

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

Obsession: Part 2

By Carol D.

The sound of his own raspy breathing woke him up. He jerked awake, disoriented and aware of a vague sort of discomfort. He lay, staring into the darkness, trying to regain his bearings.

Still at Roy's house...on the couch. My mouth is so dry, my head is pounding, it's hot in here. Drank too much and got sick. Gage, you dumb-ass moron. You're lucky to have a friend like Roy. After what you put him through, he should have thrown your ass in the gutter. Maybe he will, yet. You're just too damn pathetic.

Man, I need a drink of water and half a bottle of aspirin. Now if I can just convince my legs to work.

He turned on his side and thought some more about getting up, but couldn't quite manage it. Not yet. Couldn't trust his stomach. He thought over the events of the previous few hours. The little gathering that had started so nicely, had been organized so thoughtfully, executed so flawlessly...that he had managed to blow to smithereens. He felt the tears begin to burn, the constricting of his throat as the overwhelming sadness and shame seemed to compound with each hammering blow inside his head.

What have I done? How could I have let this get so out of hand? Why couldn't I see?

He kept remembering. He had to, for some reason. Roy had been so nice, and so had Joanne. How could they be so nice to me after what I'd done?

"Johnny, you okay in there?" Roy's concerned voice followed the sharp rapping on the hollow-core door.

Johnny could manage only a groan in response. He was propped against the wall, his arms folded across his knees cradling his head, which felt like an anvil. He could no more lift his head than run a marathon right now.

"You've got to get to him. He's been in there a long time," Joanne said to her husband.

Roy turned the knob and found, to his relief, it was unlocked. He eased the door open and craned his head around to look. The powder room was tiny. Johnny's hunched body occupied at least half the floor space, and prevented Roy from opening the door all the way.

"Johnny?"

Another groan.

"Look, I want to get you out of here. Can you move your legs a little?"

"I'll...be out....in a minute," Johnny said, his voice muffled.

"Are you sure?"

Johnny nodded.

Roy looked at Joanne. She shook her head no.

"Here, I think I'd better help you." Roy pushed the door more forcefully, sliding John's feet and jostling his head slightly. He groaned in protest. Roy turned his body sideways and managed to slide into the narrow opening. He had to duck under the sink to get in far enough to shut the door and access his partner. He grabbed a fingertip towel off the towel ring on the wall and wet it with cold water, wrung it out and mopped the back of Johnny's neck. The sick man gasped at the coldness of the towel, but didn't complain.

"Sorry about that." He put the toilet lid down, stooped, threw Johnny's arms over his shoulders and grasped him around his chest. "Okay, on 3...help me out. One, two, three...." Roy hoisted the nearly dead weight of his partner and positioned him on the stool. Johnny clutched his stomach and began breathing hard, his mouth watering.

"Ohhhh....no...."

"Oh geez," Roy answered, panicked. He fumbled behind him and opened the door. "Joanne, get a bucket, quick!"

"Nnnnnnnhhhhhhh." Johnny panted through his clenched teeth.

Roy grabbed the towel again and mopped Johnny's forehead, hoping to stave off the inevitable, noting, meanwhile, that Johnny's complexion was somewhere between green and gray.

"Easy, easy...keep breathing. JOANNE!"

"Here, here!" She handed the mop bucket in.

Roy positioned the bucket between John's feet before he realized the panting and groaning had silenced. As Johnny pitched forward, Roy managed to prevent him from taking a header onto the floor. He dragged the limp form of his partner out into the hall and through the kitchen to the family room.

"Help me lay him down." Roy lifted the shoulders and Joanne grabbed the ankles. *For a skinny guy he's heavy.*

Roy checked Johnny's pulse and respirations. "He's just going to have to sleep it off."

"How will we keep the kids quiet?" Joanne asked.

"I wouldn't worry. Fireworks wouldn't wake him now."

"Poor Johnny."

I can't stay here. How will I face them?

He pushed himself to a sitting position, moaning softly at the unpleasant sensations that followed. After a couple of minutes, his equilibrium seemed to normalize. He felt around the floor near the sofa for his shoes, which had been removed. He found them, pulled them on without tying the laces, and stood up. His keys and wallet lay on the coffee table. He scooped up the keys carefully to avoid jangling. Grabbing his wallet, he teetered to the front door and fumbled with the locks. He got the door open, checked that it would lock after him, and stepped into the cool night air, latching the door quietly behind him.

He drove home through the nearly-deserted streets, his headlights cutting a swath through the early morning mist. Arriving, he stepped inside to the familiar and comforting scent of his own place. *Some aspirin and a quick wash of the face should settle me right into la-la-land.* Heading for the bathroom, he stopped.

Blink blink blink blink blink blink blink blink blink blink blink....

He grabbed the cord and ripped the plug from the outlet angrily. His stomach roiled and contracted painfully. The sudden ringing of the phone pierced the silence.

Stay calm. You don't have to do this anymore. No more....it's over. He unplugged the phone and calmly made his way to the medicine cabinet, washed down four aspirin, and flopped into bed, lapsing into restful sleep at last.

The persistent tapping woke Johnny from his deep sleep. He turned and looked at the clock. Noon. He eased himself out of the bed slowly. The hammering in his head the night before had settled into a dull ache by now.

Passing the disabled answering machine, an unpleasant thought occurred to him. *Uh-oh, what if it's....*

Making his way slowly to the door, he peered through the peephole. *Roy.*

Johnny unlocked the door and stepped back, averting his eyes to the floor. Roy stepped in and evaluated his friend's appearance. Wild hair, boxer shorts, faded t-shirt, unshaven....he'd obviously just been in bed.

"You alone?" he asked.

"Oh yeah." Johnny's answer was quiet but emphatic. His voice was low and gravelly.

"I thought you might need this." Roy offered one of two large styrofoam cups from a fast-food restaurant, which Johnny gratefully accepted. The two men peeled the lids off carefully, savoring the aroma.

"Thanks." Johnny mumbled, taking a sip.

"I tried to call you but I couldn't get through."

"I had the phone off," Johnny explained.

Roy nodded his understanding. "I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine. Physically, anyway." He sipped again. "Too bad there's no cure for stupidity."

Roy hovered, hoping Johnny would open up to him. Too often lately, Johnny had kept to himself, to his detriment, Roy felt. The senior paramedic had some things he wanted to discuss with Johnny, if he could only get a good opening.

"Wanna sit down?" Johnny asked, making his way carefully to the sofa, cradling the cup of coffee as if it were liquid gold. He settled into the corner of the well-used piece of furniture, propping his feet on the coffee table.

Yes! "Yeah, I do." Roy took the rocking chair.

Johnny cleared his throat. "Roy, I'm sorry for the things that happened yesterday." He ventured a tentative look towards his partner. "I feel...really bad about the way things turned out. And, I feel responsible for ruining your party."

"Johnny, it was just a cookout with the guys. No big deal."

"No, you and Joanne went to a lot of trouble, and...and I came along and messed it up." Johnny looked contrite.

"Well, you had a little help," Roy replied, grinning slightly.

"Yeah." Johnny sighed. "I'm, uh, ending that."

Roy was cautiously relieved. He knew human nature well enough to know that these sorts of proclamations were often said today, forgotten tomorrow. He hoped Johnny meant it. "I can't say I'm not relieved, John." *I'm just going to tell him what I think.* "I haven't gotten the feeling that you've been altogether happy in that relationship."

"You know, Roy, I haven't been. Happy, that is. I guess I just didn't realize it, you know?" He shook

his head in bewilderment.

"I kinda gathered that. I've been worried about the way this thing's been going. She seems...a little off-kilter to me. I didn't want to butt in; I mean, your business is your business...."

"Off-kilter is one way to put it." Johnny took a long drink of coffee. "Roy, do you know, there were at least a *dozen* messages on my machine when I got home? And I *know* who they're from. After that big blow-up, she calls and leaves all those messages."

"Did you listen to them?"

"No. And I won't." Johnny ran his fingers through his hair. "I just can't believe it got so out of hand. You know what I think it is?"

"What?"

Johnny smiled ruefully. "I've never broken up with a girl before. They always dumped me first." He chuckled. "I didn't have enough experience to realize that this was going badly and I needed to *do* something. I mean, it's always been out of my hands before. You know? But *this* time, I was getting more and more miserable and I couldn't even figure out what I had to do. Is that crazy?"

Roy smiled affectionately. "No. It makes perfect sense, actually."

"Yeah, well, it's definitely over. I can't believe how stupid I've been."

"Have you, um, talked to her?"

Johnny slumped. "No. For all I know, she could be trying to call right now." He glanced at the unplugged phone. "But *I* want to call her and tell her. *I* want to be in control of the situation."

"That's a good idea, especially with her, I think."

They paused and drained their coffee.

"Roy?"

"Hmmm?"

"I really mean it. I'm not going back."

"I hope so."

"I can see it in your face. You're skeptical. You'll see."

"Johnny, it's not my place to interfere in your life, or judge you in any way. But...you're my friend,

and I care about you. And Joanne and the kids care about you. You're important to us. And..." Roy's eyes roamed to the ceiling, searching for the words. "This relationship hasn't been good for you, and I'm afraid it would only get worse. I don't trust that woman. I think she's got a screw loose, and *you* are going to be the one who winds up suffering for it. I honestly hope you mean what you're saying. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Johnny bit his lip and swallowed back the tightness in his throat. "*I do* mean it, Roy. You'll see."

"I believe I will."

"But...I've got a couple of hurdles I'm not looking forward to. The guys for one."

"I don't think you have to worry about them."

"Huh! After that scene yesterday? I can't imagine the ribbing I'm going to get now. Especially from Chet."

"You weren't there, John. After you went in the house, there wasn't any fooling around. The guys were dead serious, even Chet. They're only concerned about your welfare." Roy let loose a sly smile. "But if you tell him I told you that, I will personally help the Phantom on his next campaign."

Johnny didn't return the smile, or even act as if he'd heard what Roy said. He studied the coffee cup pensively, making little indentations in the styrofoam with his fingernail.

"Johnny, there's something else."

Johnny looked up. His face was pale and thin-looking, Roy thought. If the eyes were the windows to one's soul, as was often said, his eyes looked guarded, shielding outsiders from any clue to his true feelings.

"Joanne had a chance to talk with, uh, Lydia for a bit yesterday. Not much, you understand, just a little." Roy swallowed. "Well, she said a couple of things, kinda surprised Jo....."

"Like what?" Johnny asked as if he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"Like, you and she are soul mates. That sort of thing." Roy shrugged. "Oh, and she mentioned she was certain you two would be, you know, together forever. And that *you* were really stuck on *her*. Joanne was sort of taken aback. She said it gave her a weird feeling."

Johnny took a deep breath. "Well, that's just like her. Sounds just like her. No big deal." He got off the couch and walked stiffly into the kitchen. Clattering and banging sounds could be heard, then Johnny reappeared.

"I'm making more coffee. Gonna need it, I think." Johnny smiled self-deprecatingly.

Okay, the subject has been changed. "Yeah. I think you will. You feeling all right now? You were pretty sick yesterday. Do you have any food in this place? You're going to need to eat."

"Ah, I'll be fine. I'll get to the store today. Look, I appreciate you coming over."

Although the tone of the statement wasn't overt, Roy still caught the hint that it was time for him to go.

"Yeah, anytime. I guess I'll see you in a couple of days." He headed for the door.

"You bet. Thanks again...for coming, and for the coffee." Johnny smiled genuinely.

"Take care of yourself."

"Bye."

Johnny went straight to the bathroom, stripped and stepped into the shower. He felt that maybe, if he stayed there long enough, the hot water would wash away the anxiety that clung to him like a layer of grime. He scrubbed himself clean, then stood in the spray until the water began to run tepid. He stepped out and towelled off. Swiping the towel across the steamed up mirror, he regarded his own blurry reflection.

You know what you have to do. Do it now. Get it over with.

Johnny wrapped the towel around his middle and walked, mechanically, to the phone, plugged it in, and lifted the receiver. He dialed the number.

"Good mornin'" Johnny greeted Chet and Marco in the day room.

"Hi Johnny."

"Hey John." Chet looked up from his sports page. He and Marco exchanged glances behind Johnny's back as the paramedic poured a cup of coffee.

John turned and sauntered to the table. "Chet, I regret that we didn't have an adequate opportunity to square up an old – shall we say – rivalry." He grinned devilishly.

"Now that you mention it, John, I do believe you were, uh, losing when the game was – shall I say it? – interrupted."

"Ah-ah-ah, Chet." Johnny held up his index finger. "Not losing."

"Not losing? Then what do you call it?"

"Strategy, Kelly. Something you'd know nothing about."

"You're bluffing, Gage. You were losing, and you know it."

"Next time, Kelly. Next time. I'll send you to school." Johnny walked towards the engine bay, giggling like a schoolboy.

"He's in a good mood, considering," Marco observed.

"Yeah, considering," Chet agreed.

Roy breezed in. "Mornin'!" he called cheerfully.

"Oh hi Roy. Your worse half was just in here, trying to con us into believing he had us on the run in the volleyball match the other day."

"Hey, I was on *his* side, don't forget!" Marco snapped.

"Boys, boys," Roy chastised.

Chet stole a look over his shoulder. "Hey, Roy.....so what's the scoop? What happened?"

"Well. He just told me it's over. He broke up with her."

"No kidding! Man, that's gotta be a first! Gage dumping a chick!" Chet enthused.

"Now, come on, guys. Cut him a little slack, would ya?" Roy took on a paternal posture. "These past few days haven't been easy on him, and he's really worried about how you guys are gonna act."

"Man, I'm not gonna act like nothing, because that girl was *loco*, you know what I mean?" Marco assured Roy.

"Yeah, relax, Roy. We won't pick on him...much."

Roy shot Chet a warning glare as Stoker walked in. "Pick on who?"

"Johnny split with his girlfriend, after the cookout," Roy explained.

"Thank God! That restores my faith in Johnny's sanity."

"Well, I guess we're all in agreement that it's a good thing." Roy continued. "Now, let's not dwell on it. For his sake *and* mine. Because—"

"I HAVE TO WORK WITH HIM" They all chorused, finishing Roy's oft-said plea. The group dissolved into laughter.

"She took it surprisingly well," Johnny stated.

"That's good."

"I mean, I was prepared for anything. Histrionics, screaming, insults, anything. Well, she *did* insult me." He snorted softly. "Said she was too smart for me, that I was just a dumb plaything, and she was through with me anyway. And she only went out with me because I was, well, you know...."

Roy glanced over from his driving. "You know that isn't true."

Johnny shrugged. "Yeah...whatever."

"Johnny, she just said those things to save face. Because you were the one ending it."

"Oh, I know. I'm just glad it didn't escalate. I hate fights."

"And she loved them, apparently."

Johnny chuckled. "That she did, that she did." He shook his head slowly. "Roy, God's honest truth, I am so relieved to be out of that."

That makes two of us, partner.

They drove the rest of the way to the station in silence.

"Squad 51, domestic disturbance with injuries, 1039 Fenton, 1-0-3-9 Fenton, cross street, 22nd, time out 2241."

"Squad 51, KMG 365."

The paramedics donned their helmets and pulled out of the station in grim resignation. These calls were never pleasant. No one liked them.

The squad entered a working-class neighborhood, the type that sprung up on the edge of town with great fanfare and promise for the income-challenged. "Why rent when you can own your own home?" the ads always beckoned. The homes were non-descript, constructed of cheap materials barely meeting building codes. The lots were narrow, maximizing the builder's profit. While some of the houses were kept up nicely, their postage-stamp yards sporting green grass and neatly trimmed hedges, others had slipped into neglect, dirt yards peppered with weeds, toys in various states of disrepair littering the property, the weathered houses themselves peeling and faded.

As they approached the scene, two police cruisers idled with lights flashing, illuminating the entire block in an eerie carnival-like atmosphere. Neighbors clustered in curious groups along the sidewalks and in the street.

Officer Vince Howard greeted the squad. "Better hurry, one of them's bleeding pretty bad," he said.

"One of them? How many are there?" Johnny asked. The three started briskly towards the house as Vince told the story.

"Husband and wife. They really got into it. She even used a knife. Said she was trying to defend herself. He took it away and cut her with it."

A toddler wandered about just outside the front door. She was barefoot, grimy fingers in her mouth, her eyes big with the commotion and excitement. A layer of dirt covered all her exposed skin. Roy and Johnny both caught sight of the forlorn little figure at the same time. It never failed; there were always children involved, witnessing these horrible acts of violence between their own parents. Johnny felt a lump in his throat as he continued into the cramped home, lugging the cumbersome gear.

"Uh, Vince," he summoned quietly. "The little girl...who's taking care of her?" He motioned his head in the direction of the entrance. Visions of the child wandering into the street or into the path of the ambulance or squad danced in Johnny's head.

Vince sighed. "There were some older siblings out there a minute ago. I guess they took off. I'll take care of her."

Evaluating the scene, there was a woman lying on the couch, moaning and whimpering. She held a bloody towel around her forearm. A man sat slumped in a dining room chair twenty feet away. The two officers watching over them made room for the incoming paramedics. Roy knelt by the woman on the couch.

"Ma'am, my name's Roy DeSoto. I'm a paramedic with the L.A. County Fire Department."

"My arm, it's bleeding. He cut me with the knife." Her words were slightly slurred.

Johnny approached the man. He was shirtless, his lank dishwater hair hanging in clumps that fell forward, obstructing his face. As Johnny took a chair next to him, the man shook his head back, clearing his vision temporarily.

"Okay, take it easy. What's your name? Are you hurt?" Johnny asked.

The man's eyes darted wildly. His breathing was rapid and irregular.

"My name's Rick. Hurt? I dunno. Man, that bitch...she came after me with a knife, a *knife!*"

"Look, I'm not the cops. I just need to know if you're hurt anywhere. If you are, I want to get you treated, all right? Did you get cut?"

"Shit, you tell me! I don't know!" Rick's voice was strained.

Back at the couch, Roy had unwrapped the woman's arm. "You've got a pretty nasty cut here." He fished in the trauma box for some dressings and tape. "We'll have to take you to Rampart to get that looked at. It'll probably need stitches. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"My eye. He hit me. It's really hurting." She began to weep softly.

The room was dimly lit. Roy shone his penlight on the woman's face. Her eye was red and swelling. There was a split in her upper lip as well.

"What about your neck or back? Anything hurt there?"

"No. I...I don't think so."

"Rampart, this is squad 51, how do you read?"

At the dining room table, Johnny attempted to assess the man. He took out his penlight. "I'm going to check your pupils here, just look straight ahead."

He shone the light into Rick's right eye, but the patient turned his head and batted the light away. "Get that shit outta my eyes."

Johnny's lips formed a tight line. "Sir, are you refusing treatment?"

"Just get the hell away from me. I don't need nothin'." The man's state of agitation seemed to be intensifying. He couldn't look at one point for more than a second, his eyes darting wildly around the room."

Johnny backed away slowly. "Okay, okay. Just be cool. I'll leave you alone." Johnny gave a warning glance to the uniformed officer standing nearby.

The ambulance attendants entered with the gurney, clattering over the threshold and maneuvering around the cramped space between the television and end table.

"What's that for? What are they doing?"

"They're here to take your wife to the hospital."

"Why? She don't need no hospital!" He stood up. "She came at ME with that knife! She tried to stab me!"

Roy looked up from his patient in alarm. *Thank God the police are here.*

"Ricky, you hurt me!" she sobbed. To Roy, she continued. "All I said is I want to go home to my mother. He just went crazy and tried to choke me! I had to get the knife!"

"Rick, your wife's badly hurt. She's got a bad cut that needs a doctor's attention." Johnny tried to explain.

"She wants to leave me! Can you believe that? I give that bitch everything, and she ups and says she's leaving me and going home to her bitch mother! Over my dead body!" Rick ranted.

"Look, just settle down, all right?" Johnny attempted to placate the overwrought man.

"Listen, fireman! No one tells me what to do in my own house!"

"You heard him. Sit down and be quiet." The cop warned.

"Or what?" the man challenged.

"Or I'll arrest you right now, that's what!"

As the ambulance attendants got the woman loaded and ready for transport, Rick finally slumped, defeated, back into the dining chair he'd previously occupied.

"Man, how can she leave me?" he asked pitifully. "She's everything to me. We got three kids! I can't let her go, I just can't.....I'll kill her before I let her go."

Johnny stared at the man, astonished. "Listen to what you're saying. Violence isn't the answer, Rick. You've got three kids? What's going to happen to them?"

"They're better off without us anyway." Rick looked dejected.

"Look, you can't be talking that way. You and your wife need to either work things out, or part amicably, you understand? You don't need to be choking and knifing each other, especially in front of the kids. You owe it to them to behave in a civilized way. Do you want them growing up thinking this is what love is?"

"I can't live without her. I can't let her leave. No matter what. I'd rather see her dead." Rick spoke numbly.

Johnny couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Man, I don't get it. Don't you love your wife? Isn't that what this is all about?"

"I love her too much. I can't live without her." He shook his head slowly. "She knows it too. I'll kill her."

Johnny looked at the officer, alarm in his brown eyes. The officer just shrugged. He'd seen and heard it all too often.

Johnny stood slowly. "Well, I guess he's not hurt." He gathered up his things. "He's all yours," he said to the officer.

"Okay, buddy, let's go. A night in the clink will mellow you out." The officer stood the man up and handcuffed him. He led the unresisting prisoner out into the night.

Johnny looked around to ensure nothing was left behind. Roy had already gone in the ambulance with the wife. Johnny carried the trauma box and his helmet out onto the front stoop. The little girl sat in the dirt beside the sidewalk, holding a stick and watching everything. Johnny hesitated, then stooped down and placed his helmet on her head. "There you go, an honorary little firegirl." He smiled at her. Most kids loved to wear a fireman's helmet. She looked back at him, expressionless. "Okay, Sweetie. I have to take my hat now. I need it for my work, okay?" he asked. He removed the helmet, stood and walked slowly away, glancing back at the little girl. She sat, digging in the dirt with a stick.

Johnny walked down the hall of Rampart, a feeling of abject emptiness in his heart. He couldn't erase the sight of the little girl, playing in the dirt, from his mind. Talk about empty...her little eyes looked so empty and soulless. What had she seen in her brief life? What kind of world was she growing up to think she existed in? He set the handie-talkie down roughly on the base station counter and rested his head in his hands. *So that's love? Love is murderous jealousy and rage? Count me out.*

He was so lost in thought he didn't hear the footsteps of his partner approaching from the exam room.

"Hey Junior." Roy said softly. The evening's events had cast a pall over both of their moods.

Johnny startled slightly. "Oh. She okay?"

"She's got a black eye, cut lip. Bad laceration on her arm. They're going to suture it and release her, I guess."

"Release her, huh? Back to the cozy warmth of her domestic bliss." Johnny spoke cynically.

"Yeah."

"We'll be back there, Roy. I guarantee you."

"We'll see."

"Mark my words."

They walked out into the cool night air of the ambulance bay. Johnny slid into the passenger seat of the squad. Roy stood for a moment, staring into the stars that twinkled brightly in a sky of midnight blue velvet. He was jarred by the contrast of the beauty of the constellations reigning over the ugliness of the earth below. *It's not the earth that's ugly. It's the people on it. We're less civilized than we would like to believe.*

Johnny watched Roy with concern. Roy was a rock of stability, a pragmatic man, who knew when to shut down his emotions and detach himself. It wasn't coldness or lack of concern; it was survival. But Johnny knew he felt deeply and hurt as much as, if not more than, the average public servant. Especially in cases like this one; cases that made no logical sense and had a poor prognosis for a favorable outcome.

"Roy?"

Roy slid into his seat and began to turn the key, then stopped. He shook his head.

"I don't get it, Johnny."

"I know what you mean."

"That woman – Paula was her name – all the way in the ambulance, to the hospital. She...she kept telling me how scared she was of her husband. How she wanted to leave him, to disappear. She said she was afraid he'd kill her. He'd threatened to kill her if she tried to leave. She said she'd never even *had* the knife, that he was lying. He had it all along."

"That sounds about right." Johnny muttered.

Roy looked at his partner. "What?"

"The husband kept telling me he'd rather see her dead than lose her."

"That's crazy. I just don't understand it. And the kids..." Roy hit the steering wheel.

"Roy, there's no way you and I can understand it. You've gotta let it go." Johnny counseled, knowing full well neither of them would be letting it go for a while.

Roy started the engine and they drove back to the station. The rest of the crew were asleep. The paramedics undressed and climbed into bed for a fitful night's rest.

"I've been thinking about it. What I need is a couple of days away from the city," Johnny said, buttoning his plaid shirt.

"Sounds good. I wish I could take off like that." Roy responded. "Chris has baseball tomorrow. And we're invited to a wedding."

"Well, just getting away from here should help," Johnny offered.

"You going backpacking?" Roy asked, knowing the answer already. *A couple of days away from the city* didn't mean weekend in Vegas for Johnny.

"Yeah. I don't know where yet. Just take off, you know."

Roy smiled. He knew, all right. Johnny had a penchant for taking off and losing himself in the wilderness. Or maybe he was finding himself, actually. Roy kind of envied the ease with which Johnny cast aside all the worldly comforts and confines of modern life and communed with the earth, with nature, always returning a more peaceful and tranquil person. He didn't know how Johnny did it, and it seemed almost blasphemous to ask. So he didn't.

"Sounds good. Be careful, anyway."

"Oh yeah." He grabbed his stuff and shut his locker. "Have a good one, Roy. See you."

"Yeah, see ya."

When Johnny arrived at his apartment, he was surprised to find an envelope wedged into the space between his door and the frame. He pulled it out and examined it. The flowery script on the outside was immediately familiar to him. *Now what?*

He entered the apartment and laid the letter down, forgetting about it for a few minutes while he rummaged in the large hallway closet for his backpacking gear. He mentally ticked off each item he'd be needing as he dragged it from the packed yet well-ordered storage area. *Backpack, tent, stove, water jug, sleeping bag....*

It had been a couple of months since Johnny had had an opportunity to go for a weekend jaunt in the wilderness and he hadn't realized how much he missed it until late last night, after the domestic disturbance call. The rescue had left him so unsettled he'd been unable to release the nervous energy built up inside until the idea struck him, almost as an afterthought. What had been a common practice for him at one time, backpacking to clear his head, had been thrust to the back burner during the few weeks he'd spent with Lydia. As soon as he thought of it the night before, his nerves ceased their jangling and he was filled with a peaceful anticipation that had carried over into this morning. He could hardly wait to get going.

Within an hour, Johnny felt he had everything ready. He was especially diligent in double checking his equipment and supplies, as he was a little bit out of practice. But he was sure everything was in order now. A surge of energy propelled his speed and his mood. It was going to be great, just what he needed. As he prepared to hoist his load and depart, the letter on the table caught his eye. Johnny felt torn. He didn't want anything to dampen his spirits as he headed out. Still, maybe reading it would be a good idea. Things had ended rather nastily. Maybe the letter, or whatever it was, was some sort of conciliatory gesture. He ripped the envelope open and began to read.

Dearest Johnny,

These past few days have been the worst of my entire life. Thinking back over the fight we had, I can't believe we said the things we did to each other. I'm sure you must feel the same way. Are you hurting like I am? It's killing me to think that I've said or done anything to hurt you, sweetheart. I know how you are. You're very introverted when it comes to your feelings. I knew you'd never make the first move

to resolve our little tiff and get this nonsense behind us. You have your pride; you're a man, there's no shame in that. So I took it upon myself to write this letter and hopefully open the lines of communication and our hearts to one another again.

Johnny's breathing became shallow as he continued.

Johnny, darling, you know I love you with all my heart. The minute I set eyes on you, I knew you were the one I was meant to spend my life with. I didn't mean those stupid, hurtful things I said. I don't care if you are a fireman. Some day you'll be promoted to captain, and who knows, maybe even the commander, or the chief, or whatever it is. That will be such a proud day for us, won't it? Johnny, you may not realize this, but I dream of our future together almost all of the time. I just know you're going to be an important person in the fire department one day, and I am going to be the proud wife who is standing behind you, supporting you. And our children will be so proud of their daddy too. Don't you dream about it Johnny? Doesn't it sound wonderful?

Johnny, the sooner we admit our mistakes the sooner we can put the past behind us and be happy together again, like we once were. I am willing to admit that I overreacted. I know now that you are a sensitive man and must be handled very sensitively. I can do that. I know you must have your friends. It's all right with me, I really mean it! Doesn't it make you happy to know that I understand? You just need a woman like me who knows these things and indulges you once in a while. You've been mistreated for too long by too many shallow selfish women. I can understand why you're reluctant. But you don't have to be with me anymore! Johnny, I know you and I know what's good for you. We need each other. We aren't complete without each other. I know you feel the same way. I could always sense it in your eyes.

Johnny, I've poured my heart out to you. I'm crying as I write this. My love for you is so real, so consuming. I can't spend another day without hearing your voice, hearing you say you love me too, and that everything is going to be all right. Johnny, I wait by the phone for your call. Please, don't let another minute of our lives pass without us spending it together. Life is too short. I love you.

Yours in eternity,

Lydi

Johnny sank into a chair, stunned, absently crumpling the letter in his hand as he sat and ruminated. He felt a knot form in his stomach. This was a very unfortunate turn of events. *How could this be happening? We resolved everything on the phone that day. I told her exactly how I felt. How can she think there's any hope when I never gave her any?*

The camping gear on the floor near the door beckoned him. It was an irresistible invitation.

I'll deal with this later, he thought, tossing the letter onto the coffee table. He grabbed his things and quickly left the apartment, a sense of urgency driving his actions. He loaded up the Rover and sped towards the mountains with the windows down, the crisp, turbulent fall air having its way with his hair.

Five days later, the crew of 51's A shift reconvened for another long stint. The time off seemed to have rejuvenated the men and, upon completion of roll call and assignment of chores, they delved enthusiastically into their duties. Even Chet, who had garnered latrine duty yet again, set about his work whistling cheerfully.

Gage and DeSoto were given dorm detail.

"You wanna mop or change sheets?" Roy asked.

"I don't care."

"Okay, I'll mop then," he decided.

"I'd rather mop."

Roy let out a sigh of exasperation. "Okay. I'll do the beds."

Removing the sooty sheets from the previous shift, Roy daydreamed about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. They were going to be off-duty this year, a change from last year. Joanne always got so revved up about the holidays. Her folks were coming, which wasn't necessarily a bonus...but Roy had learned years ago the best way to deal with them. *I'll just stay neutral, smile congenially, appear to agree even if I don't...it always works.* They weren't perceptive enough to notice the lack of passion in their son-in-law when it came to their own pet issues. Or maybe they noticed but didn't mind. Maybe they appreciated the easy-going manner of the man their daughter had chosen. *Or maybe they think I'm a mindless twit.* Roy was beyond worrying about it. His goal was peace, and more often than not, he achieved it with his quiet presence.

Roy was half finished overhauling the dorm before he realized Johnny hadn't said a thing since they'd started. In fact, he'd been uncharacteristically reticent all morning. Roy looked at his partner, mopping away with gusto at the far end of the room, throwing his weight into each swish of the mop.

"Did you go backpacking?" he ventured.

"Huh?"

"Backpacking. Did you go?"

A smile flitted across Johnny's face, which was flushed from the physical exertion of the mopping.

"Oh yeah. I did. It was good. Real good."

"Good," he echoed feebly. He watched as Johnny resumed his feverish labor.

The rest of the chores were carried out without conversation. Roy's mind wandered back to thoughts of the holidays. *I think I'll ask Jo to make two pecan pies this year.....*

Finishing up, Roy wandered into the kitchen area. Chet was already there, having honed latrine duty to a science with his vast experience at it, finishing in record time. Mike was cleaning up the breakfast dishes.

"Hey Roy, it says here married men are the happiest," he mused. He was studying an article in the newspaper.

"The happiest what?"

"The happiest people. I thought this station would be a good barometer of the validity of their argument."

Roy rolled his eyes. *Chet and his schemes.*

"See, they divided everyone up into four groups. Married men, single men, married women, single women."

"Uh-huh?" Roy smiled indulgently.

Hank walked in. "What's this about married women and single women?"

"Okay, here are the results. Uh, Cap, they did studies on who were the happiest people."

"I don't need a study to tell *me* if I'm happy or not," Hank huffed.

"Well, are you?" Chet inquired.

"Yes!"

"Okay, then, you validate the study." Chet made a mark on the paper.

"*What* study?" Cap demanded.

"The results, Chet! The results!" Everyone turned to look at Mike, waiting at the sink with barely contained anticipation, his hands dripping suds.

"Okay, keep your apron on!" Chet admonished.

Johnny breezed into the kitchen and made a bee-line for the coffee pot.

"Wait, first I should ask Roy. Roy, are you happy?"

Stoker growled in frustration and turned back to his dishes.

"Am I happy? At the moment, you mean?" Roy asked.

"As a married man, Roy. Are you happy?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I mean, sure!" Roy quickly amended his tepid response. *I don't want this to get back to Joanne....*

"Okay. I guess I'd say I'm so-so...I guess tolerable, although that isn't really a choice...." Chet mumbled.

"Says you." Hank remarked. "I find you intolerable much of the time."

Stoker chuckled.

"Stoke, are you happy?" he asked the married engineer.

"Why yes, Chet." Stoker said without elaboration.

"Okay...." Chet scribbled some more.

"*Buenos dias!*" Marco announced.

"Hey Marco."

"Marco, my man. You're just in time."

"For what?" Marco asked warily.

"To be polled."

"Is it gonna hurt?" he quipped.

Chet ignored his joke. "Marco, as an unmarried man, would you characterize yourself as happy or unhappy?"

"Gee, I don't know Chet. That's a little simplistic. I mean, sometimes, I'm happy....sometimes I'm not. How can I answer that?"

Chet sighed. "Okay, then, are you happy or unhappy with your marital status?"

"Wait, that's not really the study criteria," Hank cautioned.

"Marco, in terms of being married or unmarried, are you happy or not?" Chet was beginning to regret starting this. Roy shook with quiet laughter.

"Well, I'd like to be married, I suppose. If that's what you mean."

"I'll mark you as unhappy then."

"I hope that's not a self-fulfilling prophecy!"

"Relax, pal. Okay, that leaves...GAGE!"

Johnny glared at Chet over the rim of his coffee cup.

"How about it, John? Oh, and this isn't a question about sexual frustration, by the way."

Johnny lowered his cup slowly, effecting a dramatic pause.

"Chet, I'm deliriously happy. I wouldn't get married if you paid me a million bucks." He refilled his cup and walked out of the room, all eyes following him.

"Aw, dammit. He screwed up everything." Chet glowered at the tallies before him.

Returning from a heart attack call, the squad backed into the station. It was their second shift back since Johnny's foray into the wilderness, and Roy was dismayed to find Johnny still acting distant and taciturn. This was puzzling to Roy. Usually, the backpacking trips did the trick with Johnny's sour moods. Roy wondered if his partner was still upset over the domestic incident they'd responded to the week before. It didn't seem likely, however. As bad as it was, no one was seriously injured or hurt. Johnny didn't usually sulk over those kinds of runs indefinitely.

Thinking back, Roy seemed to recall that Johnny had been pretty cheerful a couple of weeks back, pretty much his old self since breaking off with the "girlfriend from hell" as Chet called her. Something had happened to worsen his spirits, obviously, and he wasn't forthcoming with Roy or anyone else.

Roy decided to give Johnny some elbow room and allow him to open up in his own time, if he wanted to. If he *didn't* want to, then Roy hoped this black cloud would eventually dissipate. As tiring as Johnny could be when he was his usual talkative self, the silent Johnny was not much fun either.

"Well, if it isn't the dynamic duo," Hank announced as the paramedic team walked into the day room.

"Holy cow!" Roy exclaimed, staring wide-eyed at the spectacle before him.

Johnny nearly collided with his awe-struck partner who had stopped dead in his tracks. He looked up to see the biggest arrangement of long-stemmed red roses he'd ever seen outside a funeral, taking up residence on the unassuming formica table top.

"*What is THAT?*" he asked, incredulous.

"They're flowers, Gage. You should look into it. Chicks love 'em. Might improve your success rate."

Chet smirked.

"But what...I mean, who...why..." Johnny stammered.

"Yeah, what are they for? *Who* are they for?" Roy queried, a bit more articulately.

Johnny approached the bouquet and leaned over to sniff. "Mmmm, nice."

"They're for Romeo," Marco answered, rolling his eyes.

Johnny then spotted the tiny envelope amid the beautiful blooms, his own name written on it.

"Me?"

"Yeah, Johnny, you! Now open the card and end our suspense, would ya already?" Marco pleaded.

Johnny shook his head slowly, a look of puzzlement on his face. Roy watched him, bemused. *Maybe this will bring him out of his blue period.*

"It's *three dozen*, Johnny! We counted," Mike told him.

"Someone really dropped a bundle."

"Come *on*, Gage, open the card!" Chet coerced.

Johnny's expressive face suddenly changed from bewilderment to dread. He wore the expression of someone who'd just received horrible news. Roy continued to observe him with concern.

Johnny slowly plucked the envelope from its holder and tore it open. Without removing the card, he spread it apart just enough to glimpse inside. His jaw tightened visibly and his lips pressed together in consternation.

"Well?" Hank asked anxiously.

Johnny clenched the envelope tightly in his fist and stalked out of the room.

Roy scanned the perplexed faces in the room. He was just as confused himself.

"Hmmmph," Chet snorted. "I guess we'll never know."

"Why wouldn't Johnny want to tell us? Someone obviously thinks he's the cat's pajamas!" Marco said. "Boy, if it were me, I'd tell the world!"

"Look, I don't know what's going on," Roy said. "But I have noticed that something's been bothering him. Maybe this is related."

"Yeah, he's been pretty moody lately," Mike concurred.

"Well, wouldn't *you* be?" Chet asked.

"What do you mean, Chet?" Roy asked.

"He doesn't have his sexy girlfriend to, uh, you know...quell his urges anymore." Chet shrugged.
"He's probably frustrated as hell."

Roy stared daggers at Chet. "As I recall, *you* were the one who dubbed her the girlfriend from Hell!"

"Granted, but I bet she was a tigress in the sack, if you know what I mean." Chet's mustache twitched suggestively.

"Chet, give Johnny some credit," Marco said. "NO amount of sex is worth the grief that chick gave him."

"It's not the quantity, Marco, but the quality," Chet explained. "And in *that* department, I'd be willing to bet, considering the girl's fiery nature, that —"

Roy's temper flared. "You guys sound like a bunch of juveniles in a locker room. I know it's hard for you to believe, but Johnny's not as one-dimensional as you all seem to think he is."

"I have to agree with Roy," Hank interjected. "In my opinion, John's reputation is grossly overblown. Besides, this discussion is quickly entering the realm of 'unseemly' and I'm ending it right now."

"Sorry, Cap." Chet muttered.

"Yeah, Cap," Marco said, contrite.

Roy opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind, and left the room. He wasn't conscious of where he was heading, at first...until it dawned on him that he was looking for Johnny. It was time to have a talk with his partner.

He found Johnny outside, sitting on the hood of his Rover, his feet on the bumper. John's face was upturned, his perfectly chiseled bone structure glowing in the moonlight. Roy knew Johnny heard the door open and shut, heard Roy's hesitant footsteps approaching. But he didn't show any recognition of the fact.

"I guess I, uh, owe you an explanation," Johnny said quietly.

"I don't know what you *owe* me....maybe you owe it to yourself to get some things off your chest," Roy countered.

Johnny smiled. "Well, when you put it *that way*."

"So, what's got you so out of sorts, Johnny? I'm assuming that the flowers are somehow related."

"They're from Lydia."

Roy couldn't contain an utterance of shocked surprise. "But...I thought you ...that is, are you seeing her again?"

Johnny sighed heavily. "No. I mean, I'm *trying* not to."

"She's calling you?"

"Roy, she's calling me, she's writing me, she's coming over...." Johnny rubbed his forehead. "You know that camping trip?"

"Yeah?"

"When I got home from work that morning, there was this letter from her. She said how sorry she was, how much she loves me, and how we belong together...and some way-out stuff. Stuff about me, like, she knows I feel the same way.....which I don't!"

"Whew."

"Yeah. I put it aside and tried to forget about it, but it kept nagging at me all weekend. It's just *weird*, Roy. When I got home, there were all these messages on my machine. Some of them calm, some of them hysterical."

"What did you do?"

"Well, for starters, I stuck the damn machine in the closet! When she couldn't reach me that way anymore, she started calling in the middle of the night. A couple of times, she's even shown up at my place."

"Can't you just tell her how you feel?"

"I tried! I mean, I *did!* I told her that it wasn't going to work. I tried using all kinds of arguments, like, uh, she deserves better than me, and, you know, I'll probably get killed in a fire one day —"

"Johnny!"

"I know, I know. But man, I was desperate, Roy! It's like she doesn't *hear* me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know! I may have to move and change my phone number!"

"Johnny, are you sure you're not giving her *any* kind of encouragement?" It didn't make sense that this woman wouldn't get the message sooner or later, if what Johnny was saying was true.

Johnny looked at Roy. "No, I'm telling you! I'm just this short of being outright rude!" He held up his thumb and forefinger an eighth of an inch apart.

"Have you told her the biggest thing?"

"What?"

"That you don't love her?"

Johnny sighed. "I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. Maybe not. I don't want to hurt her if I don't have to. The truth is, I *never* loved her, Roy." A few moments of quiet passed before Johnny added, "and I don't think she loves me either. It's like...an obsession, you know?"

Roy looked up quickly. Johnny's dark eyes bore into him hauntingly. There was a glint of fear there.

Roy didn't respond. He didn't know what to say. What Johnny said made sense. This wasn't a simple case of unrequited love. This was really bizarre, and he didn't have any experience with anything like it. He felt for Johnny, but he didn't know how he could help him.

Johnny's mood had lightened considerably in the couple of days that had passed since his talk with Roy. The problem wasn't gone, but at least he had shared it, and that somehow made it seem like less of a burden. And he now knew that, if he ever felt like it, he could talk about it with Roy some more. The ice had been broken and Roy was always a good listener.

The roses had been parceled out to the other crew members. Johnny hadn't wanted to see them again, so each man took home his share to give to the woman in his life, be it his wife, girlfriend or mother.

It was a Thursday afternoon and Johnny and Roy were lingering at Rampart after transporting a patient. There was some of the usual banter with Dixie at the base station. Dr. Brackett seemed unusually friendly this day as well. The paramedics noticed the doctor hovering nearby as they chatted with Dix, occasionally throwing in a good-natured comment but obviously distracted by a unspoken agenda. Finally, Dixie had been called away, and he got his chance to conspire with the paramedics.

"Hey guys," he summoned.

"Doc, what's up?" Roy answered.

"Tomorrow's Dixie's birthday. You're both off, right?"

Roy and Johnny exchanged glances and nodded.

"We're going to have a little get-together at Cheaters in the evening. Sort of a happy-hour type thing. I was hoping you guys could make it."

"Sounds great! I'll be there," Johnny confirmed.

"I think I can come. Is it all right if I bring Joanne?" Roy asked.

"Of course! The more the merrier! But hey, don't mention anything to Dixie, okay? She thinks I'm taking her out for dinner."

"You're secret's safe with us," Johnny grinned.

"You bet, Doc," Roy added. "And thanks for asking us."

"Oh, it wouldn't be a party without Dixie's favorite paramedics!" he laughed.

The two paramedics walked out to the squad.

"That's gonna be fun," Johnny remarked.

"Joanne and I haven't gone out like that in a long time. Too long, in fact! I hope we can find a sitter in time."

"I hope you can too."

They pulled into the station and noticed the engine was gone, having been called out to a fire.

"Roy, I'm going to go see if I have a fresh shirt," Johnny said. He'd gotten a little bit of blood on his shirt on the last response and needed to find a clean one.

In the locker room, Johnny found an envelope stuck into the door of his locker. He felt his heart sink. The little annoyances were becoming a daily occurrence lately, getting worse instead of better.

He opened it up to find a card. It was one of those flowery sentimental anniversary cards. Johnny frowned and opened it. It contained a stock verse about the ties of true love and devotion.

Dearest Johnny,

Tomorrow is our special day...I hope you haven't forgotten! Three months since we met. Who knew something horrible like a car accident could produce something so beautiful? I thank God every day that you were there to rescue me and our life together could begin.

I am planning something special for us. I will be coming to your apartment at 5:00, but beyond that I

cannot say what I have in store for you! It's a surprise (wink wink). Just be there and be ready for me. You won't be disappointed.

Johnny, I have a good feeling about this milestone. I think we are finally getting our life on track. Things can only get better and better. That's what they always say about people who belong together, who love one another as you and I do.

Yours in eternity,

Lydia

Johnny examined the envelope. It hadn't been mailed; she must have delivered it herself. What if he'd been here? He was just glad he hadn't been. But the guys had had to deal with her. *I wondered how she acted. I guess I'll hear about it when they get back. But now I've got a more immediate problem.*

He didn't have more time to think about it then. The squad was called out to an "unknown type" rescue. Johnny hastily buttoned his clean shirt and raced out to the squad.

Johnny strolled into Nordstrom's as casually as he could, although his stomach was churning mightily beneath his cool veneer. He'd decided this would be the best place to inform Lydia he was breaking the plans *she* had made for them that evening. She was less likely to throw a fit or cause a scene at her place of employment, he thought. Plus, if a customer happened along, he'd have an easy escape.

Johnny made his way past menswear to the brightly-lit center of the store, the location of all the alluring and over-priced cosmetics the high-end chain had to offer. He was taking a chance that Lydia was working today. He really had no idea if she'd be there. Johnny spotted her counter from a vantage point just behind accessories. There she was, re-arranging a display. Perfect.

Johnny set his face in his most impassive expression and strode to the counter. Lydia looked up, saw him, and smiled broadly. He didn't smile back.

"Johnny!" She circled the counter to the other side and ran to hug him. "You got my card! Were you surprised?"

He grasped her arms before she could encircle his body. "No, don't."

"Johnny?" She gazed up at him in confusion.

"Lydia, I came here for one reason." His manner was wooden.

"Johnny," Lydia smiled, attempting to defuse the tense atmosphere. She glanced around to see if anyone was watching. "Honey, what are you talking about?"

"Look..." He sighed and pursed his lips. "Don't call me honey. I'm not going to see you tonight, or any other time, for that matter."

Lydia's gray eyes flashed angrily. Johnny had seen that look too many times. He steeled himself.

"Johnny, don't start this *shit* with me here," she hissed.

"Lydia, I'm not *starting* anything! I'm *ending* it! Like I've tried to end it umpteen times already!"

Two salesgirls from one of the other cosmetics companies were watching the exchange with interest, murmuring back and forth and smiling cattily. Lydia noticed them and softened her stance. She caressed Johnny's forearm.

"Honey – I mean, Johnny – " She batted her eyelashes flirtatiously. "I had something special planned for us this evening...something I *know* you'd like."

"Lydia, are you even *listening* to me?" Johnny jerked his arm away from her touch. "Look, forget about us, forget about ME! That's it! It's over! Do you understand?" His voice was strained from anger and frustration.

"Johnny, you are pathetic!" Lydia spat. "Look at you. I don't know what I ever saw in you. You're disgusting! You're a loser, just like all your loser friends!" Her lips curled derisively.

"I hope you're right, Lydia," Johnny seethed, his eyes narrowed. "...If being a loser means losing *you!*"

"Just leave me the hell alone! Don't ever call me, Johnny!" Johnny had turned and was walking away. She called after his retreating form. "Never again, Johnny! Do you hear me?"

He didn't look back.

The pub was crowded, the smoke was thick and the din was nearly deafening. All the ingredients for a raucous celebration of a good friend's birthday, in this case, Dixie's.

The group was tucked into the corner on the other side of a half wall separating them from the bar. They sat at a high table with swiveling vinyl stools, a wrought-iron light fixture with amber glass casting a warm glow on them all. All around, business people in suits and conservative attire contrasted sharply with the scantily-clad waitresses threading their way through the crowd, carefully balancing small trays laden with potables of all varieties. The mood was decidedly upbeat.

Johnny sat next to Dixie, who was bordered on the other side by Kel Brackett. Also in attendance were Joe Early, Roy and Joanne, Gladys Pritchard, another E.D. nurse and one of Dixie's favorite co-workers, Charlie Dwyer, Tom Bledsoe, and his wife, Sally. The beer was flowing for the guys, while the ladies sipped manhattans. Naturally, the topic of conversation was work.

Brackett shook his head and chuckled. "I couldn't believe it. I thought I'd seen everything."

"I can imagine something like that happening in San Francisco," Early quipped.

Dwyer guffawed. "Oh hell, L.A.'s got *more* than its share of queens, let me tell you!"

"Gee, Charlie. You seem to be quite knowledgeable about it. Do you speak from experience?" Roy chided. Joanne jabbed her husband in the ribs.

"Oh, no you don't, DeSoto. Don't even suggest it! Look, I'm right and you know it!"

"Yeah, I've seen Charlie in action. He puts *me* to shame!" Johnny chimed in.

"Is that possible?" Dixie asked drolly.

"At any rate, we got the thing out. Not the sort of case I'm eager to handle every day, mind you." Brackett took a long swig from his brew.

"Man, it's cases like that that make me glad I'm a paramedic, doc," Johnny said.

"It's cases like that that make us *wish* we were paramedics!" Joe said, his blue eyes dancing.

"Oh lord, can't we just let it drop?" Dixie pleaded. "I'd rather not think about such things on my birthday!"

"Dixie's right. Let's talk about something more pleasant," Gladys chimed in.

"Yeah, like this wonderful gathering!" Dixie smiled. "Thanks, all of you. It means a lot to me that you'd all show up for little ol' me."

"Aww, Dix, we wouldn't miss it! You know that." Johnny's lopsided grin was warm and sincere. He rested his arm on the back of Dixie's chair and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"To Dixie," Roy proposed, raising his glass in a toast.

The happy group continued its merriment for the better part of the evening. As the time wore on, the imbibing slowed and the mood mellowed. Topics ranging from cliff-side rescues to the price of gasoline were bandied about good-naturedly. Everyone was relaxed and in no rush to be anywhere but there.

Across the bar, at another table, sat three young women.

"Hey, Lydia, isn't that your boyfriend?" the one named Camie remarked.

Lydia stared as if looking through a tunnel. Her focus intent on Johnny, the world around her could have been decimated for all she knew. The sounds of the bar became muted and distant...the other faces blurred and faded...the colors all turned to gray....all she could see was the happy, handsome

face of her beloved; animated, smiling, talking, laughing...with those strange people. He sat so close to that woman, his arm behind her. At one point, he leaned over and kissed the woman on the cheek.

"Lydia!" Karen said forcefully. Lydia's trance was broken. "Aren't you going to go over to him?"

Lydia looked back and forth at her friends as if they were speaking a foreign language.

"I have to go," she said, sliding off her stool and grabbing her purse and jacket. She ran from the bar.

It had been a fun evening. Johnny was able to forget, for a time, the problem that had been dogging him for longer than he cared to ponder. Not to mention the scene at the department store. As distasteful as it had been, he hoped it would resolve the issue once and for all. He'd been forceful and direct. There had been no doubt of his feelings or intentions. He drove home carefully, mindful of the fact he'd had a few beers, although he was far from inebriated. It was late, he'd worked the previous night, and he was tired. Pulling into his apartment building parking lot was such a relief. *Home at last.*

He walked up the dark sidewalk and simultaneously sorted through his key ring for the right key. He didn't notice the large figure looming near the pine tree.

"John Gage?"

Johnny looked up quickly. "Yeah, who—"

The blow to his gut doubled him over with a grunt. His keys clattered to the sidewalk. He was hammered on the side of his head, nearly toppling him to the ground. As he tried to right himself, he managed to utter "what--?" before the fist smashed into his mouth. His mouth filled with the metallic taste of his own freely flowing blood. He raised his hands in a feeble attempt to ward off further blows, clearing the way for another pummeling to his mid-section. The hits came hard and fast, about a half dozen of them. Johnny collapsed to the ground beside the sidewalk, his body curled against the assault. As he lay in all-consuming agony, struggling to breathe, a boot connected soundly with his right rib cage, eliciting an audible ***crack*** that must have been a very satisfying sound to the owner.

The entire incident took half a minute.

Johnny lay very still for a very long time, afraid to move. Breathing was excruciating and labored. His abused stomach threatened to rebel at any moment. Johnny's forehead rested against the cool blades of grass, his knees drawn up under him. He lapsed into a twilight state of consciousness wherein time was meaningless.

[Part 3](#)