. This was his first shift back since the injury, and although it smarted a bit if he whacked it, the extra cushioning was allowing him to do his job without too much discomfort.

"Just be sure to let one of us know if you re-injure it; no being brave and trying to work while you're in pain or anything," John lectured as they each considered the hands they'd been dealt.

"*Un burro hablando de orejas*," Marco countered. He automatically supplied the translation, "the donkey talking about ears," as he threw away two cards and received replacements. "Besides, I *had* to return to work; I needed an excuse not to be able to join Noel's first grade class's annual field trip to the *maldito* zoo tomorrow morning. Not much could compare to *that* particular brand of torture."

Roy shook his head over his cards but smiled over the way Marco seemed to let his niece wrap him around her little pinky. "You should probably attend a twelve-step seminar on how to "just say no" when faced with cherubic wiles before she has you promising to take her to that new Chuckie Cheese place they're building up in San José. Now *that* sounds like a torture chamber in the making.

"No, Gage is right, Marco," Chet piped in as he also discarded two. "Your mama was telling me about your high pain tolerance and stoic self-control-edness when we crossed paths the other day. She had a real cute story to tell about when you were all of four years old and your wee little toes got caught under the kneeler during high mass at church."

Mike held and Roy dropped a single card on the pile. Chet waited to be sure he had everyone's attention and ignored Marco's warning glare. "There he was, just a little guy, foot being crushed by the weight of his fellow parishioners, not making a peep. The only reason Mama Lopez even realized what was happening was there were tears running down her son's face."

John exchanged four cards, as they all pondered the scene Chet had just painted. More than one wore faint smiles of recognition at the poignant tale. Play continued until their now-triumphantly grinning crew member fanned the winning hand out for display. Marco swept in his winning chips, a right forefinger cocked at a protected angle.

"Everyone of you should know by now not to hide an injury, so I don't need to worry about whether or not Marco here is *wise* enough to let me know if he needs to bow out of a situation, *do I, amigo?*" A captain accepted the good-natured snort he received from Marco as agreement to the accuracy of that statement and he set aside the dish towel.

The crew began a leisurely migration into the day room to see what the television had to offer in the way of entertainment.

One learned of the missing child the next day via the early news on TV, the others were alerted through swiftly placed phone calls. Within the hour, they all found themselves joining the search of 133 acres of a zoo and its surrounding area.

They gravitated towards Mrs. Lopez, since Marco was nowhere in sight.

"Where can we help, Mama Lopez?" The woman who was both the glue and the steel of her sprawling family turned to meet the compassion radiating from the members of her middle son's fire *familia*. For a moment, her tightly held composure slipped and twisted and Hank stepped close to enfold her in a supporting hug. With a deep, centering breath, Mama raised her back-under-control face and reached up to pat *Capitán* Stanley's cheek in fond gratitude.

The five-foot-nothing matriarch sent five firemen to join her son in searching the gridded area he'd been assigned. She escorted the wives to a table where the ladies from St. Anthony's hovered over organized lists of tasks. Joanne and Rosie were soon headed to the nearest grocery store to pick up food and supplies for the seeming horde of civil servants and volunteers.

The thwap-thwap-thwap of a helicopter passed over the searcher's heads and an elderly woman again bowed her own.

Two days later, a six-year old child remained missing. Height: 44 inches, weight: 43 pounds, long, dark brown hair, brown eyes, last seen in the crowded gift shop of the LA zoo, over by the stuffed animal display. Hank mentally filled in what details the posters and local news snippets left out: bilingual chatterbox, lover of all things four-footed, light of her parents' hearts, and also of a certain lineman's. He pushed away from his desk, as restless as the other men who had been forced to break away from the search.

The bulk of the shift yawned before them, and so far nothing dispatch had set on their plate had served to distract them for longer than the time it took to set a scene right.

Jason Belt, the first to volunteer to cover Marco's shifts, sat back and watched five men as they prowled the station in nervous energy.

Finally, Hank called a shift meeting just before noon, hoping to redirect some of the building frustration by making plans for their upcoming days off.

"He's not gonna have to do this his own," Chet announced with conviction.

His crew mates forgave him for stating the obvious, each having their own fears as to what "this" might eventually entail. The brainstorming session was interrupted by the ring of the station's phone. They all braced to rise; only settling slightly when it was clear Cap planned on answering it himself.

"LA County Fire Department, Captain Stanley." Hank paused to allow the caller to identify themselves.

"Hey, Dan, any news?" He stood with a hand in his pants pocket, jingling a set of keys. His men waited patiently while he listened to Dan Castillo, a fireman out of Station 105 and lifelong friend of their absent crew mate.

"Of course one of us can be there. If you think of anything else, just let us know. Otherwise, we'll see you at the Lopez's tomorrow. We may need to grab some sleep, depending on how tonight goes run-wise." Another pause, and then, "Thanks for calling, Dan, see you then."

Hank turned and faced his men, running an agitated hand across the back of his neck. *What more was this family going to have to endure?*

"Dan Castillo says the police have asked them all to take polygraph tests, the entire family." Hank was grateful his men managed to contain most of their outbursts at this statement, although he had no trouble understanding their obvious shock at this news. He was having enough trouble wrapping his mind around this new development himself. Hank bulled ahead with the rest of what Dan had just shared. "It seems statistically, most missing children are taken by family or people they know, so the police want to start ruling everyone out. Dan just wanted to give us a head's up. He's working next Tuesday when Marco's test is scheduled and I promised we'd be close before, during and after; whatever he needs."

He wasn't even going to try to dissuade his men from *all* showing up in support of Marco; by the looks on their faces it would be a wasted effort.

The next afternoon, Castillo was pouring over a map of Southwestern United States with the crew of 51. Someone from the church paused next to them and made a comment about what a rock Marco was being for his family. They each looked to where their friend and crew mate stood with his mother who refused to stay seated or to be limited to waiting by a phone.

"*De tal palo, tal astilla,*" Castillo said. "From such a stick, such a splinter," he added without looking up, as accustomed as Marco was to supplying automatic translations of the Mexican proverbs and sayings that frequently slipped out.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Hank thought in paraphrase as he watched Marco cant his head at an angle to better catch what his shorter mama was saying.

The active door-to-door, flood-canal perusing, empty lot-empty building-empty hands portion of the search dwindled within several days when frustrated people ran out of places to shine their flashlights and dogs lost the scent in the drizzle of rain.

Airport, bus and train personnel had been briefed early on. Noel's likeness competed for space with concert announcements and pleas for lost pets on vertical surfaces in an ever-widening area. Police departments in six adjoining states had already received five copies of the poster; the fire departments each received at least twenty-five. There were stacks of them spreading to a network of truck stop diners, distributed by CB-wielding drivers. Everyone seemed to be on the lookout for the missing child; the little girl with the impish grin that reminded them all to hug their own children in somber gratitude and worry.

The out-of-town contingent of Noel's extended family eventually had to return home; all except Noel's parents returned to work. Marco himself was the last to do so, under the insistence of Will and Maria.

"Engine 51 in quarters," Hank announced over the radio as Mike idled the engine behind the squad.

They had just wrapped up a fire in a box car over in the railroad yards east of the station, and Hank drummed his fingers on his thigh as he contemplated the man and woman who scurried out from in front of the bay doors. Once Roy and then Mike had backed the rigs into place, Cap turned to face the jump seats. "Marco, Chet, you two go see what's salvageable from lunch." After a moment's thought, he sent Mike in after them with a tip of his head in the kitchen's direction. He swung down out of the right front seat to join his paramedics who had already stepped out of the apparatus bay.

"Roy DeSoto, do you trust Marco Lopez around your six-year-old daughter, knowing that he is being investigated as a person of interest in the Noel Raith case? How does your wife feel about you working with a man suspected of kidnapping or worse?" The questions were called rapid-fire from the cement apron in front of the station and hung in posed malignancy.

Hank started forward as the female reporter stepped further back from the skirmish taking place six feet in front of the squad. A spectator, and thank-the-Lord there were none, would have had trouble deciding which paramedic was restraining which partner. To Hank's eye, it was definitely a mutual hands-on response of support and restraint as the two reacted to the reporter's volley in stunned anger and disbelief.

Hank followed the woman's retreat back to her partner who was now standing on the side-walk. "Ma'am, as I understand it, every family member and several close family friends were asked to take a polygraph test. That doesn't make any one of them a 'person of interest', it makes them each willing participants in the investigation. Marco himself told me he was glad to take the test so that the search could move forward." Both Roy and John had immediately settled and straightened once the shock of the questions had been absorbed. Hank could feel the outrage radiate from each paramedic now stationed at his elbows. There was a good bit of that particular emotion threatening to flash from a point somewhere *between* those two elbows. "Steady, men," he murmured just under his breath. *Steady.*

"Every fireman that works at this station puts his life in Marco Lopez's hands on a daily basis. Wives and mothers and children trust him to have their loved ones' back. And he has *never once* failed them or us. No one who knows that man could imagine accusing him of anything remotely like what you're suggesting. Anyone with any kind of integrity would get the facts before raising such a question; anyone else should be ashamed." Hank swept the pair and the *thank-the-Lord* still empty sidewalk and parking lot across the street with some of the heat he was holding back.

The other reporter, the one snapping pictures, had allowed his lens to dip. The female reporter, a woman in her mid twenties, refused to back down. "Just because someone *has* been trusted, doesn't mean they *should* have been." She scribbled a few notes in a small note-book. "This is just evidence of your hallowed brotherhood of firefighters and time-honored loyalties. Of course you all are going to support him to the last. It would take one of you catching Marco Lopez burying the body under one of those bushes over there," she jabbed her pen towards the shrubs to the left of the building, "... for you to believe that your sainted shift mate could be capable of such a thing."

Hank's weight rocked back on his heels before he simply put voice to his first reaction, an honest one. "You're probably right. Now if you'll pardon us..." He refrained from making further comment because he was swinging towards the human teakettle that was beginning a warning sputter on his right. Roy moved to John's other side, obviously having the same thought. The woman they turned their backs on had provided fodder for a number of rants; a few of which Hank himself longed to indulge in. John was gearing up for what promised be an epic tirade.

The three of them made the bay and Hank brought his hand down on a switch. By the time the lower edge of the door kissed the cement of the apparatus floor, John had tamped down most of his ire at the accusations the woman outside had spewed and was manfully extinguishing the remainder of his righteous indignation, well aware of the acoustics inside the station.

"She just referred to Noel as a *body*," was the single comment that escaped, and even that was carried on a barely audible hiss.

It was almost dusk of their next shift before Marco and Roy found themselves alone. Actually, it had taken Roy a few minutes to locate the lineman where he was leaning against the back of Johnny's Rover, mostly hidden from view of the station.

"What's the verdict? Do you and Joanne want me to stay away from your kids?"

The question came as no surprise; Marco had been uncharacteristically quiet since they'd gotten back from the rail yards two days ago. The term 'uncharacteristic' had taken on a fluid sort of meaning ever since the disappearance of a niece tore a wound in an uncle's soul.

Roy joined his friend in facing I-405 as it passed behind the station. It was funny how none of them ever noticed the traffic noise that enveloped the station day and night except when they came out to the back lot in need of a quiet moment.

"I'm sorry you heard that reporter spouting off. I won't lie and say Joanne and I didn't discuss it. We're parents, how could we not?" Marco's silence and shadowed face revealed no clues as to how he was taking this admission, so Roy pushed on. "Look, it's not like we ran some kind of a risk assessment to decide if we were still going to let you be around our kids. And it's not like it was a long drawn out argument. Did we discuss it? Of course we did. Someone, a thoughtless, career-driven reporter slapped it on our plate, and we were forced to digest it." Roy let some of his frustration leak into his voice because, hell, what was the point of pretending they weren't all stressed by the ramifications of Noel's disappearance. "What kind of parent, what responsible person can look away and ignore any of this? But here's the thing, Marco. Now that we *have* talked about it, there is only one answer Joanne and I can come up with. We trust you as much as we trust anyone, as much as we trust ourselves. Nothing that rag of a newspaper can print in the name of hard-hitting journalism can hold a candle to that, *nothing*."

The dark couldn't hide the raw hurt that Roy could sense, and that unresolved doubt propelled him into the kitchen to pick up the pay phone.

The night air had not cooled the leaning spot that Roy's shoulder had just vacated before John ambled up and covered it with his own. "Hey, there's a phone call for you." When Marco offered no response, John added, "By the look on Roy's face he's willing to stand there holding that receiver until the next tones drop."

Marco stood as he listened to what a fireman's wife had to say on the subject of trust. Once his crew mates saw a lessening of the pain etching his features, they trickled out of the kitchen. He was left to endure a short lecture on listening to friends and ignoring shitty little headline-grabbing gossip-mongers. By the time Joanne came up for air, a ghost of a smile threatened to supplant a minuscule portion of the haunt that lurked behind it.

Hank imagined there was a lot of missing-child-related phone activity going on throughout the greater Los Angeles area. Someone had told him that the Raiths had installed a second line at their house to handle all the in-coming tips. It shouldn't really amaze him that some of it would slop over and find an uncle at his place of work.

There were the understandable calls from family members. Marco's brothers raged from out of state, forced into long-distance spectator-ship by jobs and obligations and life. Lizzy had made the difficult choice to return to her campus rather than drop all of her classes. Hank did not begrudge this family their need to stay connected. What had him shaking his head in wonder and some disgust was the variety and sheer volume of calls Marco was having to field.

Marco stood with a bracing arm on either side of the payphone after having hung up the receiver. His head dipped just enough to set Chet off.

"Damn it, Marco, next time she calls, just tell her she needs to find a shrink or a pastor or someone else, *anyone* else, to talk to." The linoleum under Chet's chair gave scraping protest as he shoved away from the table. "You shouldn't have to be the one to reassure her over and over that it wasn't her fault. Hell, maybe she does need to take some blame. She was the one in charge of the field trip; she was supposed to be keeping track of those kids."

Marco swung away from the wall. "*Maldita sea*, Chet! And just who else besides Noel's teacher should we blame? Her mom and dad for signing the permission slip? God? An uncle who could easily have just said 'yes' and been there to hold his niece's hand?"

Marco and Chet stood facing off in front of the kitchen sink; friendship and frustration broiling between them. The rest of the crew was evenly distributed between the kitchen and the day room and held their peace and their breath until Chet peeled away in a distancing stomp out the side door. Marco spun in the opposite direction, heading out onto the apparatus floor without comment or eye contact.

Silence hung between the four left behind until moments later the phone rang again. Looks were exchanged but no actual rock/paper/scissors, and Roy, who was closest answered it on the fifth ring.

"LA County Fire, DeSoto speaking."

"No, ma'am, Marco's not available at the moment, but I can take a message."

"I'm sorry to hear of your loss."

"I'm real sorry you had to go through that..." Roy turned to give the others a resigned look and leaned a shoulder against the wall to settle in for the duration.

Noel's parents were near collapse; it only seemed to be a matter of who would succumb first, one of them or Mama Lopez. The seventy-one-year-old woman had the entire collection of her close relationships concerned over her refusal to slow down.

And Marco stood buffer and support, while still managing to perform his job flawlessly. His shift mates remained watchful and close, not only to lend a hand when they could, but to ensure that if he should falter, he would not fall far.

Mama Lopez's body eventually betrayed her. Weeks of running ragged, trying to hold her extensive brood together finally took its toll. She spent a night at The Memorial Hospital of Gardenia for a work up of the radiating pain behind her left shoulder. Marco spent that night at her bedside and showed up to work his scheduled shift only because the doctors ruled she would be in no danger as long as she got some rest.

The church ladies of St. Anthony's took turns checking on her. Joanne DeSoto and Rosie Stanley shifted their focus to picking up some of the slack left by a side-lined force of nature.

Mama Lopez went home the next day with a strict order for continued bed rest. Lizzy and her cast moved back home to stay with her mother and act as reinforcement for that order; it wasn't as if she was able to concentrate on her studies anyway.

The Lopez clan regrouped, gathered their strength and continued.

Marco startled from the nightmare. Although his bean field had been the backdrop, the child had not been a younger version of himself traipsing through crowding rows of parting leaves. This child had huddled in a terror that morphed into his own to send him rolling from his bunk.

Something woke Hank, leaving his mind sifting for cues as to what had disturbed him. He shifted to his back. After a few moments of listening to an anonymous rustle and the distinctive soft snore that indicated Mike was sleeping on his back, he stepped into his bunkers to investigate further.

Marco met him at the latrine door, a door that had been open long enough for a captain to catch the gist of what had gotten his lineman up before dawn. Hank asked his questions without words before they both crossed the apparatus floor to the kitchen.

Marco sat at the table and raked both hands through his hair before pausing with fingers interlaced behind his head, elbows still raised. He nodded his thanks for the glass of water set in front of him. "I'm okay, Cap. I think it must've been something from dinner that didn't settle quite right."

It was the baldness of that lie that wasn't settling right, and Hank waited for his hedging lineman to realize it.

With one ragged breath and a defeated slump, Marco surrendered. "Cap, did you ever get lost when you were a little kid? You know... maybe wander away for a moment, just long enough to scare the crap out of yourself when you realized you were alone." Silence hung as two grown men revisited a few of the minor traumas of their childhoods. "What if she's out there, scared and alone, waiting for someone to rescue her?" Marco paused and with his eyes closed, tipped his head back in a struggle to limit the spill of anguish to his whispered, "What if she's not?"

Five and a half weeks after a six-year-old had been lured away from her fellow field trippers with the promise of her very own Elsa, Tony Edmunds tucked an HT into a turnout coat pocket as he and his crew mates headed into a grocery store 855 miles north of where dozens of die-hard searchers concentrated their efforts.

Tony spun on his heel to return to the ladder truck that was sitting in the far corner of the parking lot. He reached up into the jump seat and snagged the shopping list Jerry Baker had sent them off with. Spuds was a particular man when it came to all things culinary. Tony himself couldn't tell a chive from a green onion, and from past experience he knew enough not to risk ticking the station's best cook off by making any wild guesses from memory. The block letters on the rig's aerial ladder declared it to belong to the Eugene, Oregon Fire Department. The ones he scanned on the scrap of paper he held spelled out the ingredients of possibly the best Cajun gumbo to be had anywhere west of the Mississippi. *What the hell is filé powder?* The truck man jogged to catch up with the crew.

Someone who had measured 44 inches at her last check up tensed when four boisterous firemen appeared at the end of the aisle she and the Man now occupied. Without lifting her hair-shrouded face, she watched from out of the corner of her left eye as one of them ducked three steps into the aisle and quickly selected a bag of something and returned to toss it into the shopping cart. She very nearly broke the rule when the turnout-coated men moved out of sight.

The Man tossed six cans of tomato soup into the cart where she knelt, taking no care to see that none of them bounced off an already bruised body. The child did not flinch or raise a fuss when two of them connected with a thigh covered in the same jumper she had worn when she left for school on a day her mind shied from thinking about, as it did every other day of the thirty-eight since she'd been stolen. She shifted her grip on a stuffed animal.

"Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight, come out tonight, come out tonight?" The hated one sang in a low voice as he shoved the cart along to make further selections. *"Buffalo gals won't you hmmm hmm hm hmmm,"* he dissolved into a lower hum and lifted a box to squint at a label.

The wire at the bottom of the cart bit into bony knees as the child worried a loose baby tooth, sister to the other upper one that had fallen out at Christmas time. She wondered if the tooth fairy would be able to find her to place a dime under... *where would a fairy leave a dime if someone no longer had a pillow to tuck it under?* She didn't spend any energy mulling over that question; all of her concentration and senses were dedicated to the monitoring of the Man and the slightest of his movements, all senses save one. She spared part of her hearing to try and track the position of the four men who continued to joke and call to one another as they made their way through the store.

"*Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight, come out hm hmm.*" A hand snaked out and she barely flinched when it stroked her hair in counterfeit tenderness as a woman bustled by them. The stroke turned into a savage pinch to the rim of a translucent ear once the woman had passed. It continued in a twist of warning until that person turned at the end of the aisle and disappeared. And still the child retained her silence; fingers gripped the stuffed lioness in pain.

"*...come out tonight, and dance by the light of the moon?*"

They stopped in front of the place where the fireman had made his selection. A bowed but alert head shifted ever so slightly to allow her to mentally sound out the letters R-I-C-E. The Man's back was turned when the clomp of two sets of boots approached.

"Geeze, Matt, I said *jasmine* rice, you yahoo. It says 'jasmine' and there's no way we're gonna show up back at the barn with anything but the gen-u-wine article. Give me that." Tony reached and snatched the bag his partner teasingly tried to keep out of reach.

Tony slowed his steps when he noticed the middle-aged man standing behind the cart and its occupant. All three were parked next to the spot he was headed for. He was in a hurry, always cognizant of the hassle it caused everyone when they got called out on a run with a full basket of un-paid-for groceries but never-the-less he slowed.

Some kids could be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of his line backer frame encased in a turnout coat, and the girl before him seemed more timid than most. He caught the glint of a dark iris through a curtain of dark, tangled hair and winked at the girl before turning to hunt out the spot where Matt had randomly plucked the *wrong* rice and then found the last item they needed before heading to the checkout stand.

The fireman stood not three feet away from where she crouched under a brutal grip that curled over a shoulder and dug into the tender spot below her right collar-bone. She checked her own grip on a plush toy.

Having made his selection, the fireman flashed his most winning smile at the little girl and turned to join his partner. In the years that followed, for the rest of his life, he could never pin point what exactly it was that caused him to turn back when he did. When questioned, he usually settled on citing the uneasy feeling he had about the whole tableau behind him. During more introspective moments, he thought it was a specific tug of guilt, like he was abandoning some wounded animal to suffer in trapped silence. For whatever reason, he turned.

Noel threw herself forward, twisting and wrenching her shoulder from an already relaxing grip. She launched herself at the retreating fireman, well before he turned and caught her. It never occurred to her that he wouldn't.

Matt reached his partner's side even as Tony was recovering his balance. It was easy for Matt to explain why he had moved so quickly. Years of shared teamwork had honed his instincts and he had picked up on Tony's unease, perhaps before Tony himself was aware of it.

The man let out a howl of frustrated rage, but did not try to breach the wall of canvas that now separated him from his prize. A prize that he'd believed had been conditioned and trained not to make even the slightest effort to approach or communicate with anyone during their weekly trip into town. He spun away and headed towards the nearest exit.

Tony spared the man no attention as he held on to the child who seemed determined to burrow her way further into his right turnout coat sleeve. Matt called out a "Grab him!" but remained rooted to the shielding position he'd adopted in front of the pair. His partner seemed to be trembling, but Matt quickly realized it was probably a conduction of the alarmingly violent tremors coming in waves off of a small body. *Or maybe not*, he thought, once he himself started to shake in sympathy.

Hank's pen beat a rapid tattoo on the ink blotter that protected the top of his desk. The days and weeks that Noel had been missing had been hell, but the ones since the Raiths had recovered their child weren't shaping up to be anyone's dream of a swift and sure happily-ever-after. Noel had yet to speak in much more than mono syllables and clung to a stuffed animal that matched ones the zoo carried in their gift shop, refusing to set it down for any reason. She wanted to sleep in her own bedroom, but woke nightly in tears.

By day, Noel's pale shadow was unable to express the palpable fear that sometimes seemed to enfold her. Her abductor might be behind bars, but his ability to cause pain had certainly not been curtailed. No amount of adult conviction that she was "safe now" had been able to keep her convinced that she was. The entire family was looking more than a bit haggard.

Hank had just ended a lengthy phone conversation with Dr. Preston, the psychiatrist they'd chosen for Noel.

Last week her parents had both noticed that their daughter seemed more relaxed at the fire station during a visit with her uncle and the rest of A-shift. They'd mentioned this at her next therapy session and the doctor had suggested that perhaps they should honor Noel's preferences and arrange for a few more visits and see where that led.

Over the past few days, Hank had ironed out the details, feeling like he was proving the axiom "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission," with every phone call he made. No one from HQ was against the plan per se since it wouldn't really be stretching policies already in place, but no one wanted to set a precedence. Hank had countered with the assurance that it wasn't like they were planning on starting a day-care. One of her parents would always be in attendance, hanging back to let Noel interact with the guys but always prepared to leave with the child should an alarm empty the station of firemen.

There had been one shared concern: the intense scrutiny the press had given the whole ordeal of Noel's abduction. No one wanted to attract more attention or invite criticism. But, Hank was quick to point out, interest in the case had already begun to wane. The front page was for adrenalin, terror and sensationalism; more than one of the adults in Noel's life were grateful that their story had moved out of the spot light. There was the added hope that since many of the visits would be scheduled during the firemen's' traditionally 'free' time in the evenings, they might fly further under the radar. In the end it was decided they would deal with any curiosity when and if it happened, and play the rest by ear.

Today's conversation had allowed the doctor to offer some advice and answer a few of Hank's questions. They ended with plans for weekly updates and one last caution from the doctor. These therapist-sanctioned visits came with a therapist-grade warning: if Noel began to open up to the men at the station, such a bestowed honor may come at a price.

Gentle hands folded and fondled the extravagant, velvet Basset-ears that spread out across her lap as the grownups of Station 51 went about their daily business and her daddy read the newspaper at the kitchen table.

A silent elf scurried to perch a peacock on a pillow. Five minutes later, an 'uncle' and a 'niece' paused their industrious shining of a squad's headlights as another 'uncle' set the brightly colored figurine on a cherry red hood with a playful growl.

"Someone's gonna have to help me name this one, 'cuz I've run out of ideas. You know, I think there's only one grape Popsicle left in the freezer, I'll race you for it."

J. R. GAGE

Egg J_ _

Roy was at the black board with Noel, using John's name to explain how an anagram worked. He had her rapt attention and won a ghost of a smile when she caught on and added an "a" and an "r". She brushed at a stuffed animal's nose to remove the dusting of chalk it received during the process.

Maria rolled a warm mug between her palms as she visited with Chet and Mike at the kitchen table. "I'm sorry, I know I should be grateful just to have her back, and oh-my-God, I am. But I can't help resenting that she hangs onto that thing like it's some kind of lifeline," she admitted in an undertone.

"He said Mommy and Daddy didn't want me anymore, and that's why he had to take me home with him." Small hands tugged and twisted the tufted end of a stuffed lioness' tail.

They all had been coached as to what the correct response to a variety of questions and announcements might be, but for the life of him, all Marco could manage was to open his arms and accept the misery that climbed into his lap.

"Don't tell them."

Marco finally found his gone-missing voice. "Don't you think they'd want the chance to tell you that just isn't so?"

"I didn't believe him!" came an emphatic declaration. "I didn't! But he said it over and over and he was a grownup, and..."

Marco was working off-script which was just as well since he seemed to have lost all vocal ability again except the "sh-shh" sound he was making as he rocked the child and himself until tears turned to hiccoughs and hiccoughs turned to soft breathy snores.

"Mommy doesn't like Elsa."

Chet thought it best not to agree heartily with that observation and stalled for a moment as he pulled out the piece of stiff paper he had just upended a full-to-the-brim glass of water on. They were alone in the kitchen and he put a finger to his lips and tugged Noel into a seat at the table where they picked up abandoned hands of "go fish".

"Why do you think that, little elf? Have you got aaaa-ny eights?"

Noel checked her cards before ordering the fireman sitting next to her to "go fish." The six-year-old studied her cards and her answer in silence. "She just doesn't. I think Elsa maybe makes her remember I got stolen. Have you got any two's?"

Cap and Noel's father returned from a brief chat in the office. Will scooted Noel over on her chair and then relocated her onto his lap. She carefully turned her cards to give him a peek.

Hank paused for a moment, and took in the scene before him. He didn't miss the too-innocent look Chet was goading him with, or the fact that most of Noel's face was hidden behind a school of fish-motive cards. He made sure Chet didn't miss the meaning of his returning gaze; one that promised that this was going to be a one-time occurrence. With a similar promise to himself, he wandered over to the counter and positioned himself to give the full dramatic effect before upending the waiting glass as if he were planning to fill it at the sink. He choreographed his swift sidestep with a gasp so that he got away with only a moderate splash. He rounded on two criminals and a witness in order to catch the smiling eyes above Noel's cards, a wink from his lineman and a surprised guffaw from Noel's dad.

"Well, I guess you got me this time, guys. You two know where the mop is," Hank said as he wiped the countertop with a dish towel. He bent to whisper something private in Noel's ear as she scurried past to get the wheeled bucket and then straightened again. "Excuse me, while I go and drip-dry," he said before taking himself off to do just that.

Chet immediately noticed Noel's change in attitude. They were finishing up their card game and the little girl was watching him like he was going to turn into a bug any second. "What? What'd I do?"

With an exaggerated huff she folded her cards with a "tsk". She leaned close for a whispered scold, "You shouldn't ought to cheat at cards, Uncle Chet. Nobody's ever going to want to play with you if you do."

Hank returned Noel's goodbye wave as her mom pulled the silver Accord away from the curb. As soon as they were out of sight, the captain went in search of the crew member that seemed to have gone missing.

The last time he'd seen Mike had been over twenty minutes ago. His engineer had been taking a short break from mundane firehouse chores to offer his expertise on the finer points of managing a cat's cradle. Hank had paused a moment to appreciate the scene. Noel had been standing on one of the chrome steps to the engine's jump seats, bringing her close to eye level with her six-foot-two tutor. She and Mike had hovered over the tangle strung between two small hands, foreheads almost touching. They'd been deep in conversation as Hank continued on his way to the office.

He spotted his engineer leaning against the brick at the rear of the station, polishing a brass coupling with more vigor than was strictly required. When Mike slid down the wall and set the fitting aside to press the heels of his hands against closed eyelids, Hank backed away. Mike would come in when he was ready; not to break confidences, but to absorb the quiet support he would find once he absorbed whatever horror had been placed in his keeping.

"What's wrong with Henry, Uncle Johnny?" a concerned voice asked.

"He's just dreaming." John bent to tug on a dark braid before lifting an end of the couch to shift it away from the wall, giving it a playful wobble in hopes of eliciting an excited shriek. What he received was a still-snoozing canine sigh followed by a whimper as four legs twitched in pantomime of a remembered chase. At Noel's continued look of concern, John set his mop aside and knelt by the couch to run a soothing hand over doggy ribs. "I'll bet he's after a rabbit or maybe trying to keep old Herbert the mouse out of the station."

"Maybe it's a nightmare that he was stolen and he's trying to get home."

The dreamer in question cracked an eyelid and licked a little girl's hand. His tail gave three solid thumps before he rolled his Basset bulk in her lap until an ear draped over the edge of the couch and one paw dangled above his chest. It raised and flopped with each deep breath as he relaxed back into sleep.

"Maybe, but it looks like he knows he's safe now."

"Uncle Chet, why do you sound so funny?"

"I just ate a lot of smoke at a fire we had last shift and I think I'm coming down with a cold on top of that." A harsh, gravelly answer was carried on a rattle from deep inside Chet's chest, but he chased it with a smile as he put away the dish he was drying.

A frown canted at the same angles as furrowed, puzzled eyebrows. "Why did you eat smoke? What did it taste like?"

"It tasted like sh..."

Roy turned from where he and John were entering their reports in the logbook and smoothly cut in with a warning look at Chet. "That's just a figure of speech, honey. Firemen say it because when we breathe too much smoke, it's all we can smell or taste for awhile. It makes our throats sore and our voices all nasty sounding."

Chet threw Roy a mixed look of umbrage and thanks, for the less-than-complimentary description of his scratchy voice and for the smooth save from his faux pas.

"Hey, Chet, do know why the pony always whispered?"

Playing along, Chet gave a pat, albeit gravelly response, "No Roy, why *did* the pony always whisper?"

After a pause that just begged for a backup drummer's "baa-da-da-dum", Roy answered in his best laringitis voice, "... because he was a little hoarse."

Smiles and a few rolled eyes all around except for one look of obvious puzzlement. Noel rested her chin on the table deep in thought.

A few minutes later, Will entered the kitchen after making his usual stop by the office to touch bases with Captain Stanley. Hank followed behind with the dual intent of greeting Noel and getting a coffee refill.

"Daddy, Daddy, do you want to hear a joke?"

"Sure, pumpkin, let's hear it."

"Why did the little pony always whisper?"

In perfect vaudeville timing, Will supplied his line. "I don't know. Why *did* the pony always whisper?"

Noel provided the answer in a tinkling soprano, "Because he was such a small horse!" The laughter that the inadvertently bumbled punch line received was genuine, as was the smile on a little comedian's face. She all but took a bow.

Chet's chuckle turned into a coarse hack.

"Roy, John, one of you better check him out; let me know if he needs to take the rest of the shift off."

After a quick exam, it was decided that Chet would be going home with his aggravated raw throat, low-grade temperature and congested cough.

Noel hovered close during the assessment as the grownups in turn watched and wondered at her growing agitation.

"Uncle Chet, I'm sorry you don't feel good."

Chet, as concerned over Noel's obvious distress as the rest of the men in the room, spoke from a distance, in an effort not to share germs with her if he turned out to be infectious. "It's nothing, little elf. I'll drop by my doctor's on my way home to see if I need to breathe in some special medicine or take something for my sore throat. Then I'll go home and take a really long nap. In a few days, I'll be right as rain. I promise."

Noel still look worried. "But Uncle Chet, you don't have anyone to take care of you; you're a lonely batter."

The tones went off before Uncle Chet could correct her.

"Uncle Cap'n? Did I leave Elsa at your fire station?"

Hank was glad the obviously distraught Noel was on the other end of the phone-line so she couldn't see the smile that was proving difficult to quell. He held the receiver against his chest, sobering as he wondered how many frantic calls had been placed while they put out a trash can fire that had gotten out of control and threatened to engulf an entire backyard of shrubbery.

He motioned to the guys as they entered through the kitchen door, Chet brought up the rear looking as if they had just fought a three-alarm blaze by themselves. His replacement should arrive within the half hour.

Uncle Cap'n's "Anyone see Elsa?" was all it took to start a bona fide grid search for the missing treasure.

Within half a minute Johnny produced the stuffed lioness, after he extricated her from under an immobile Basset head.

"Gimme that, Henry," Gage scolded. "This is *not* a pillow."

"Noel? Yeah, sweetie, we found her," Hank spoke into a phone receiver now held between his chin and shoulder as he continued the fluffing process John had begun before handing off the very-important-stuffed-one.

"Mommy says it's almost my bedtime and we should come get her tomorrow, or that maybe Uncle Marco could drop her off after he takes his nap." Hank was having trouble with his face muscles again. He reminded himself that this was serious stuff to Noel. "I'm sure your Uncle Marco could drop her off after his nap," he assured her, checking to see if any his men were following the conversation. He gave up the battle and let his smile join the others'.

"Well, I was thinking, maybe Uncle Chet could take her with him for a sleep-over. They could take care of each other. Can I please talk to him before he goes home sick?"

"Please, Uncle Roy? I can't reach. Please erase it?" Noel's jumping swipes with the felt block were falling several inches short of erasure.

His hand was obeying the whispered request even as he read what a cohort had chalked in an obvious attempt to tickle a six-year-old's funny bone.

Henry Basset Hound

hunt, bay, shed, snore

She shot a worried glance at the snoozing object of the anagram before she explained in an anxious whisper, "It'll hurt his feelings." Tears were gathering.

John joined his partner and Noel at the chalkboard. He assumed the squatting position they had all adopted weeks ago when addressing Noel rather than tower above her. "You know, I should have thought of that. I'm sorry, little elf, can I try again?"

Noel's dad and five other sets of lungs breathed a collective sigh of relief when John performed a slick rescue via what had to have been a back-up offering.

Henry Basset Hound

Hero bays; hunt ends.

Johnny thought the smile of approval and forgiveness Noel bestowed upon him ample reward for the effort he'd invested into wrestling an acceptable anagram out of her canine pal's name.

"Fi-ive, ten..." A puzzled face looked up from concentrating on the coins in an engineer's palm as its owner practiced counting change, a new and troubling subject for someone who had missed a fair chunk of first grade.

"How 'bout you start with the two quarters first?" came a gentle suggestion.

"Twenty-five, fif-ty..." She started again with more confidence.

"Noooo, Henry, you're supposed to come find us!" A frustrated Noel returned to stand in front of the couch with hands on her hips. The hound raised his head only when a four-footed, excited bundle of energy threatened to invade his space on the couch.

Jason Roer, a young lineman just out of his probationary period, had dropped by with Spotmop, his four-month-old Dalmatian. With a chagrined smile, he had explained that the pup's name had morphed from a solid fire-family tradition of "Spot" to one more descriptive of the difficulty he'd had mastering house training.

Before the pup could make good his threat to pounce the older dog, the tones went off causing the paramedics to scramble for the squad. The noise and commotion sent the pup racing after them in excitement.

"Grab him!"

Excitement turned to alarm when hands reached and feet stomped in pursuit. Mid way across the apparatus floor, alarm translated into incontinence and the pup lost his footing and slid in his own poop. Noel, hot on his heels, slid too. They both disappeared into the bunk room as the bay doors lowered behind the squad and its wailing siren.

Inside the bunk room the trail led across three bunks. The smell was *everywhere*.

They found the pair hiding on the other side of Cap's bunk, huddled under a blanket. Noel was crying and when she raised a tear streaked face she squeezed the wiggly, smeared pup tighter, "I know he did something bad. Something really, *really* bad - but I *love* him. Please, don't make him go away!"

The silence was painful. Maria Raith stood mute and stunned in the doorway.

In Hank's book, young Jason Roer earned a merit badge for intuition and timing when he instantly dropped to his knees in front of the two refugees from a sewage dump. "Nah, we love him at our house too. He's staying; that's what family's all about. Nobody's perfect, and hey, what's a little poop amongst family, right guys?"

A recovering mother muttered, "What a shit storm."

Chet was the first to laugh. "Mike, we're gonna be testing that phenomena of smell saturation and nose fatigue again. B-shift is gonna love this."

After a quick size up, Cap took charge.

In less than fifteen minutes, Noel was standing back in the dorm looking pretty adorable in one of Mike's spare undershirts and damp pigtails, saying good bye to an also-damp-but-clean mass of spots and wiggling joy.

"Mommy, what's a shit storm?"

"Ah, I didn't say that, I said 'ship storm'. You know: when boats get caught in big storms, things sometimes spill and they have to swab the decks? That's what I meant."

Marco straightened and mouthed the word "liar" from where he was re-making a bunk.

"Oh, I hope their puppies don't always get too excited 'cuz this is awfully hard to clean up."

Cap handed her a pillow. "Yep, it is that, isn't it, little elf. Here, you put this pillow in a clean case while your uncle puts these blankets in the wash, assuming he can stop laughing long enough to make himself useful."

"Promise you won't tell?"

As he felt his gut roll and bare its underside in anticipation and surrender, Hank put his pen down and turned to the child sitting at the other desk, her head bent over a coloring page.

R. DeSoto

Set Odor

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N.M. Raith

Thin Arm

Although this shift's anagram offerings did not produce the giggles the paramedics were fishing for, an arm-wrestling match ensued which would have had an outside observer (if they were very gullible) convinced that the men of station 51 were repeatedly thwarted by a skinny arm made of kryptonite. The firemen weren't exactly throwing the matches since each technically ended in a draw, but a small wrist never neared the table. Mike finally ended the game by standing and lifting a stubbornly clinging opponent and carrying her nonchalantly around the room dangling from a forearm as if she didn't weigh in at forty-five pounds.

"I'm s-orry."

"It's okay, El. Can you tell me why you wanted your mom and dad and Dr. Preston to think we were headed to the zoo?"

Marco sat on a park bench not two blocks from the Raith's neighborhood, a niece tucked under his left arm. Every few seconds a shuddering, *silent* sob would accompany an intake of fresh air. The heart absorbing these seismic tremors was shattering along familiar fault lines, memorized over the past eight months.

Eight months ago, Noel had been the family's drama queen. It used to be a running joke that the wails and waterworks she was capable of dredging up would one day earn her an academy award. Dr. Preston, her therapist for the past seven of those months seemed reassured that Noel was able to cry at all following what she termed "such a significant trauma." Marco thought it one of two of the most gut-wrenching cues that something deep inside his niece remained wounded. The other was that Noel had yet to laugh. He held on and waited.

"They wanted me to go *so much*."

Okay, maybe not the most gut-wrenching.

"El, your mom and dad love you; they want you to be happy. They thought, we *all* thought, you wanted to go see the animals. No one wants you to do something that makes you sad." Marco's mind was sifting through past conversations for evidence of what they'd all missed. They'd assumed Noel's insistence that her first trip back to the zoo be with only her uncle was a reflection of a continuing need to protect her parents from sharing her hurt. It seemed that they had only been partially right.

"I *do* want to go. I miss the otters and the lions and, and the giraffe baby is getting big and I haven't gotten to even see him yet. It's just when I think about going to visit them I start to feel..." Here it seemed, a six-year-old's vocabulary failed her as she turned her face into a chest that somehow maintained a deceptively calm rhythm.

Marco forced himself to take another even breath and managed a counterfeit smile. "*Niña dulce*, it will be okay, I promise. What shall we do with the rest of our morning, eh?"

The background chaos faded to white noise as Marco stood aside and surveyed the group he was with.

Cap had joined Roy who stood with his son and daughter in front of the same monkey exhibit where Marco had first lost an intrepid explorer named Wren during a previous visit more than a year ago. He smiled as he caught himself automatically gauging distances and judging the small group to be safely beyond the chimps' pitching range.

Natalie, Cap's fifteen-year-old daughter, had come along to bolster the ranks of the adults. She held Mike's niece, Patti up to better see the young giraffe standing near its mama, without releasing Mike's other niece's hand.

John was off to one side, standing sentry with Mike; each were wearing dark sunglasses. They could have passed for secret agents except John kept stealing pinches of frothy pink cotton candy from the cone Mike was holding for one of the younger kids.

Chet and his nephew were horsing around at a nearby water fountain.

Marco allowed himself to focus entirely on the pair who had claimed much of his attention during this excursion; in reality, for much of the past year. Maria knelt next to Noel in front of a plaque that proclaimed the two giraffes loitering not ten feet away to be of the Masai variety. He smiled at a giggle-producing tickle, and again at a whispered exchange.

Noel seemed mesmerized by the two sixteen foot giants standing with their heads canted together in a gossip-like pose. Suddenly an astonishingly long, dark blue tongue stretched out to lick deep inside a neighbor's velvety ear. A clear peal of laughter rang above the white.

A/N: Four Rug Rats this final go-round, no wait, *five*... one of them has a tail to wag. One last hint: use Noel Raith as the base for this story's star rug rat's anagram.