

Note: This story contains violence which may disturb some readers.

Obsession

by Carol D.

"Just leave a message on my machine, whatever you decide," John Gage said to his partner, Roy DeSoto.

The two men stood before their lockers, transforming themselves from civilians to firefighter/paramedics in preparation for the 24-hour shift that lay ahead.

"Yeah, okay." The senior paramedic replied agreeably.

Chet Kelly had sauntered in, unnoticed, shamelessly eavesdropping on the last exchange between the paramedics.

"Did I hear you right, Gage? You've got an *answering machine*?" The Irish firefighter asked in astonishment.

John smiled smugly. "Sure, Chet! What's so hard to believe about that?"

"Well, nothing, I guess...aside from the obvious," Chet baited his adversary. Roy grinned. He secretly enjoyed the verbal sparring that inevitably ensued between the two eccentric bachelors of Station 51.

Johnny regarded Chet with narrowed eyes. "*What 'obvious'?*"

"One, I know how much you make. Toys like that are generally the domain of the idle rich. Two, what do *you* need with a telephone answering machine? How many important calls could you be getting, anyway?"

"Well, Chet, as usual, you have no vision." Johnny wore an expression of patient condescension. "For your information, the prices have come down and they're now quite reasonable. It won't be long until *every* household in America has one, and they won't know what they did without it. When I say every household, I realize that yours may be the rare exception, since you're still stuck in the 50's anyway."

Captain Hank Stanley stuck his head in the door. "Roll call in five minutes." Noticing the half-dressed paramedic who still had his index finger poised mid-air, the captain added, "sharp." *The shift hasn't even begun and those two are at it already. Maybe I'll assign them both to latrine duty and let them duke it out with plungers.*

"All I know is it must be a pretty pathetic sight, watching you rush in to check your messages and finding none. Before you know it, you'll be calling yourself just to feel important."

"Oh shut up, Kelly."

The day was a moderately busy one for the station, especially Squad 51. By mid-afternoon, they'd responded to five calls ranging from chest pains to motor vehicle accidents to fainting in the supermarket. DeSoto and Gage were driving back to the station after the last, a fender-bender with minor injuries.

"I hope they saved us some lunch. I'm starving," Johnny said.

Roy snorted with laughter. "So, what else is new?"

"I heard *your* stomach growling back there at the base station!"

"I am kind of hungry," Roy admitted.

"Kinda! I couldn't hear myself think with all the noise."

Just then, Johnny's stomach let loose with a loud roar that rivaled, if not surpassed, his partner's earlier gastric performance.

"Huh? What? You say something?" Roy said loudly, followed by a snicker.

"Drive, just drive."

By late afternoon, the scene in Station 51 was one of Rockwellian domestication. Chet was sprawled on the sofa with the sports page, idly scratching Henry's ear while the dog lounged on Chet's left thigh. Marco Lopez stirred the contents simmering in a pot on the stove, his uniform protected by an apron. Mike Stoker studiously engaged himself in a game of solitaire at the table. In the bay, Johnny buffed the chrome on the squad, his expression one of thoughtful concentration. His partner, Roy, sat in the cab, polishing the instrument panel. In the office, Captain Stanley immersed himself in the endless parade of paperwork that is the bane of every firehouse captain.

The reverie was broken by the sudden toning of the klaxons summoning the station to a motor vehicle accident with injuries. Smoothly and wordlessly, the firefighters abandoned their activities and boarded their respective vehicles for the trip to the accident scene.

"Over there," Johnny pointed to the busy intersection of five streets where the cars sat, crumpled and blocking traffic. Roy threaded the squad through the gridlock, at one point mounting a curb to bypass the hopelessly stuck vehicles unlucky enough to have happened along directly after the incident.

The paramedics grabbed their gear and strode purposefully to the involved cars. "I'll get the red one," Johnny said as he split away from his partner.

"Yeah okay."

Roy approached the white sedan to find an elderly woman sitting behind the steering wheel, staring

dazedly at the cracked windshield before her.

"Ma'am, are you hurt anywhere?" he asked solicitously. He opened the driver's side door to gain better access to the woman.

"My head. I hit my head," the woman responded shakily.

"Okay, let's check you out here." Roy gently palpated the woman's skull and discovered a large bump just beyond her hairline on the left side of her forehead.

"Oh, that hurts!" she exclaimed shrilly.

"Okay, okay. Do you hurt anywhere else?"

"No, I don't think so." The woman seemed close to tears.

"Did you lose consciousness at all?"

"I...I'm not sure."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"It's Friday, isn't it?" she asked uncertainly.

Roy smiled encouragingly. "That's right. It's Friday. You're going to be all right, now. Just try to relax while I contact the hospital."

Johnny approached the red vehicle and found a very attractive brunette inside. She was restlessly fiddling around in the seat, and didn't seem to notice he'd approached. He tapped lightly on the window.

"Ma'am?"

She turned suddenly at the sound and glanced at the paramedic, did a double-take, and openly stared for several seconds. Johnny was used to unusual behavior on the part of accident victims and didn't pay any heed. He waited to see if she'd attempt to open a door or window, and when she made no move to do so, he tried the door handle. To his dismay, he found it inoperable. The door was jammed. The passenger side of the car was resting against a parked car, making it inaccessible.

"Are you all right?" he called loudly.

"I think so..." She blinked finally, and smiled. "I just can't get out!"

"Okay, hold tight. We'll get you out. Just hang on." He ran to locate Hank, whom he found peering beneath one of the involved vehicles to check for a gas leak.

"Cap, her door's jammed. I'm going to need the porta-power."

"You got it. Lopez, give Gage a hand over there."

Marco dropped the reel line he was using to spray away spilled gasoline, and ran to help Johnny with the trapped woman.

Johnny yelled to the woman, "can you open this window at all?"

She tried the handle, but the window lowered only two inches before it became stuck. "It won't go any farther!"

"Okay, that's all right. Here, take this blanket," Johnny passed a folded yellow blanket through the narrow opening, "unfold it, and cover yourself. It's just a little extra protection in case the glass breaks."

The victim smiled sweetly and did as she was told. Johnny began the painstaking task of prying the door open.

Back with the elderly victim, Roy was preparing her for transport to Rampart. The blow to the head was troublesome enough to warrant a trip to the hospital, just in case. Once he had gotten her 'packaged,' he trotted over to the second vehicle to check the situation with Johnny's victim.

John and Marco were just succeeding in getting the door open as Roy showed up.

"Hey Johnny, whatcha got?" the senior paramedic asked. He set the drug box down for his partner.

"Well, she's been trapped, so I don't know if she's injured. I don't think so, though. I'm fixing to check her out now."

"I'll hold the ambulance until you do. The other patient is stable." Roy started to head back to his victim.

"Okay, good." Johnny knelt before the young woman and visually scanned her extremities. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

The woman's eyes roamed over the uniformed paramedic's lean physique appreciatively. "Oh...no. I think I'm all right. Can I get out of here now?"

"Here, take my hand. Let me help you." Johnny supported the victim as she exited the wrecked vehicle. "How's that? Everything okay?" he asked again.

She held his hand firmly, her other hand on his forearm.

"Oh yes. Everything's perfect!" she answered breathlessly, giving his arm a squeeze. Her large, slate-gray eyes danced as she continued to cling to the hapless paramedic.

Johnny smiled uneasily, a blush creeping up his neck. Marco suppressed a snort of laughter and turned quickly, carrying the equipment back towards the engine. Johnny swallowed and looked around for a suitable place to sit the young woman down. He led her to the curb and eased her down.

"Let me just check you out here," he said in his best attempt at a professional tone. He opened the drug box and retrieved the b.p. cuff and stethoscope.

"I'm all yours," she purred.

Johnny cleared his throat and commenced checking the woman's vital signs. She *was* very pretty. Shiny, dark hair framed her tawny face; her teeth were impossibly straight and white. But the eyes...big, round, surrounded by thick lashes, and a most unusual color of gray. Those eyes were really throwing him off, and he suspected she knew that. He tried to avoid eye contact as he efficiently read her b.p. and counted her pulse rate. He decided it would be prudent to forego the respirations check.

"I'm Lydia," she offered.

"I'm John. John Gage."

"John-John Gage?" she teased, a glint in her eyes.

Johnny felt his face go hot again and he laughed self-consciously.

"Oh there you are," Roy said from behind, startling Johnny back into reality.

"Uh...yeah. Sorry, Roy. I think she's all right." Johnny was replacing the instruments in the drug box.

"Just all right?" Lydia asked with a playful pout.

Roy surveyed the scene with a bemused expression. It wasn't often he saw his playboy partner this flustered.

"Okay, I'm going in with the ambulance, then. See you at Rampart."

Johnny gave his partner a beseeching look, then nodded resignedly. "Yeah."

A police officer seemed to materialize in the spot vacated by Roy. "You the driver of this car, ma'am?" he asked, gesturing towards the red vehicle.

"Yes, that's mine," Lydia replied regretfully.

"I'll just need to get your version of the accident for my report." He turned to Johnny. "Is she released?"

"Yeah, she's okay. Be my guest."

"Wait, does he have to go?" Lydia asked the officer, indicating Johnny.

The officer looked back and forth between the two, confused.

"I, uh, have to get to the hospital to meet my partner. You saw him. Roy." Johnny fumbled for an explanation. "Glad you're okay. Listen, if you have any problems, feel free to call us. Sometimes injuries don't surface until the next day or so....so, take care now." With a friendly smile, he turned and quickly retreated.

Lydia watched him intently.

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

When she could no longer see the handsome fireman, she reluctantly turned her attention to the police officer.

Johnny strolled down the hallowed corridor of Rampart's Emergency Department as he had countless times before. He expected to find his partner at the base station, and that is exactly where he was. Roy was signing a requisition form and sipping a cup of coffee.

"How's the lady you brought in?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, she's fine. They're going to keep her for a few hours of observation. I think she's okay, just a little shook up."

Dixie came around the corner. "Hiya Johnny! Haven't seen you since...." She checked her watch. "Two hours ago."

Johnny smiled. "It's been kinda busy. Fridays are like that."

"You ain't just whistlin' Dix-- ...oh, never mind!" she finished with a laugh.

"We need just a few things." Roy slid the sheet in front of the head nurse. "So," he said to Johnny. "Did you get her number?"

"Whose number?"

"For pete's sake, the gal in the car wreck!"

"Oh, Lydia?"

"Whatever her name is."

"Nah."

"Nah? You've gotta be kidding."

"Why? Look, Roy, I don't ask out anyone and everyone who comes along, contrary to popular opinion!" Johnny's tone was defensive.

"Johnny, she was practically throwing herself at you! And she wasn't exactly ugly either!"

"I know, I know! I just...need some time, that's all."

"Since *when*? You're one of the fastest operators I've ever met!"

"Since today, okay?" Johnny fairly hissed. "I'll see you in the squad!" He gathered up the box of supplies and left the base station.

Roy looked at Dixie questioningly. Dixie just shrugged. *The never-ending mystery that is my partner*, Roy thought, and he, too, trudged towards the squad.

The drive back to the station started out coldly silent between the two men. Johnny rested his elbow on the door beside him, his fingers fanned across his mouth and chin as he gazed out the windshield. Roy periodically glanced at his uncharacteristically reticent friend, trying to pluck up the courage to say something to him.

"You wanna talk about it?" he finally blurted out. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Johnny startle at the sudden sound.

The dark-haired paramedic sighed. "You know Roy....it's just....I can't....I mean.....why do....bah!"

Roy chuckled. "I know exactly what you mean."

"That girl. Lydia. She was out of sight, no doubt about it." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I guess I was thrown by a couple of things."

"Like what?"

"Well, you know about that hero-worship thing. I think, maybe, she just felt a little overly appreciative because I got her out of that car. And, by tomorrow, she'll have forgotten all about the dumb fireman."

"Well, it's good to be realistic, I guess. But I think you're selling yourself short. She really seemed to dig you. From what I could see, anyway."

"That's another thing, Roy. It's just not natural for such a beautiful chick to come on to me that way. It's always, *always*, the other way around. And then I get rejected and everyone gets a good bit of entertainment out of it, and life goes on as normal."

"Maybe your luck is changing."

"Ahh, I don't know. Did you see the size of that gold chain around her neck? No, I guess you didn't. Girls like that are all the same. They act all interested at first, until they find out how much a fireman makes. Then it's 'ciao, baby.'"

"Well, only the Italian ones, right?" Roy smiled at his attempt to inject a little humor.

"Only the--? Geez, Roy. Don't quit your day job."

"At least keep an open mind."

"Hey, I'm nothing if not open-minded." Johnny smiled crookedly.

"Atta boy."

"That was superb, Marco." Cap leaned back in his chair and savored the after-glow of another delicious meal a la Marco.

"You outdid yourself this time, buddy," Chet concurred.

Marco smiled, pleased. "Glad you liked it!"

"I just can't believe we got to eat an entire meal without a call," Roy observed. "And on a Friday evening, no less."

"We paid our dues earlier," Johnny insisted.

"What dues?" Marco asked. "If rescuing beautiful women from their cars is paying dues, sign me up!"

"Oh yeah!" Chet added. "I hear you got lucky today, Gage. When's the first date?" His mustache twitched gleefully.

"There *is* no date, Chet."

"Is he sick Roy? Maybe you'd better take his temperature," Chet suggested.

"He's okay. For Johnny, anyway," Roy answered.

"Ah! I get it. Rejected already, huh?" Chet shook his head sadly. "And I really could've used the money to help me with my car payment this month."

"I was *not* rejected."

"Hey, Johnny, if you're not going to take her out, can I have her?" Marco asked. "Man, she was sweet."

The phone rang and Cap got up to answer it. "Station 51, Captain Stanley speaking...why yes, he's here. One moment." Cap covered the mouthpiece. "It's for you, John. Lydia."

Johnny's jaw dropped. He stood and walked to the phone stiffly.

"Hello?...hi Lydia...well, yeah, I am a little surprised..." Noticing his co-workers watching him a little too interestedly, he turned and huddled against the wall. "Good, I'm glad...yeah, I had one once...no, nothing serious...um, sure...okay...see you then...bye."

"Hunh!" Johnny grinned idiotically and drifted out of the kitchen and into the engine bay.

Chet rubbed his hands together. "Ahhh....I may get help with my payment after all."

Roy threw a wadded napkin at Chet.

Three days later, Roy stood before his locker, buttoning his shirt. Another inauspicious beginning to, he hoped, an inauspicious day. As usual, he was on time, even a little early. As usual, his partner was running late.

"Morning, Roy," Chet greeted unenthusiastically. "How was your weekend?"

"Oh, the usual. Little League, chores, shopping. Yours?"

"The usual." Chet left his answer ambiguous.

The whistling could be heard a full ten seconds before Johnny burst through the swinging door, still blowing the off-key ditty. "Go-o-o-o-o-od mornin'!" He slapped Roy heartily on the back, causing the senior paramedic to lurch involuntarily into his locker. Johnny opened his locker with a flourish and began humming.

"I can't stand it," Chet intoned as he shuffled towards the same door Gage had just nearly torn from its hinges.

Once Roy had sufficiently recovered from the assault, he asked, "so, you had a good weekend?"

Johnny stopped humming, smiled and sat down on the bench. "Incredible."

"Lydia?"

"Oh man, Roy. What an amazing chick." Johnny chuckled, a faraway look in his eyes. "You know, you were right, too. She likes me. ME!" He clapped his hand to his chest, a look of incredulity in his dark eyes.

"See, I told you—"

"We spent all day Sunday, just walking around down by the pier, talking." He smiled at the memory. "She showed me her condo. It was fantastic. We went to a movie later."

"Yeah, Joanne and I were supposed to—"

"And *then...*" Johnny raised and lowered his eyebrows wolfishly. "Well, let's just say she lit my fire."

"—go to a movie too...." Roy trailed off. *What a difference in our lives. He's starting a passionate relationship with a new girlfriend, and Joanne and I have to cancel our movie date to help Chris with his social studies project*

Johnny sat on the bench, lost in his memory of the weekend. He held a boot in one hand, a dark sock in the other. He'd made no progress in getting dressed. The station phone rang.

"Gage!" the captain's voice bellowed. "Phone! Make it snappy!"

Johnny's spell was broken and he ran, skidding in his socked feet, to the phone.

"Hello?...hi!...yeah, I feel great...me too...of course...look, I've gotta go...yeah, it's time...I'm not dressed yet...uh-huh, soon..." Johnny glanced at the clock, noticing it was one minute before the hour. "I really gotta...sure!...no, not at all...that's not it...look, I...no, no...I'll call you later...I promise...I promise!...yes!...." He sighed. "Lydi, I...I'm sorry...no, don't think that...I'll call you...I promise!... okay...you too...bye."

Mike Stoker and Marco couldn't help hear the one-sided conversation as they sipped their coffee.

Johnny slammed the receiver into its cradle and tore into the engine bay. He slipped and fell hard on his hip. "Owwwww...." He got up painfully and half-ran, half-limped to the dorm to finish dressing.

Roy was almost a casualty at the hand of his partner a second time as Johnny exploded through the swinging door, nearly colliding with him.

"Where's my boot? Where's my belt? Badge...." Johnny feverishly dressed, his hands trembling in his haste, making buttoning nearly impossible. "Badge, badge!" he muttered through clenched teeth, digging through the piles of stuff lying on the locker shelf. Roy rolled his eyes at the shameless display and left to report for roll call.

DeSoto, Lopez, Kelly and Stoker stood at attention, their captain doing a slow burn in front of them. Finally, hasty footsteps were heard approaching and their wayward comrade took his place, panting,

in the line next to his partner. One shirttail hung out.

"Nice of you to join us, Gage," Captain Stanley seethed.

But Gage was saved by the bell. The klaxon sounded, toning the squad out for a playground mishap. Johnny didn't miss the realization that he was lucky, for now. *Lydia or no Lydia, I can never be late again!*

The squad had three back-to-back runs that morning, returning to the station for the first time as the lunch hour approached.

"What's to eat?" Johnny asked as he limped into the kitchen.

"Cold cuts," Stoker replied.

Johnny labored to conceal his disappointment. Around a firehouse, it didn't pay to complain or show ingratitude. Still, a nice warm kettle of stew or soup would have really hit the spot today. He grabbed a hunk of colby cheese from the cutting board and nibbled on it.

Roy sauntered in, yawning. The phone rang and he picked it up. "Station 51, Firefighter DeSoto speaking... Yes, here he is." He held the phone towards his partner.

"Hello?... hi Lydi...I was going to...we had three runs....no, we just got...of course I was!... it's almost lunch time...that's not what I meant...I can't wait either...yeah...no....no....no...yes!... whenever you want..."

Marco shook his head slightly. *Just like this morning.*

"...either way, I don't care...I really don't...I told you, I don't...really....yes, I'm sure...don't worry, okay?... no...I won't...I will..."

The crew, sans Gage, began preparing their lunch sandwiches from the available spread. They listened in voyeuristic fascination to half of a conversation, occasionally snickering or gesturing suggestively.

"...I feel the same way...no, I can't...not now...because, I just...no, you don't understand...look, just believe me...okay?... come on...you know I do...me too...oh yeah!... of course...I will...I'll call you...I will...I promise...promise...it depends...I can't say right now...it depends on ...look, you understand, don't you?... no, don't get...yeah...well, I thought...okay...okay...you too...okay...bye."

Johnny replaced the cradle gently and turned, a shell-shocked look on his thin face. Five pairs of eyes looked at him as five mouths chewed.

"You look hungry, Junior. Get something," Roy suggested through a mouthful of sandwich.

It was late afternoon that the squad responded to call about a sick vagrant outside an adult book store. During the ride in the ambulance to Rampart, the old man vomited all over Johnny's slacks and shoes. It wasn't the first time something like this had occurred, certainly, and it wouldn't be the last. But it never got any easier to take.

At Rampart, Johnny borrowed a pair of surgical scrub pants and rinsed his clothes and shoes in the sink. He'd have no choice but wear the wet socks and shoes, at least until they got back to the station. At least his feet were the farthest point from his nose, he thought gratefully.

Back out at the base station, Johnny found Roy and Dr. Mike Morton conversing about radio frequencies. He was too distracted to even try to join in. Roy gave Johnny a once-over and grinned at his motley appearance.

"Now I see why you didn't go to medical school. Those don't do a thing for you," Roy indicated the baggy scrubs.

"Don't forget, Pally...the next drunk is yours!"

Morton laughed. "Count your blessings, gentlemen. They *all* end up here."

"Yeah, but not until they've unloaded on *us*." Johnny clarified.

"Must be you, Johnny. I haven't been vomited on in months," Roy chided.

Johnny had no witty rejoinder for that one. It was true, he *did* seem to incur the more disgusting elements of the job while his partner sailed through cleanly with flying colors. Maybe it was Roy's clean living that spared him. Johnny smirked.

"Let's go. See ya, doc."

Johnny stood in his briefs, unhooking a clean pair of uniform pants from their hanger. He heard the station phone ring. A few seconds later, Cap entered the locker room.

"Phone for you, John. You know who." As he started towards the facilities, he stopped short. "What happened to *you*?" Hank pointed to the large black and blue discoloration on John's hip and upper thigh.

Johnny contorted his body to examine the lesion. "Hmmm. Kinda ugly, huh?"

"Yeah, you are, but we love you anyway," Chet quipped as he entered from the dorm.

"Do you need to have that looked at?" Hank asked, concerned.

"Nah, it's just a bruise."

"If you say so." Hank walked away.

"She was pretty rough on you this weekend, eh?" Chet asked innocently.

"She...who? Oh shit, she's waiting on the phone." Johnny got one leg in, but the second foot became stuck halfway down the pantleg and he hopped, trying to maintain his balance. The foot was hopelessly stuck, however, and Johnny bumped into the bench, attempted a face-saving sit, but misjudged, ending up on the hard floor.

"Ow, damn!" he hissed.

Chet shook his head and held out a hand. "Here, let me help you."

"I'll get it. I'll *get* it," Johnny snarled.

"Okay, suit yourself! Sheesh!" Chet exited the locker room, leaving Johnny in a tangle on the floor.

By the time Johnny sorted himself out and got to the dorm extension, he was greeted by a dial tone. Oddly relieved, he replaced the receiver only to jump at the phone's sudden, immediate ringing.

"Station 51, Firefighter Gage."

It was Lydia.

Back in the kitchen, supper preparations were nearly complete. The five present members of the crew grabbed plates and dished up. Firehouse etiquette was necessarily lax, requiring no one to wait politely for an absent crewman before chowing down. The tones could sound at any time, and meals were a catch-as-catch-can proposition. One may miss a meal, but that was no reason for all six to miss a meal.

"Where's John?" Mike asked between bites.

Chet held his hand to the side of his head, miming the telephone.

"Again?" Roy exclaimed, louder than he intended. "This is ridiculous." He wiped his mouth, scooted back in his chair, and threw the napkin down as he headed for the door.

"Forget it, Roy." Cap said calmly.

"He needs to eat. I don't want him carrying *me* out of a fire if he's weak from hunger." Roy sounded irritated. He strode to the dorm, stopping just inside. He cupped his hands in the direction of his hunched-over partner and called loudly, "SUPPERTIME, JOHN...TIME TO EAT, LET'S GO."

Johnny turned and nodded his acknowledgment. He seemed to be mostly listening. Roy turned on his heel and clicked away. He hated treating Johnny like a kid, but sometimes Johnny acted like one.

Back in the kitchen again, the five finished their meals. Johnny finally swept around the corner, hanging on to the door frame for support. Wordlessly, he grabbed a plate and spooned a lukewarm portion onto it, nabbed a fork and took two bites on the way to the table before the klaxon rang out. As the five sated crew members rushed to their vehicles, Johnny wolfed two more large bites of casserole, set the plate down with a clatter, and ran to the squad. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the phone ringing as the rigs pulled out of the station into the darkening evening.

The sun rose high and bright on Tuesday morning as the A-shift straggled in for another 24-hour stint. Chamber of Commerce weather, they always said. Johnny's Land Rover was already parked in the prime spot for shade as Roy veered around the back of the firehouse in his vintage two-seater. He pulled in next to his partner's distinctive vehicle and walked leisurely to the back entrance. There was no hurry; he was on time. His partner was actually *early*. Cap's stern rejoinder last shift must have hit its mark.

The smell of brewing coffee infused the cool, early morning air of the station intoxicatingly. Roy fought his impulse to grab a quick cup before changing. It would wait, he decided. Better to be prepared. *There I go, acting sensibly again. Ever since Cap let it be known that he considered me the sensible one, all these annoying reminders won't let me forget it.*

"Mornin'!" he called in a friendly, if slightly rote, manner to any and all assembled in the locker room.

"Hi Roy," Mike called out amiably. Stoker was almost always amiable.

"Mornin' Roy." Johnny yawned his greeting.

"How were your days off?"

"Whew, busy. I came back to work to get some relaxation." Johnny smiled lazily.

"Did you, uh, see Lydia?"

"See her? Oh yeah, I saw her. There was never a time I *wasn't* seeing her, except when I was asleep. I tell you, Roy. That girl is intense. I've never had a relationship just...take off like this. She wants to be with me all the time. I mean, *all* the time."

"I guess that's good," Roy commented doubtfully.

"She's really something, Roy. Talk about energy. I mean, *I'm* basically hyper, right?"

Roy nodded and opened his mouth to reply but was cut off.

"Forget it. Even *I* can't keep up with her. She's in constant motion, and if she isn't moving, she's talking. Sometimes she's moving *and* talking."

"So I guess she really likes you."

"Oh, she digs me all right! I can't even take a..." Johnny stopped, realizing his volume had gradually increased to an imprudent level. He leaned in towards Roy conspiratorially. "I can't even take a *piss* without her practically sending in the National Guard!"

Roy frowned.

"I dunno, it's kind of cute, though," Johnny continued. "I mean, when I think about it, I'm a really lucky guy. This may be the first time in my life that someone is as hung up on *me* as I am on *them*!" Johnny let that sink in. "Maybe even more so." The smile he attempted rang false, Roy thought.

"Say, Johnny, I was going to ask you. I'm taking Chris to the go-cart track this Saturday. I know he'd love it if you came along."

This time, Johnny's smile was genuine. "Cool! Man, we had a blast last time!" His smile faltered. "Oh, but...I'll have to see. Is it okay if I let you know later?"

"Yeah. Sure. I hope you can make it, though." Roy added, pointedly, "It won't last all day. Just until noon or so."

"I'll try to work it out," Johnny said quietly, avoiding his partner's direct gaze.

The ringing of the phone echoed through the station. "Gage!"

Johnny poured a cup of strong black coffee and drained it quickly, wincing at the searing heat in his throat. He immediately refilled the cup and raised it to his lips again, drinking steadily. Dixie McCall watched him from her perch on the base station stool.

"Are they predicting a shortage?" she asked wryly.

"Hmmm?"

"The coffee. Is a shortage predicted? You look like you're drinking enough to get you through the holidays."

"Oh." He shrugged. "I always drink coffee. You know that. Especially yours." Johnny flashed the nurse a winning Gage grin. "Best in the business."

"Correction. You always *sip* coffee. Usually half a cup at a time. I should know. I get stuck dumping the leftovers and washing the cups you guys leave around."

"Sorry about that, Dix." Johnny quickly drained the second cup and set about washing it in the bar-sized sink.

"Hey, no problem." She slid down and went to the paramedic's side, touching his forearm to get his attention. "Johnny, I was teasing. Forget it." Dixie raised her eyebrows in a conciliatory expression. *He's been acting strangely. He's never been so sensitive about a little ribbing before.*

He rinsed the cup and held it aloft for her inspection. "There, good as new."

"What's this? A conference?" Dr. Joe Early asked. "I wasn't invited. Then again, I hate conferences." He chuckled lightly, his gentle eyes shining.

"Oh, hey Doc. How's that little boy doing?" Johnny inquired.

"I think he'll be all right. He's going to have to wear the eyepatch for a while. I've referred him to an ophthalmologist for follow-up, but I don't think he'll have any permanent damage."

"That's good news," Roy commented. He'd just come in from the squad. "Johnny, did you get some more 4X4's? We're completely out."

"Ah, not yet. I guess I forgot," Johnny answered apologetically. He grabbed the clipboard bearing the supply requisition forms and began to complete one.

"Put down two boxes," Roy instructed, plucking the items from the stainless steel drawer.

"Yeah, okay," Johnny replied absently. He glanced at his watch, scrawled his signature and picked up the handie-talkie. "I've gotta go make...uh, I'll be right back, Roy."

"Don't be too...long." Roy finished futility. The retreating back of his partner was already lost in the commotion of the well-populated emergency room corridor. The senior partner massaged his brow deeply, a gesture not lost on Dixie.

"Can I ask you something, Roy?"

"Sure, Dix...anything."

"What's going on with Johnny?"

"Well, he's been seeing this girl..."

"Ah! I should have recognized the signs." She grinned knowingly. "He's in love." She watched carefully to gauge Roy's response.

I'm not so sure. "Maybe." Roy shrugged.

"What's she like?" Dixie swung her foot in anticipation.

You don't want to know. "She's pretty. I don't know that much about her, truthfully." Roy smiled thinly,

hoping the perceptive nurse didn't detect his duplicity.

Dixie's grin faded as she reviewed the requisition form Johnny had completed. "Roy, Johnny filled this out wrong.

Roy scanned the form, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. "Yep. Well, give me another one and I'll do it over."

"That's strange," Dixie mused. As flighty as Johnny could be, it wasn't like him to make careless mistakes on the job.

Roy looked up sharply. *So I'm not the only one who thinks something weird is happening.* Roy quickly finished the form and handed it to Dixie for her approval.

"Well, I'd better go find him. We need to get back. Thanks Dix."

"You take it easy," Dixie called after him. "And take care of that partner of yours."

Roy's eyes locked with Dixie's for a few nanoseconds longer than usual. *She knows.*

"So, are we on for Saturday?" Roy asked.

Johnny sat in the passenger side of the squad, scraping at some unseen blemish on his helmet with his thumbnail.

"Oh, uhhhh....," he scowled at the helmet, clearly still dissatisfied with its appearance. "I don't think I'm gonna be able to make it. Sorry."

"Well, maybe next time." Roy cast several glances at Johnny, waiting for elaboration. Johnny was usually more than anxious to fill everyone in on his life and plans, but lately had seemed somewhat reticent. "So, what'cha got planned? Anything exciting?"

Johnny sighed. "Mmm, Lydia's got something cooked up. I don't know what. Something she wants to do," he mumbled.

"Something *she* wants, huh?" Roy chuckled. "You're already at that point in the relationship? You sound like an old married man, partner."

A look of alarm crossed Johnny's features for a split-second. Then he relaxed as he recognized Roy's attempt at light-heartedness. "Whoa, Nellie, don't even say that," he warned with a wry smile.

Roy was more relieved than he would have thought. This thing with Lydia and Johnny had him unnerved, for reasons he couldn't quite pinpoint. And while Johnny's notorious commitment-phobic reluctance could be exasperating, it was music to Roy's ears in this case.

Backing the squad into the bay, the paramedics noticed the imposing figure of their captain standing just inside, apparently waiting for them. His expression was impassive.

"John, could I see you in my office." It was not a question.

"Sure, Cap." Johnny cleared his throat and went into the office with some trepidation.

"Close the door. Sit."

Johnny felt a knot of fear tightening in his chest. He was transported back in time to 3rd grade, sitting outside the principal's office.

"John, you have to do something about the phone calls."

Johnny felt a slow burn envelope his face and neck as he blushed in embarrassment.

"I know, Cap, I've been trying—"

"You have to do more than try. It has to stop, pal." Cap picked up a notebook and examined it. He inhaled deeply. "11:32, 11:57, 12:11, 12: 24, 12:36, 12:48, 1:01, 1:16...shall I go on?" Cap's unflinching stare bore into the paramedic, causing him to squirm.

"Cap, I've told her—"

"John, we're not your answering service. Furthermore, this is a place of work. You have assigned chores, and so does everyone else. Every time that phone rings, work is disrupted. Not only that, but there could be *important* calls that are not getting through!" Hank Stanley's voice had risen to a near-shout.

Johnny nodded emphatically throughout the lecture.

"Look, I think it's wonderful you've met someone who seems to like you a lot. And I wish you every happiness....*outside of duty.*"

"Thanks, Cap, I—" Johnny began breathlessly.

Somewhere in the far reaches of the station, the phone began ringing. The extension light on the phone on the captain's desk blinked demandingly. Johnny sat mesmerized by the beacon, his face drained of color, swallowing back his intense discomfort. Capt. Stanley didn't take his eyes off the paramedic as he reached over and lifted the receiver.

"Station 51, Captain Stanley speaking." He handed the phone to Gage and leaned back in his chair expectantly.

"H-hello?... hi Lydi...yeah...yeah...listen, I...Lydia...Lydia...*Lydia!*... listen, we need to talk. *I need*

to talk, so please listen....I can't..talk to you...when I'm on duty. Do you understand? Lydia? Lydia, don't say that. Lydia, listen. You've got to stop calling me here...I know, but...Lydia, are you...look, I'll talk to you more later. All right?... I'll talk to you later... Later...Don't call anymore tonight...I promise, I'll call you.....Look, I'm going now...I'm going to hang up.....I'm going...bye."

Johnny handed the phone to his superior and slumped in his chair, rubbing his eyes. Hank studied the man before him, not without sympathy. This aspect of his job gave him no pleasure, but he wouldn't be doing his job if he let anarchy reign around the station. It was his responsibility to keep everyone at the top of their form and maintain order around the firehouse. It was a tightrope at times, trying to exert authority while providing a level of friendship and support to his men. He prided himself on his ability to do just that, at least most of the time. He resolved to keep a close eye on this unfolding drama. Johnny may be in over his head with this one. The thought of Don Juan meeting his match caused the captain to snicker quietly.

Johnny looked up quickly at the unexpected sound. His features relaxed visibly at the apparent amusement of his captain. Hank got up, stretched, and ambled towards the door.

"Now, let's go get us some coffee, whaddya say?"

Johnny exhaled in relief. "I say okay."

The end of the shift didn't come soon enough for Johnny. The night had been particularly grueling, with two structure fires in a row, complete with their attendant clean-up and follow-through. The men of 51 had managed almost no sleep and they were feeling the effects as they shuffled bleary-eyed to their lockers, met by the comparatively fresh-faced members of the B-shift.

"Tough luck, guys," Tom Bledsoe, one of B-shift's paramedics, said. "I hear it was a bad one."

"Yeah, well the bad luck isn't all ours," Marco piped up. "There's several hundred feet of hose to be hung now."

Bill Lackey, the engineer, winced. "Did you have to remind us?"

"Oh, you would have found out sooner or later," Chet reassured him. "Like, in about five minutes."

"Oops, better get a move on," Lackey said, hastening to tie his boots.

Chris Chavez, the other paramedic, giggled. "Cutting it close again, Lack?" He and his partner, Bledsoe, were practically mirror images of Gage and DeSoto. Chavez was dark and swarthy, with a magnetic smile that seemed to attract the opposite sex quite handily. Bledsoe possessed a more quintessentially California charm, his sandy hair and blue eyes epitomizing the all-American guy.

"Well, no one asked me—" Johnny started.

"No one ever does, Gage." Chet interrupted.

Johnny ignored the remark. "But I am ready for about ten hours of sleep."

"Better disconnect your phone," Chet said, his eyes gleaming.

"Okay, Chet. Ha ha, I laughed. Are you happy? Now, for your information, that is where the answering machine comes in *very* handy."

"Maybe we should get one for the station, then. I'll chip in. Anyone else?"

"Stow it, Kelly." Johnny gave Chet a murderous look and gathered his belongings. "I'm outta here."

Sleep, blissful sleep...I can't wait. Hurry up, stoplight. I've got a date with my mattress.

Johnny's heart sank as he pulled into his apartment building's parking lot. *Oh god, no, it can't be...it is.*

Lydia saw the Land Rover roar into its spot and she climbed out of her car, slamming the door. She stalked over to Johnny's vehicle before he had a chance to step foot outside it. Johnny smiled gamely.

"Lydi, what are you doing here?"

"Johnny, I am just so upset." Her voice quavered.

"Hon, what is it?" Johnny asked.

"Johnny, I've been so worried!" She suddenly collapsed in tears.

"Lydi, Lydi! What? What's wrong?"

"Johnny, you said you'd call me last night, and you *didn't!* I was so sure you were hurt, or worse!" She burst into a renewed round of sobs.

Johnny stood, dumbfounded.

"I called and called, I called the hospitals, I called your apartment...I couldn't find you anywhere!"

"Lydi, we had fires, we were running all night!"

"I didn't sleep at all! Do you know what you've put me through?"

"Lydia, I'm a *fireman*. It's my job!"

"All I could think was that you were burned or crushed or dead! I was frantic, Johnny!"

Johnny looked around to see if anyone was witnessing this scene. "Lydia, let's go inside, okay?"

"Okay." She sniffled and allowed herself to be led into the building and into his apartment.

"Look, Lydia, when I'm working, I can't always get to a phone. You understand that, don't you?" Johnny's tone was slightly patronizing, but the woman didn't seem to notice, or care.

"I guess so. But after the rude way you treated me last night, I was so scared that it was the last time I'd hear your voice!"

"Rude...*what?*"

"When I called and you hung up on me. I was so mad, Johnny—"

"Wait wait wait a minute. Hung up on you?"

"John Gage, you know very well what you did!" Lydia's self-pity dissipated and her gray eyes flashed angrily.

"Whoa, Lydia, now hold on—" Johnny geared up to defend his actions.

"Don't think you can go around treating me that way and just forget about it!" she yelled.

"Lydia! I did NOT hang up on you! I TOLD you—"

"Oh, you told me, did you? Well, YOU don't do the telling, I do! Where did you learn how to behave, anyway?"

"I did NOT—"

"YOU DID!" she screamed. Lydia turned and grabbed the nearest object on the kitchen shelf, a snow globe of Cinderella's castle at Disneyland, a gift from Jennifer DeSoto.

"No!" Johnny yelled, lunging to rescue the treasure.

Lydia curled her lips derisively and, with all her might, hurled the object against the far wall where it shattered noisily. She watched with sick satisfaction as the droplets of water coursed downward. The sound of the clock ticking was like thunder in the suddenly quiet apartment.

Johnny felt the blood drain from his face. The vicious act was incomprehensible. He turned his stunned gaze to the stranger in front of him.

His expression terrified her. *I've gone too far! He's got to forgive me...he's just GOT to!* "Oh, Johnny...I'm so sorry!" She ran to him and embraced him tightly, burying her face in his chest. "Oh, I've been horrid. I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!" She cried, the words muffled. "I'll get you another

one!"

Johnny robotically raised his arms and wrapped them loosely around the sobbing woman. They stood that way for several minutes. Johnny felt angry, hurt, betrayed...and confused.

Sniffing, Lydia raised her tear-stained face. "Johnny, honey, please. Say you don't hate me. Please," she implored.

"Lydia, I don't *hate* you," he said uncertainly.

She smiled with renewed hope, her eyes shining as she gazed up into his face. "Do you love me? Because I love you!"

Johnny was astounded. "Lydi,"

Lydia's face adopted a flirtatious expression and she licked her teeth suggestively. Johnny knew that expression. *I don't believe this...but I don't dare reject her now.*

"Let me show you how much I love you, Johnny," she said huskily. She took his hand, tickling the palm with her fingernail, and led him to the bedroom.

If I play along...she'll leave...

Johnny felt numb.

Johnny was awakened by the sound of the phone ringing. He lay in bed, his head swimming with fatigue. Looking at the clock, he saw it was 10:30. He'd been asleep for only an hour at the most. He was alone in the bed; Lydia was gone. The clicking noises of the answering machine were followed by the unmistakable telephone voice of Lydia wafting in from the living room.

"Hi Johnny, honey, I'm sure you're wondering where I am. I had to get back to my place and get freshened up and changed, you know how that is...I'll be back over in just a little while so we can spend the day together. Can't wait to see you, sweetheart, love ya. Bye now." The message was followed by a kissing sound.

Wondering where you were? Actually, I was in dreamland, and quite content there, I might add.

He hauled himself out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen to grab a cold drink. Gulping some Gatorade directly from the bottle, he wandered into the living room and looked at the phone with a feeling of dread. Picking up the receiver, he dialed the familiar number.

"Hi Lydia."

"Hi lover."

"Look, hon...I am beat."

"I could tell! You practically passed out on me."

"What I'm getting at, is...I'd really like to get some more sleep."

"But Johnny, I thought we'd spend the day together."

"I thought you were working today."

"I called in sick."

Crap.

"You did?"

"I knew you'd be happy!"

"Lydia, I want, I *need*, to get some sleep. I was up all night, remember?"

"I was too, remember?" Her voice had an edge.

Johnny sighed. "Tell you what. Just let me sleep another couple of hours, and we'll do something then, okay?"

"Look, Johnny, if you don't want to see me, then fine."

"It's not that, Lydia."

"Is there someone else?"

"What?"

"Are you seeing someone else, Johnny?"

"No!"

"Because if you are, she can have you. I will *not* share you. Is that clear?"

"Lydia, I—" He sighed, defeated. "I am not seeing someone else. You have my word." *For crying out loud, how could I?*

"Oh Johnny. You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that."

"So, we're settled, then?" he asked gently.

"Yes, sweetheart...I'll be over in half an hour."

No...."All right. Bye."

Hanging up the phone, Johnny noticed the blinking light of the answering machine counting out the messages. In all the upheaval earlier, he'd missed it. **Blink, blink, blink...**...he counted 17 blinks. 17 messages. He pressed the rewind button.

"Johnny, are you there? Johnny, where are you? You were supposed to call me...."

"Johnny, answer the phone! Johnny!..."

"It's me again. I can't stop worrying. Where are you...?"

Johnny sank into the dining room chair, the lilting voice lulling him into an uneasy trance, his red-rimmed eyes staring vacantly at a crack in the plaster.

Roy strolled into the emergency entrance and stooped at the drinking fountain. *Coldest water in town*, he thought. He could rarely pass it up. Refreshed, he continued on to the base station.

"How's Betty Crocker?" he asked Dixie. They'd been called to the home of a young newlywed who'd tangled with her Kitchenaid mixer.

"Well, incredibly, the beater made a spiral break in the bone, right like this," Dixie demonstrated on her own index finger. "They're going to have to put a pin in it."

Roy winced. "Ouch. At least she didn't lose the fingertip."

Dixie nodded. "The nail is still iffy, though."

"Hmmm, that's too bad. I hope she keeps it." Roy looked around searchingly.

"He's, uh, indisposed." Dixie nodded her head towards the men's room, answering Roy's unasked question.

"Ah. Maybe I'll make a pit stop too."

"Just because I'm a nurse, they think I want to hear everything," she sighed, rolling her eyes.

Johnny came out as Roy was going in. Dixie scrutinized the haggard-looking paramedic. His hair was more unruly than usual, and his eyes were set in dark hollows. He shuffled to the desk and immediately hunched over it, seeming to need the support.

"You look tired," she said sympathetically.

"Yeah." Johnny rubbed his face with his hands and stifled a yawn.

Roy reappeared at the desk then, full of vim and vigor in contrast to his weary partner.

"Let's go, Junior." He tapped Johnny with the handie-talkie.

"Yep, off to save the world," Johnny mumbled, rising. "See ya, Dix."

"Get some rest," she called after him.

They boarded the squad and Johnny lifted the mic. "Squad 51, available."

"Squad 51, child injured. 1600 block of Los Arboles. 1-6-0-0 block of Los Arboles. Time out, 1532."

"Squad 51, 10-4."

"School just let out, Roy...be careful," Johnny cautioned his partner, who piloted the rescue vehicle through the residential area. Roy clutched the steering wheel a little more tightly, taking extra care to pay attention to his peripheral visual field lest a child dart unexpectedly in their path. Children on both sides of the street stopped to gape at the shiny red fire department squad with its lights flashing. They ran in the direction of its progress, their natural curiosity piqued by what they no doubt considered a bonus on the otherwise ordinary afternoon.

Johnny unbuttoned his shirt pocket and fished something out. He tore the wrapper back from a roll and popped two white discs into his mouth.

"Over there," Johnny pointed. A middle-aged woman stood in the street, waving her arms to get the paramedics' attention. Roy parked the truck as close as he could to the crowd that had gathered. He and Johnny jumped out and grabbed their gear.

"I'm Mrs. Hancock, the crossing guard," she explained. "A little boy was hit by a car over here, hurry!"

DeSoto and Gage followed the woman closely as she cut a path through the bystanders, mostly children. Within the confines of the crowd lay a young boy and his mangled bicycle. The boy rested his head on the curb, crying quietly and clutching his leg.

"Hey, there, what's your name, son?" Johnny asked, kneeling by the victim.

"Jimmy," the boy choked out. "I want my mommy!"

"Okay, okay, calm down." Johnny turned to Mrs. Hancock. "Has anyone called the police?"

"Yes, they were called!" she answered, somewhat hysterically. "I don't what's taking them so long!"

"Okay, all right." In the background, Roy was initiating contact with Rampart.

"I don't want the police! I didn't do anything wrong! I want my mommy!" the boy cried.

"Jimmy, you've got to calm down, now! You're not in trouble, just stay calm!" Johnny glanced around at the crowd. "Would everyone please step back and give us some room here?" he yelled irritably.

"I didn't mean to hit him, you know," a mild-mannered older man said. "He just rode out in front of me." The man wrung his hands. "I hope he's going to be all right."

"He's going to be fine, he's going to be fine," Johnny insisted absently.

Roy had started checking the boy's vital signs. "Jimmy, did you hit your head at all?" He directed the beam of the penlight into the boy's eyes.

"No. My leg hurts."

"Okay, I just want to make sure you don't have any other boo-boos besides your leg," Roy smiled engagingly at the little boy, who smiled back weakly through his tears. Roy conveyed the vital signs to Dr. Early at Rampart and received instructions to apply a c-collar, splint the leg and transport.

Johnny was slitting the boy's pants leg as Officer Vince Howard arrived on the scene. "What've we got here, fellas?" the policeman asked.

"Uh, little boy hit by a car," Johnny explained. "We need to get his parents contacted so we can treat him."

"Jimmy, what's your last name? Do you know your phone number or where your mother or father are right now?" Roy spoke calmly.

"Until I get ahold of them, consider him in my protective custody and go ahead and treat him," Vince stated as he took down the information the boy gave him.

Johnny began splinting Jimmy's injured leg. The ambulance siren could be heard wailing in the distance but getting closer. After securely immobilizing the limb, Johnny sat back on his haunches and waited. Sensing something odd, his gaze roamed to the far perimeter of the small crowd. His eyes narrowed as he focused on an individual holding a camera to his face and snapping photographs in rapid succession. Johnny looked down and away, disturbed by the crass voyeurism. *Weirdo*, he thought. His attention was soon diverted by the arriving ambulance.

"Okay, let's get him on a backboard," Roy directed. They soon had the boy strapped in and ready to transport. "I'll ride in with him, John."

"Okay."

Once the ambulance pulled away, lights flashing and sirens blaring, the crowd began to thin. Johnny looked around at the small amount of debris strewn about, and began to clean up. He loaded the O2 canister back into the squad compartment and gathered up the splint and collar wrappings. Taking a last glance around, Johnny suddenly froze. He turned slowly to find himself staring into the telephoto lens of the camera he'd seen earlier. The face of the man shooting wielding the camera was still hidden, but by this time he was partially hidden by the door of a beige sedan, with one foot on the floorboard of the car as if poised for immediate flight. The man's trigger finger was depressing the shutter release repeatedly and the whirring of the auto film advance could be heard.

Johnny jerked his head around, hoping to find something of interest to explain the photographer's continued activity now that the accident was cleaned up and the victim gone. All he saw were a few stragglers drifting away from the scene. Looking back in the direction of the beige car, he caught only the sight of the door slamming and the car peeling away from the curb in a hurry. The realization hit him; the target of the lensman had been *him*.

Johnny slid behind the wheel of the squad and proceeded to Rampart, his mind a jumble of confused thoughts.

"Roy, did you notice anything...unusual at the accident scene back there?"

The blonde paramedic quirked his mouth in concentration. "I guess not. Like what?"

"Oh, nothing. It was probably nothing."

"What? Tell me."

"There was a photographer there, Roy. Taking pictures like there was no tomorrow." Johnny retrieved the roll of discs from his pocket again and chewed two more of them.

Roy shrugged. "So? Probably a free-lance guy hoping to sell a shot to the papers."

"Yeah, probably." *Then why was the camera pointed at me?*

"What is that?" Roy gestured the roll.

"These? Just some antacids."

"You feeling all right?"

"Just indigestion."

Roy changed the subject. "How are things with you and Lydia?"

"Oh, fine." It was somewhat true. Lydia's antics had settled down some after her strange behavior of the previous week. The volume of calls to the station had decreased dramatically, much to Johnny's

relief. And as long as he paid her an appropriate amount of attention and devoted all his free time to her, she seemed content enough.

"Did you say she lived in a condo somewhere?"

"Yeah, a nice one. Over in that Belmont district."

"What does she do?"

Johnny sighed. "She sells cosmetics at Nordstroms."

Roy nodded and smiled. "I think I'm in the wrong line of work."

"I know what you're thinking. Turns out, her parents were killed in a car wreck about five years ago. She doesn't have any brothers or sisters, and they were fairly well-to-do. The job is more or less a formality."

"That's too bad about her parents," Roy sympathized.

"Yeah. She doesn't like to talk about it."

Roy grinned. "Beautiful *and* rich, huh? You hit the jackpot all around this time."

Johnny shrugged off the remark. "She's not *rich* rich."

"Why don't you bring her to the house this weekend?"

Johnny shot Roy a panicked look. "What for?"

"For the cookout, remember? I told you about it this morning."

"Oh, yeah."

Roy could see Johnny sliding into excuse mode. He wasn't going to let him off easily.

"Roy, I don't think—"

"Come on, Johnny! You haven't been by in weeks! The kids miss you. Hell, even Joanne misses you."

Johnny rubbed his face, a giveaway to the emotional struggle within. "I know....."

"You can bring Lydia. That way, you won't have to spend time away from her. And she and Joanne can engage in a little girl-talk." *And Joanne and I can try to get a fix on this chick's motivations.*

"We're going to set up the volleyball net. It'll be a blast."

Johnny perked up visibly. "Oh yeah? Well, who else is going?"

Roy smiled. He could always lure Johnny with the promise of some volleyball action. "So far, Chet, Marco and Mike. Cap isn't sure yet."

Johnny's eyes shifted deviously as an evil grin played across his lips. "I *owe* Chet for that last match, you know."

"I know!" Roy grinned broadly.

"What time should we be there?"

"How does 2:00 sound?"

"Sounds good, pally. Sounds good." Johnny chuckled demonically.

Johnny pulled the Land Rover to the curb in front of the DeSoto home. "Well, here we are!" he announced cheerfully.

Lydia's eyes swept up and down the home's modest but neatly kept façade. *How provincial. But, what did I expect from a bunch of firemen?* She mentally inventoried the cars already parked in the driveway and along the curb.

Johnny trotted around the vehicle to help her out. "Whose car is *that*?" she inquired with obvious distaste, indicating the beat-up old station wagon.

"Oh that's Chet's," Johnny snickered. "He seems to have an emotional attachment to that old wreck."

Lydia smirked. *Can't wait to meet this loser, Chet.*

Johnny hoisted the case of beer he'd brought along and started up the lawn towards the side gate. Lydia hung back slightly, following half a step behind.

"Hey Johnny!" Roy shouted. With that, half a dozen heads turned in curiosity. No one had seen Lydia since the car wreck, and they were eager to re-evaluate this woman who had ingratiated herself into Gage's life so insidiously.

"Hi fellas, you all remember Lydia," Johnny said off-handedly. As soon as he unloaded the beer, Lydia hooked her arms tightly around his waist, clinging to his side. Roy couldn't help but notice that Johnny looked slightly taken aback at the behavior.

"Hi Lydia," Chet smiled and waved. To Marco, he muttered, "Man, she is beautiful. Gage, that dog."

The other guys murmured their hello's and resumed their discussions. Joanne came out the back door with a platter of hamburger patties. When she saw Johnny and his lady friend, she quickly put the tray

down and approached.

"I'm Joanne, Roy's wife," she said warmly, extending her hand.

"Hello." Lydia returned the handshake limply.

"Uncle Johnny! Uncle Johnny!" Chris and Jennifer came running around the side of the house.

Ewww, kids. Lydia unlatched herself quickly when it became obvious that the children showed no signs of slowing.

"Ohhh!" Johnny grunted as first Chris, then Jen, ran full force into him. Lydia watched with barely-disguised horror.

"Uncle Johnny, I missed you!" Jennifer pouted.

Chris piped up. "Yeah, Uncle Johnny. You missed a great time at the go-cart tracks!"

"Awww, I've missed you too, honey," Johnny crooned, planting a chaste kiss on Jen's cheek. "Next time, Chris, okay?"

"Okay!" Chris echoed happily.

Johnny picked Jennifer up and carried her over to the deck bench, where he plopped down with the little girl on his lap. Her arms rested around his neck possessively.

Lydia remained fixed in the same spot, watching the scene with a growing sense of outrage. The sight of the little imp so comfortable in her man's lap was almost more than she could quietly bear. *How could you humiliate me like this, Johnny?* Her head held high, she made her way onto the deck and over to where Johnny sat, purposefully stepping on his foot as she passed. She seated herself next to him and pressed against him. Her private fuming was interrupted by Joanne.

"Lydia, would you like something to drink?" she asked sweetly.

"Um, no thank you." Lydia murmured. *Get me out of here. I can't stand it.*

"Well, *I* would!" Johnny chirped.

"*I know* what you want, Johnny," Joanne said, laughing.

Oh you do, do you? Lydia studied the other woman. *You think you know him so well. Well, I know him better.*

Johnny immediately guzzled half the beer Joanne handed him. Jennifer watched him and giggled.

"Uncle Johnny, your throat goes up and down when you drink," she said, touching his adam's apple..

Don't touch him, you little....

"Oh yeah? Wanna see again?" Johnny giggled back and raised the beer bottle a second time.

Jennifer unleashed a peal of giggles and tentatively touched his throat again, causing him to laugh and nearly spit out the liquid to avoid choking. This made Jennifer convulse in girlish giggles, inciting everyone around her to join in. Almost everyone.

"Excuse me." Lydia stood abruptly and stomped into the house. The smile faded from Johnny's lips as his eyes followed her.

"The Gage charm strikes again," Chet remarked with a smirk.

"Oh well, at least his charm works on some of the ladies," Marco added.

"Yeah, the pre-pubescent ones."

Roy and Joanne exchanged eye contact. Roy had been so relieved to see Johnny cut up the way he used to, the way he *hadn't* for so long....and now his enjoyment was threatened by Lydia's childish behavior. As he feared, Johnny set Jennifer down and followed Lydia into the house.

"Okay, let's get those burgers on," Roy announced with false cheer. *Ignore it and maybe it'll go away.*

A full 30 minutes passed before Johnny emerged from the house, his features drawn and tense. He went straight for the cooler and retrieved a beer, popped the top off and poured it down his throat, stopping only once to catch his breath. He placed the empty bottle aside and grabbed another one. Roy observed him discreetly. When Johnny was in this kind of mood, it wasn't smart to rile him.

"Hey, Johnny's back," Chet bellowed tactlessly. "Say, John, if you've got any strength left, how about a re-match?" Chet waggled his eyebrows.

Johnny glared at the curly-haired man. "Chet, you—" he pointed his finger at his annoying co-worker, then suddenly calmed, the fire in his eyes gone. "—are on!" Johnny grinned and drained the second beer. He grabbed a third and stumbled out to the area of the volleyball net, joined by Chet, Marco and Mike.

"Hey, don't you guys wanna eat first?" Roy shouted. "The food is ready!"

"In a few minutes, Roy! We'll be right there!" Chet answered.

"All right, all right, let's GO!" Johnny laughed, clapping his hands together. It was 2-on-2 as Marco joined Johnny and Chet teamed with Mike.

A fair amount of whooping and hollering ensued as the practice session rose to a fever pitch very quickly. Johnny, in particular, seemed out for blood. He rushed the net and spiked the ball whenever he could, ruthless in his attack posture. He was almost crazed with competition, his face reddened with exertion and sweat glistening on his face and body.

Lydia cautiously exited the house and looked around. She finally spotted Johnny at the volleyball net. Her perfectly plucked brow furrowed in disdain.

"Joanne, where is that dinner triangle we used to have?" Roy asked.

"Oh lord, Roy, I don't know." Joanne was fixing Jennifer's sandwich.

"Hey, fellas!" Roy cupped his hands. "Come on, it's getting cold!"

Mike, Chet and Marco abandoned the game and trudged towards the deck. Johnny spiked the ball a few more times in practice, then followed.

Lydia wrinkled her nose at the close proximity of the sweaty men. *How disgusting. And now I'm supposed to eat?*

Johnny glanced at his girlfriend who refused to meet his gaze. She sat stiffly, a dour expression on her face. He went ahead and prepared a plate for himself, then went over to join her.

"Go ahead and get something, Lydi," He said softly.

She scooted away from him a couple of inches. "You're all sweaty."

Johnny got up and walked over to the cooler, fetching another brew. Lydia, sighed, stood and prepared herself a perfunctory plate of food, spooning miniscule portions for herself. She sat at another section of the deck and picked at her food.

No one paid any attention to the little drama being played out. Everyone was busy talking, laughing and eating. Especially eating. These men had voracious appetites and there was plenty of food.

Johnny stood apart from the others, looking thoroughly preoccupied. After two bites of the hamburger, his meal was virtually forgotten. He continued to drink beer at a steady rate. Eventually, he'd wandered back over to the volleyball net and occupied himself serving the ball in a variety of styles.

Chet, Marco and Mike finished eating and dragged Roy out to the net to participate. The games were underway in no time, each man caught up in the excitement and camaraderie. Even Johnny seemed to have risen from his funk, laughing and teasing with the best of them.

"Those guys are like a bunch of kids when they get together," Joanne commented affectionately. Lydia

was still sitting in the same spot, her eyes glued to Johnny.

"Yes, well, that won't last forever. At least not for Johnny," she stated.

"I suppose no one can be a kid forever," Joanne offered generously. *I guess that's what she meant.*

"It may be all right for some wives, being married to an overgrown kid, but it's not something I would ever tolerate," Lydia elaborated.

Joanne dismissed the veiled insult. She was much more alarmed at the other implication. "Are you....and Johnny....getting serious?" she asked haltingly.

"Oh yes! Johnny and I are soul mates. I knew it the minute I laid eyes on him." Said so matter-of-factly.

"I see," Joanne said. *From what Roy has told me, he's not at all convinced Johnny's happy. Having met this woman, I can certainly understand his reservations.*

"Yes, I would definitely say we're serious," Lydia continued. "Johnny wants to spend all his time with me. He calls me even when he's at work. Several times a day. He'd be lost without me. Lucky for him, I'm quite taken with him too." Lydia finished with a theatrical laugh.

"We think the world of Johnny. He's like a member of our family," Joanne said. *And don't forget it.*

"Well, it's high time Johnny had his own family, don't you think?" Lydia asked haughtily.

Joanne chose her words carefully. "I think....whatever makes Johnny happy will make us happy, too. That's how we feel about him."

"Yes, well, Johnny's very happy with me and we're going to be together forever," Lydia insisted.

Joanne smiled graciously. "Good." She turned around, suddenly overcome with a profoundly uneasy feeling. She quickly gathered the paper plates and flatware and carted them into the house.

The volleyball shenanigans went on for another hour. Lydia was beside herself with boredom and neglect. She'd been watching Johnny like a hawk. He's drinking too much, she thought angrily. He's making a fool of himself and of me. She had fumed and stewed to the point she could hear her pulse pounding in her head. This had to be stopped. She marched down the lawn to where the game was in full-swing and walked right into the middle of it.

"Enough's enough!" she hissed, grabbing Johnny's wrist and digging her nails in.

"What?...Lydia, what are you doing?" Johnny seethed.

The others stood panting and watching in dumbfounded shock.

"I'm sick of this. Let's go!" she ordered.

"No, I'm not finished!"

"Yes you are!"

"No—" Johnny wrenched his arm away. The slap that stung his face took him by complete surprise and stunned the onlookers.

Lydia turned and ran up the hill to the house. She entered and slammed the door behind her. Johnny followed, his gait made awkward by the large volume of beer he'd consumed.

"Jeeee-sus," Chet muttered.

In the house, the scene escalated.

"We're leaving," Lydia declared.

"The hell we are!" Johnny countered.

"Don't you get enough of these overgrown adolescents at work?"

"Lydia, those overgrown adolescents would lay down their *lives* for me!"

"From the looks of them, they don't have much to lose!"

"What is your problem?" Johnny's dark eyes narrowed.

"You're drunk!" she spat.

"If I am, it's because of you!"

"Give me the keys." Lydia's eyes flashed.

"No!"

"Johnny, give me the keys!"

"Just...simmer...down...Lydia," he intoned as calmly as he could manage.

"I'm not spending another minute in this dump!"

The sharp intake of breath behind him caused Johnny to whirl around. He saw Joanne standing in the doorway of the kitchen, a hurt look on her face.

Johnny slowly turned back to Lydia, his features contorted in rage.

"Then call a cab and get the *hell out of here!*" he thundered.

Lydia stared at the stranger before her. Her face mirrored a range of emotions, from anger, to fear, to defiance. She fixed her steely eyes on the paramedic.

"John Gage, don't you *ever* speak to me again!" Lydia snatched her purse and ran out the front door. She trotted down the street in the direction of the convenience store at the entrance to the subdivision.

Johnny pressed the heels of his hands to his temples, his eyes closed, and took several deep breaths. Joanne ventured towards him tentatively.

"Johnny?"

"Joanne," he said hoarsely. "I'm...gonna be sick." Johnny scrambled to the half-bath off the utility room.

[Part 2](#)