

25 TO LIFE by John Lansing

EXCERPT

ONE

Gloria was embarrassingly beautiful first thing in the morning. Her lively intelligent eyes, were the color of cocoa. Her perfect skin was a shade darker. She blew steam over the rim of her coffee cup, steeling herself for the day. Gloria mentally repeated the bullet points she wanted to make with her next group of interviewees.

Mug shots of Carl Forbes, a teenage African American boy, were taped to her mirror. A daily reminder of her life's work. She quickly gathered her overflowing briefcase and iPad, and locked the apartment door behind her.

Gloria slid behind the wheel of her Fiat, the color of a pistachio, and headed for her first appointment with Councilman Mark Corcoran.

Gloria's interview with the councilman wasn't going well. Saying she worked with Project for the Innocent did her no good. Corcoran had agreed to give her ten minutes of his time, but the officious man had already checked his watch twice.

"I'm a big fan of your program," Corcoran said. His unblinking eyes used to intimidate had no effect on Gloria. "But I believe your client is a guilty man. I followed the case—hell, we all knew the kid. Quiet type, lived a few blocks over, didn't run with our set. Hard to believe him capable of such brutality, but he confessed to the crime."

Gloria was prepared for this. "Carl says the arresting officers tortured the confession out of him. He was seventeen years old. Thirty-six hours without food or bathroom facilities. And look at the photograph, it's clear he'd been beaten."

The councilman glanced at the photo and handed it back. "He was picked out of a lineup."

"Eyewitnesses are notoriously undependable. If the cops coerced the confession, it's not a stretch to think they might have manipulated the lineup. And none of his DNA was found on, or in the victim's body. Shelley Goldstein had been sexually assaulted before she was murdered. I believe Carl was set up. He's already served twenty-three years for a murder he didn't commit."

Corcoran wasn't moved. "Shelley was a lovely rich girl. None of the boys in our neighborhood stood a chance in hell with her. Sorry, but there's nothing more I can add."

"I was told you had a big crush on her."

"We all had crushes on her. Who were you talking to?" All attitude now.

"I don't reveal sources."

Corcoran rose from his power desk, "Good luck with the case. I respect what you're doing."

Gloria understood an exit line when she heard one. She nodded, and walked out.

Gloria was early for her next interview. She grabbed a latte from her favorite coffee house, and took a window seat. She called Professor Ted Andrews who ran Project for the Innocent and filled him in on her less than stellar performance. Her mentor wasn't pleased.

"It's a little early in the game to be burning bridges" Ted said.

"I know, you're right. I get it. But he was so arrogant."

"Don't beat yourself up. You're doing a good job." Ted counseled her to take a few days, consolidate her notes, and then they'd revisit the case. Not what Gloria wanted to hear. And then as an afterthought, "I think I'm being followed."

That caught the professor's attention. Gloria explained it was an SUV with tinted windows. She'd picked up a strange vibe. She made a few off-the-wall turns, and he was gone. She started questioning herself, said it was probably nothing. The professor reminded her when they exonerate one of their clients, someone else's career and reputation sustains damage. It's a dangerous business. He tells her to trust her instincts. Gloria took that to heart and signed off.

Hanna Cook was standing on the postage-sized porch of a tired California bungalow in Del Rey. She was pushing fifty but giving sixty a run for its money.

"So, what can I tell you about the bastard?" Hanna asked, droll.

Gloria shared a conspiratorial grin. Put the subject at ease, she'd been taught, and they might share their secrets.

"Do you remember the case? It was back in 2000. The sexual assault and brutal murder of a young co-ed." Gloria reached into her briefcase, "This is a picture of Carl when he was seventeen." She handed Hanna the photo.

"What did Kevin have to do with it?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. He's on record as being part of the team who arrested the young man."

"No," she said wistfully, handing the photo back. "The less I knew, the better off I was. Kevin was an angry man who never should've been a cop. Went to his head. That, and the rye whiskey. Only thing that made him feel good ... then it made him mean. When he wasn't getting his kicks arresting dirt-bags, he'd start in on me."

"Was he ever cited for physical violence?"

"Once or twice. It wasn't like it is now. People with their cell phones, and cameras. And just try to arrest a cop back then for slapping around his wife..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Gloria said, and decided to drop the hammer. "Carl claims your ex, and his partner, beat him into giving a false confession."

Hanna considered that. "I almost shot Kevin one night. Had his gun. He woke up staring down the barrel. I started to cry and he slapped the thing out of my hands and gave me something to cry about. First call I made after they unwired my jaw was to a lawyer."

The conversation was going nowhere. Nothing but conjecture to corroborate her inmate's story.

It was dusk as Gloria made her way toward Twin Dragon Restaurant. She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a gray Ford Expedition several lengths behind her. Was it the same SUV she saw before? There were lots of SUVs in LA. When she checked again, it was gone.

Gloria pulled her car onto the side street next to the restaurant. All was quiet. She draped a sweater over her briefcase in the rear compartment, locked up, and hoofed it around to the front entrance to pick up her order.

Five minutes in and out. When Gloria emerged, her hands were full and the smell was incredible. She rounded the corner—and had to look twice to make sense out of what she was seeing. Broken shards of glass fanned out around the back of her car. She took another tentative step forward and could clearly see the shattered rear window of her Fiat.

Her heart pounded, and her breath came in fits and starts. She prayed she was wrong. Yet as she neared her car, her worst fears were realized.

Her briefcase was gone.

Her throat went dry, and she stifled tears. She set the bag of food on top of her car and took in the scene. She looked around her car, checked the traffic on Pico, and the quiet side street for anything out of the ordinary.

Nothing. No one who could have witnessed the break-in. No one who cared that she was caught in a nightmare.

Gloria did a quick mental inventory of everything in her briefcase and came to the sickening realization her iPad and four months of hard work had been stolen. In some instances, information and notes of interviews that took hours to create, and hadn't been copied. The flood gates opened and tears streamed down her cheeks. Light-headed, she had to lean against the car to keep her balance.

Was it an opportunistic crime? The thief saw an object, did a smash and grab. Could it have been that simple?

What else could it have been? The SUV? Gloria knew she was paranoid now. Scared silly. She grabbed a few napkins out of her takeout order and whisked the shards of glass that had landed on her front seats onto the curb. She turned on her headlights and pulled out, driving toward home.

Her head was still swimming. Gloria pulled to a stop, grabbed her cell phone and called her father.

After she told him what had happened, he quickly replied:

“Look, darling, don't go home to an empty apartment,” he said with a tenderness that belied his courtroom reputation. “I don't want you to be alone. Drive over the hill and spend the night. We can file a police report in the morning and set you up with a rental car.”

“I've got Chinese.”

“Shrimp with black bean sauce?”

“And Kung Pao.”

“I'll chill the chardonnay. I don't want you to worry. Drive safely, honey.”

“Okay, Dad. Thank you.”

Gloria clicked off, feeling loved, and headed for the Las Virgenes exit off the 101.

Malibu Canyon Road was two lanes of driving pleasure. Winding blacktop cutting through deep canyons and steep cliffs with sandstone outcroppings. It came to a dramatic end, revealing the Pacific Ocean and Malibu.

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The missing rear window of her Fiat created a strange whistle as she powered the small car around the curves at forty-five miles an hour. Her rumbling stomach got the better of her, and Gloria rummaged around the bag with one hand and plucked out a dumpling. She smiled, took a bite, and glanced at the rearview mirror.

A large SUV appeared around one rocky turn, moving fast, and she hoped the driver wasn't going to be a pain, and force her to pick up the pace.

Gloria made short work of the dumpling and used two hands to maneuver around a tight curve. Her discomfort swelled as she realized the SUV was closing the distance. Headlights on high beam. Her body tensed as she realized the vehicle bearing down on her was a gray Ford Expedition.

Gloria wondered if she was going mad. It looked like the same car she'd seen before. No, it was impossible, she thought, but picked up her pace. Fifty miles an hour was pushing it around the tight curves, and as fast as she was willing to go. Screw the driver.

The SUV was tracking her now. Tight on her fender. Headlights blinding. She grabbed her cell phone and hit her father's number with one hand. Gloria slid around the next turn, and the phone dropped out of her hand.

"Back off!" she shouted over the whine of air thundering through the broken rear window as her speedometer hit sixty miles an hour. The SUV loomed in her rearview and she instinctively pushed the car to sixty-five, white-knuckling the steering wheel.

Gloria drifted over the broken white line as a car blasted by from the opposite direction, horn blaring, scaring the crap out of her. She came dangerously close to skidding onto the narrow gravel shoulder and colliding with the sheer cliff face.

And then, oh Christ, she felt the SUV nudge the back of her car.

Gloria stomped pedal-to-metal. Her small sedan rocketed to seventy miles an hour.

The SUV tapped her rear bumper again.

Gloria's eyes teared. She was losing it but fought to keep the car on the road.

The SUV slammed into her harder. "Stop it!" she cried.

And then the power punch. Five thousand pounds of steel rammed her compact car.

Gloria couldn't hear her squealing tires over the sound of her own screams as she went into a death spin.

Gloria knew she was going to die a moment before her car came out of the 360 on the opposite side of the road, barreling toward the cliff at seventy miles an hour.

Her Fiat smashed into the rocky berm and went airborne.

Time stood still.

The only sound: the whistling wind and Gloria's beating heart.

The rock-strewn riverbed grew in size, filling her field of vision as she dropped out of the sky and bore witness to her impending death.

The pistachio Fiat that had brought Gloria so much joy in life burst into flames on impact and enveloped her broken body.

Excerpt from *25 to Life* by John Lansing. Copyright 2023 by John Lansing. Reproduced with permission from John Lansing. All rights reserved.