

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

## **Obsession: Part 3**

### **By Carol D.**

He didn't know how long he'd been there when he heard approaching footsteps and voices.

"Mark, what is that? Is that a person?" a woman whispered.

"Looks like it."

They hurried to Johnny's side. "Hey, can you hear me? Are you all right?" the man asked.

"I think he's sick or something," the woman said.

"Probably drunk. Hey, buddy. Do you live here?"

Johnny spoke laboriously. "I'm hurt. Could you...help me...inside?" His words were slurred.

"What happened to ya?" the man asked.

"Jumped," Johnny replied.

"Were you mugged?" the woman asked.

"I dunno." He was very hard to understand.

"Maybe we should call the police," the woman suggested.

"No...just...please...help me." Johnny started to push himself up and gasped.

"Here, lean on me." The man bent over and draped Johnny's arm around his neck. Johnny breathed rapidly through clenched teeth.

"Keys," Johnny said.

"Here, I have them," the woman said, picking up the set.

They got him inside his apartment and turned on the light. There, they could see that he really had been injured and was not passed out drunk on the front lawn. His face sported several small cuts and scrapes and his lip was swollen and bleeding.

"Maybe you should go to the hospital, man," Mark said.

Johnny sat propped in a semi-incline on his couch, his hand clutching his side.

"No. No. Thanks....for....helping." He winced.

"Call the police, Karen," Mark instructed. She went to the phone and made the call.

"What apartment is this?" she asked.

"6B," Johnny answered.

She finished the call and hung up. "Is there anyone else I can call? A friend or relative? Girlfriend?"

"Unnh....yeah. Call 555-8941. Ask for Roy."

Karen was dialing. "Is he a relative?"

"Friend."

"Hello, may I speak to Roy?" Johnny could hear Karen talking in the background through the loud buzzing in his head.

"Can I get you something?" Mark asked Johnny.

"Nnnno."

Karen finished the call and glanced around. "Look, I'm going to bring this phone over closer to you. If you need any help, call the fire department. They can send out paramedics to take care of you. They're really very good. My stepfather had a heart attack and they probably saved his life."

Johnny nodded mutely. He didn't have the energy to explain that he already knew about the paramedics.

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"I'll be right there." Roy hung up the phone, a perplexed look on his tired face.

"What's wrong?" Joanne asked. "Is it Johnny?"

"Something happened to him. That was a woman from his apartment building." Roy was busily pulling his slacks back on.

Joanne put down the book she was holding. "*What?* What happened?"

"I don't know yet. He's hurt or something. Sorry, hon." He leaned over and kissed his wife. She sighed, watching her husband re-button his shirt.

"Call me if it's bad," she said, a line of tension forming on her brow.

"Okay. Don't wait up."

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Roy walked into Johnny's apartment without knocking. He saw a uniformed police officer talking to a strange man and woman. He guessed this was the woman who had called him.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice laced with anxiety. He glanced over to see his partner sprawled on the couch, blood on his face, apparently unconscious or asleep. His breathing was noisy and shallow.

"Is he a friend of yours?" the cop asked.

"Yeah, I'm Roy DeSoto. What happened?" he repeated.

"He was attacked right outside. These two people got him in here and called us."

"Did you see it happen?" he asked Mark.

"No. When we found him, he was just layin' on the ground. There wasn't anyone around."

"Was he mugged? Is that it?" Roy demanded.

"Apparently not. He's got his wallet and cards," the officer said dispassionately, scribbling notes on his pad. "There's still \$38 in his wallet."

In spite of his initial relief, it was a disturbing fact. "I don't get it," Roy said, wishing someone would offer the comfort of a logical explanation, but no one did. *If they didn't beat him up for his money, then why?*

"It's weird," Karen agreed.

Roy turned his attention to Johnny and walked over to the couch.

"Johnny?"

Johnny's eyes fluttered open and he grimaced.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"Beat up."

"I can see that. How long ago did this happen?" Roy noticed the blood was mostly dried on Johnny's mouth and chin. In medic mode, Roy scanned Johnny's body almost without thought. He was inventorying injuries.

"Ou'side....when I....got home."

"I was getting ready to radio for an ambulance," the officer interjected.

"No!" Johnny protested. "No, I'm okay."

"Yeah, you're *real* okay," Roy said. He got up and went to the linen closet to fetch some washcloths. He wet them and came back to the couch.

"Sorry you hadda come o'er here, Roy."

"Hey. It's all right," Roy said sincerely. He began to wipe the blood on Johnny's chin. "Did you lose consciousness?"

"Ow! Uh...I dunno...."

"What hurts? Besides your lip?"

"My side...my stomach...my head."

"Your head? Where?"

Johnny raised his left arm and touched his head lightly. "Here."

Roy felt a bump, but it didn't seem too bad. He then opened Johnny's shirt and observed angry deep red patches about his abdomen. His right side sported a nasty purple bruise. Roy palpated the ribs beneath it.

"Ahhh! Stop!" Johnny hissed. His face contorted in pain.

"You might have a cracked rib. You need to go to Rampart and get some x-rays. That lip probably needs suturing too."

Johnny sighed resignedly. "Awright...no am'ulance, though."

Roy nodded his assent. He turned to the cop. "I'll take him to the hospital. I'm a paramedic; I can handle it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, he doesn't want an ambulance." Roy noticed that the couple, Mark and Karen, had disappeared.

"Okay." The officer snapped his book shut. "I'm going to put in a report, but don't expect much. There isn't much to go on. Probably just a random attack. They *do* happen."

Can you walk?" Roy grabbed John's left arm for support and pulled him to an upright sitting position.

"Whooooaaa," Johnny whispered. "Uh-kay...hel' me up."

Roy supported him and lifted him to his feet. Johnny moaned but didn't say anything.

"Okay, let's go."

Johnny gamely started putting one foot in front of the other and they made slow progress out to Roy's car. He plopped into the passenger seat, using as few muscles as necessary. "Non code R, 'kay?" he said in a weak attempt at humor. He smiled slightly and shivered.

"Here, I'll get the heat on."

Halfway to the hospital, Johnny began stirring restlessly. "Roy, coul' you turn the heat down?" Roy glanced over.

"You okay?"

"Jus' feel kinda woozy.....uhhh....man, you better pull o'er!"

Roy quickly veered into a parking lot, threw the car in park and got out to run around to the passenger side. Johnny already had the door open and was leaning out, holding the door handle for support as he threw up. Roy stood by helplessly. Johnny finally stopped and settled back into the car seat, shivering again. Roy got back in the car and started driving.

"Shit, that hurt," he groaned.

"Almost there. Hang on," he said.

"I'm awright," Johnny drawled.

*Uh-huh. That's what you said before.* Roy pulled up near the emergency entrance.

"Stay here, I'm going to get a wheelchair."

Johnny didn't protest. He sat patiently, not eager to be a hero, for a change. A wheelchair sounded nice.

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"Well, you've re-cracked this old rib fracture," Morton announced. "It's stable; not much we can do but let it heal again on its own. It's going to be tender for a couple of weeks, at least."

Johnny grunted disinterestedly from his position on the exam table.

"What about the bump on his head?" Roy asked.

"It's iffy. He says he doesn't know if he lost consciousness or not," Morton shrugged.

"He vomited on the way over here," Roy said.

"But that could be due to the blows to the abdomen as much as anything."

Roy nodded. "Yeah, that's true."

"How do you feel now, John?" Morton asked more loudly than necessary.

Johnny lay on the table, his eyes closed and his forearm thrown over his forehead. "Like I got run over by the engine," he mumbled after a hesitation.

"Still queasy?"

"A little. Not as bad as before."

Morton turned to Roy. "When's his next shift?"

"Two days."

"Well, he's going to miss it. John, I want you to take it easy for a few days. Stay home. Get plenty of rest and fluids. Take aspirin for any discomfort. Okay? Oh, and stay out of dark alleys. Your job is dangerous enough without you taking chances on your days off."

"Hmmmph." Johnny grunted.

"I guess that's an 'okay'" Morton said, smiling. Checking to make sure Johnny's eyes were still closed, Morton motioned to Roy to follow him out of the room.

"Roy, I didn't catch it. What exactly *did* happen?" Morton asked once they were in the hallway.

"I'm not sure," Roy conceded. "But it's pretty strange. He got beaten up right outside his apartment. He wasn't in any dark alley."

"Mugged?"

"No, nothing was taken. He still has his wallet and everything."

Dr. Morton looked puzzled. "Did he call the police? He *should* file a report."

"He did. There was a policeman there when I showed up."

"Okay, well, I'm going to release him. Is there any chance you can keep an eye on him for the next 12

hours or so? Or find someone who can? Just in case that bump on the head is worse than we thought."

"I'll stay with him tonight," Roy assured him.

"All right. Oh, and keep me posted, okay?"

"Sure thing."

On the way home from the hospital, Johnny was subdued. Roy couldn't tell by the streetlights whether he'd fallen asleep or was just sitting quietly.

"You doing all right?" he finally asked.

"Yeah," Johnny croaked.

Roy hesitated. He wanted to know more about what had happened. It just didn't add up. Still, he was reluctant to add stress his friend by making him re-live it.

"Johnny," he ventured. "Did you get a look at the person who did this?"

"No."

"Do you think it was gang-related?"

"No."

"Was there just one person, or more...?"

"One. I think."

"Maybe it was a case of mistaken identity. He thought you were someone else," Roy suggested.

"No."

"No?"

Johnny sighed. "He said my name."

"He said your name? When?"

"Right before he beat the shit outta me."

Roy was stunned. He was sure the only explanation could be mistaken identity. This revelation ruled that out.

"You mean, he just walked up to you and said your name, and then started...."

"Pretty much."

"Johnny, do you know of anyone who could have a vendetta against you?"

"Nah...anyway, it's over."

"This may not be the end of it!"

Johnny sighed again. "Roy, I just want to forget about it, okay? Can we just....stop talking now?" His voice was thin and strained.

"Okay, okay. Sorry." *Is he in some kind of trouble? I can't believe Johnny would be mixed up in anything illicit.*

Back at the apartment, Roy helped Johnny up the stairs and into his home.

"Thanks for comin', Roy...I'm really sorry about your night." His speech bore the poor enunciation of one with a badly swollen lip. He began to trudge stiffly towards his bedroom.

"Wait, Johnny. I'm, uh, gonna crash on your couch tonight."

Johnny stopped abruptly and turned. "Why?"

"To keep an eye on you, that's why. Don't argue." Roy's tone was firm. "Now, where can I find an extra blanket?"

Johnny rapped on the door of the linen closet adjacent to where he stood. "You can find whate'er you need in here." He continued his painful journey to the safe haven of his bedroom.

Roy opened the door to the closet. Just as he was about to retrieve a blanket, something caught his eye. Reaching up, he gingerly lifted the base of the broken snow globe from a high shelf. Without the glass, water and "snow" it looked sad and pitiful. *I wonder what happened? Johnny didn't mention it was broken. He must have felt terrible, knowing how excited Jen was to get it for him.*

Roy carefully replaced the ornament, got his things and proceeded to bed down for the night. It was after 2:00 a.m. and he was exhausted. He debated whether or not to call his wife, finally deciding not to. It wasn't that serious. He'd fill her in in the morning. He passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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Roy woke early, in spite of the commotion and long hours of the previous evening. Something prompted him awake, and he was alert almost immediately. He looked around, temporarily disoriented.

*Johnny's apartment...I'm supposed to be looking after him!*

Roy threw the blanket off and trod down the hallway to the bedroom, pausing to turn on the hall light. He stepped quietly into the room, careful to avoid tripping over the heap of clothes Johnny had abandoned on the floor.

Roy could hear the steady, deep breathing coming from the bed. *Johnny's okay.* As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could make out his partner's face in sleep. The bruises weren't as evident in this light. Although not an overly-sentimental man, Roy felt a twinge of fatherly protectiveness towards his calamity-prone friend. He smiled and shook his head slightly. *Even off-duty, Johnny has a way of walking into trouble.* Yet, he had a way of walking away from it as well, without permanent damage. Roy formed a mental picture of Johnny, a miniature devil perched on one shoulder and an angel on the other. *Whatever trouble the devil stirs up, the angel always prevails.* So far, anyway.

He shuffled back to the couch and settled in for another couple of hours sleep.

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When Roy awoke again, he heard the sounds of water running in the bathroom. It was mid-morning by now, and Johnny was evidently awake and about. Roy got up and folded up his blankets, and put them back in the linen closet. In close proximity to the washroom, he could hear Johnny gasp occasionally. *He's gotta be feeling pretty sore this morning.*

"You okay, John?" he asked.

A pause, then a clipped "yeah."

Roy started the coffee, then called home.

"Hi honey, it's me."

"Roy! What's going on? Are you at the hospital?" Joanne was bursting with curiosity.

"No, no, I'm at Johnny's. I'm sorry I didn't call, but it was after 2:00 when we got in last night."

"Got in? From where?"

"From the hospital."

"Oh, so you *did* have to go! How's Johnny? What happened?"

"He's all right, relatively, anyway. Someone jumped him and beat him up outside last night. He's got a cracked rib and a lot of bruises, but he's okay."

"Oh my God! Was he mugged?"

"Not exactly." Roy heard the bathroom door open. He didn't want Johnny listening in while he voiced

his concerns to Joanne. "Look, I'll talk to you some more when I get home, 'kay?"

"Okay. As long as he's all right."

"He's all right. I'm going to stay for a bit longer, then I'll come home."

"Stay as long as he needs you. Or bring him here if that would help."

Roy smiled. At times like this, he was reminded how lucky he was to have such a sweet, understanding mate. "Okay. We'll see. I gotta go."

"Bye, hon."

"Bye Jo."

As soon as he hung up the phone, there was a knock. Opening the door, Roy was stunned to see Lydia standing there.

"Uh...er...Lydia?" he stammered. *Johnny's gonna flip.*

"Roy." She pushed past him into the apartment. "I heard that something happened to Johnny. Where is he?"

Roy regained his composure. "How did you hear that?"

She regarded him coolly. "Where is he?"

"He's—"

Just then, Johnny came down the hallway slowly, bent to one side, his arm protectively against his side. He was wearing sweat pants and an old t-shirt. His hair was damp.

"Johnny!" Lydia hurried towards him.

Roy saw the unmistakable look of horror on Johnny's battered face. Lydia stopped just short of embracing Johnny and gaped, open-mouthed, at his appearance.

"Your face!" she shrieked. "Look what he did to your *face!*"

A red flag sprung up in Roy's mind, but he was too busy running interference to pay it heed at the moment. He had followed Lydia and was now pulling her back, bodily, from any contact with Johnny.

"Lydia, *what are you doing here?*" Johnny practically growled. He was hurting and irritable and in no mood to tolerate anything from her.

"Oh, Johnny! When I heard you were hurt, I couldn't stay away! God, your face!"

"Heard what? Where?" Johnny's anger was building. Roy could see the veins in John's neck stand out, a sure sign he was near erupting.

"Look, Lydia, I don't think you'd better stay right now." Roy tried to steer her back towards the door she came in.

"Let go of me!" she commanded Roy.

Johnny took a deep breath and continued making his way, slowly and painfully, to his living room.

"Johnny, do you want me to leave?" she inquired desperately.

Johnny closed his eyes and set his jaw. "Yes, I think you should go now," he responded with herculean restraint.

"Johnny, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry!"

Roy looked back and forth between the two. Johnny opened his eyes and set his bloodshot gaze on the upset woman. "You're....sorry?"

"I'm leaving, myself. Why don't I see you out," Roy suggested strongly.

Ignoring him, she looked longingly at Johnny. "Johnny, let me stay and take care of you!"

Johnny blinked slowly. "You're....sorry," he repeated.

"He's fine. I'll look after him," Roy said more forcefully. "You have to go now."

"Johnny!" she wailed.

Johnny closed his eyes again and shook his head. He was pale and his breaths had turned rapid and shallow.

Roy, noticing John's agitated state, dug his fingers into Lydia's angora-clad arm and pushed her towards the door. He knew he was hurting her arm, but he didn't care. He fixed his blue eyes on her steely gray eyes, and intoned, "Leave. Now. Or I will throw you out." He propelled her out the door and slammed it behind her. His own state of agitation was pretty high by that time.

Collecting himself, he went over to where Johnny had settled himself on the sofa, limp, his head tilted back and his breaths sounding like repeated sighs.

Roy took John's wrist to check his pulse. It was fast and weak.

"You need to calm down, Johnny."

Johnny swallowed and nodded, his eyes blinking open.

"I'm sorry. I should never have let her in. She just pushed her way in."

"Roy?"

"Yeah?"

"I think...never mind." Johnny raised his hand to his face, covering his eyes and trying to fight back the despair he was feeling.

Roy was desperate to say something reassuring. He needed to get Johnny calmed down, for his own good. "It's all right. She's gone. Do you want something to drink?" At Johnny's nod, Roy got up and went for a 7-Up. In the kitchen, fixing the drink, something in the back of his mind kept nagging at him. "*Look what he did to your face!*" Lydia's shrill voice echoed in his head.

Roy stopped and considered. *One, how did she know Johnny was hurt? Two, how did she know he was beaten up?*

The phrase repeated again. "*Look what he did to your face!*"

The obvious realization sent a chill through Roy. *She had something to do with it, and Johnny knows it.*

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Johnny ended up missing two shifts. His rib was too painful for regular duty. The very idea of missing work was stressful to him, because he hated to be "laid up." As hyperactive as he was, he didn't handle sick leave very well, even when he felt bad. On the bright side, it gave his face a few more days to begin to heal before returning to the scrutiny of the station and public life.

Nevertheless, his lower lip was still purple and scabbed when he returned on the third shift post-incident. The bruise on the bridge of his nose was less obvious, but still very present as well. Still, the swelling had all but abated. His torso was wrapped tightly to give support and help with the pain of his injured rib.

The five crew members of A shift lined up for roll call.

"John, nice to have you back," Hank acknowledged.

"Thank you sir."

That was all that was ever said about the beating once Johnny returned to duty. The men had had plenty of time to discuss it during Johnny's two missed shifts. By tacit agreement, they didn't bring it up in his presence.

Johnny made a valiant attempt to act nonchalantly. He felt that the assault on him was causing an undercurrent of discomfort around the station, simply because his appearance was still a vivid reminder. He hated the notion that anyone would treat him preferentially or "walk on eggshells" around him because of this. Still, every time he smiled, his lip tugged painfully. Every time Chet started to rag him about something, the sight of Johnny's face would cause him to back down self-consciously. Johnny realized things weren't going to be back to normal until he *looked* normal. He resigned himself to the thought and went about his work.

The day went unremarkably. There were a few minor runs that didn't involve follow-ups to Rampart. The afternoon brought one call-out for a fire, which turned out to be a false alarm. Johnny was secretly glad. He didn't know if he had the stamina to tough out a major structure fire.

"Station 51, respond to domestic disturbance with injuries, 1039 Fenton, 1-0-3-9 Fenton, cross street, 22<sup>nd</sup>, time out 2306."

"Station 51, 10-4, KMG 365."

*Domestic disturbance*, Roy thought. It's getting to be a nightly occurrence. He didn't know who hated it more, he or Johnny. Roy caught a glimpse of his partner as the pulled out of the station, looking right to check the traffic. Johnny sat ramrod straight, gazing ahead, his jaw muscles tense. *Okay, maybe Johnny wins this one.*

Neither paramedic realized until they drew close that this was the same address of the call they'd responded to three weeks before.

"Oh no," Johnny murmured.

Roy pulled the squad to a screeching halt beside a patrol car, adding their light show to the one that already was well established by the presence of two cruisers. The engine stopped across the street.

A police officer was already waiting for them. "You'd better hurry. I'm not sure she's even still alive."

Roy and Johnny gathered their life-saving gear and hustled into the small structure. The woman, Paula, was lying on the floor, cyanotic. A policeman was performing CPR compressions on her. She looked dead.

"What happened?" Roy asked. He and Johnny set their gear down and quickly set up.

"Husband stabbed her. It's bad. No pulse, no breathing," the first officer explained.

The woman's clothing was soaked in blood. The officer performing CPR was bloody to his mid-forearms.

"How many times was she stabbed? Anyone know?" Roy asked desperately as he prepared to contact

Rampart.

"A lot," the officer who was doing CPR said needlessly.

Johnny motioned for the police officer to stop CPR and he tore the woman's frock down the front. Her chest was a mess of oozing wounds, with so much blood pooling they couldn't be distinguished one from the other. Her previously white bra was bright red. Roy pulled the defibrillator paddles from the case and placed them on her chest to check for heart activity.

Johnny stared transfixed at the sight. They treated a lot of accident victims, people with injuries resulting from mistakes on the road, or in the work setting ...but to see this magnitude of carnage intentionally inflicted on another human being was incomprehensible. He jarred himself from his trance to perform his duty.

"Johnny, she's in v-fib," Roy stated.

Johnny charged the defibrillator and Roy administered the shock.

"No conversion."

Roy relayed the duo's frenetic measures to Rampart as they went, taking orders for progressively more aggressive treatments in an attempt to save the woman's life. In between, Johnny performed CPR. Grunting audibly with each forceful compression, his side ached with each thrust. Johnny was in automatic pilot mode, his whole being focused on squeezing the heart in this chest to spread the blood through this body. If there was enough blood left. He couldn't even think of the being beneath him as a person anymore. It was an organism, and he was performing a therapeutic measure designed to elicit a desired result. Tirelessly, he continued his actions in spite of overwhelming evidence of the futility of the situation. He was vaguely aware of a strident sound in the background.

Finally, the third shock elicited a sinus rhythm. The paramedics knew the woman's hold on life was tenuous at best. They quickly prepared her for transport and practically ran the gurney to the waiting ambulance. The strange sound provided an eerie backdrop to the nightmarish scene, and was growing in intensity. Finally, unable to ignore it any longer, Johnny tore his gaze from the blipping oscilloscope, suddenly needing to acknowledge, *identify* that sound.

"Mama! Mama!" the little toddler's plaintive wail ripped through the cool night air. She stood uncertainly by the back bumper, her dirty face streaked with tears, her neglected hair was matted and clung to the sides of her face. Her hands swept through the air aimlessly with each cry, as if reaching to grasp something out of reach.

Johnny nearly collapsed at the sight. It was almost more than he could bear. He looked back to the barely-alive organism that was once this child's mother, a mother who laughed, loved, cried, hugged....and now just lay. A faceless police officer gathered the child up and carted her off somewhere, still keening for her unspeakable loss.

With an ETA to Rampart of three minutes, the patient's heart arrested again. The second ambulance attendant manned the respirator as Johnny continued the bone-crunching CPR all the way to the hospital. He knew it was useless; he knew the woman was dead. The ambulance attendant stole concerned glances at the frenzied paramedic, but didn't comment. Johnny's counting gradually slid into voiced grunts and his shirt clung to his sweat-soaked body. An occasional droplet of sweat would fly off a strand of Johnny's disheveled hair.

The squad had been able to keep pace with the ambulance all the way in. Roy was at the back door of the vehicle as soon as it had backed into the emergency room bay. He helped unload the gurney, extend its legs, sweep into the treatment room that was ready and waiting. Johnny rode the gurney in, too, unwilling to let up for a second.

"Johnny, stop," Brackett commanded.

Dixie grasped Johnny's arm and pulled him off the gurney. He stumbled slightly as he found his footing. The medical team surrounded the body on the table and began administering desperate measures. Johnny backed away slowly, feeling light-headed and not trusting his balance. His was the kind of total, complete exhaustion familiar to those in rescue work, the point where tunnel-vision is threatening. He felt alarmingly close to collapsing.

Roy had been mesmerized by the controlled chaos of the doctors and nurses as they shouted their findings and orders, working in fluid motion to bring a spark of life into the lifeless form on the table. His trance was broken when Johnny bumped awkwardly into him. Roy instinctively reached to grab Johnny's elbow to steady him. Johnny's knees buckled slightly, but he was able to recover with Roy's assistance. Roy scrutinized his partner's vacant stare. *He's gonna lose it. Better get him to a chair...and away from here.*

Roy gently steered Johnny into the hallway and towards the doctor's lounge. Passersby stared at the two; Roy noticed, Johnny didn't. Johnny could barely put one foot in front of the other, let alone notice his surroundings. Roy sat him on the couch. Johnny's head lolled a second before he caught himself and sat straight. His eyes closed.

He was a mess. His arms were covered to his elbows in blood. He had chewed his lip completely raw, his chin and neck streaked in his own blood. His hair was pasted to his pale face in clumps, while dark circles framed unseeing eyes.

"I'll be right back," Roy said as he left the lounge. Entering the hallway, Roy nearly bumped into Dixie.

"Excuse me, Dix...uh?" he asked. Dixie's expression told Roy all he needed to know.

"Where's Johnny?" she asked. "I haven't seen him since the party, and I want to see if he's all right."

"He's in there," Roy motioned the closed door behind him.

"How is he doing?" she asked with concern.

"Right now, he's pretty rough. This one really got to him. I think I'll call Cap and request a replacement for him. He's just worn out."

Dixie smiled sadly. *It would be getting to you, too, Roy DeSoto, if you weren't so preoccupied with your partner.*

"Did they ever figure out who attacked him that night?" she inquired.

"No, no, not that I know of." Roy looked around restlessly. "Look, I'm going to make that call and then get something for us to drink. Why don't you go in and talk to him and I'll be right back."

"Okay," she murmured. She slid her hands into her uniform pockets and pushed the lounge door open with her shoulder. Johnny was still sitting on the couch, but his head was tilted back and his eyes were closed. She thought he might be sleeping. She approached quietly.

"Hiya Dix," he greeted her hoarsely.

"Hi yourself. How've you been, Johnny?"

He cleared his throat. "Been going through a...bad spell." He grinned mischievously, and coughed.

"I've been thinking about you. Hoping you're all right." Dixie rested her hand on Johnny's knee and looked at his face. His head was still lying back, but his eyes were open and he blinked at the ceiling. She weighed her words. "Johnny, she didn't make it."

"I know."

"You did everything you could."

Johnny nodded mutely.

"She's not in any more pain."

Johnny lifted his head, the abject misery on his face fully evident. He spoke slowly, his voice cracking. "No, her pain is gone. But her children will have theirs for the rest of their lives." The specter of the pitiful toddler would haunt his dreams forever, he thought. Suddenly, he couldn't contain his grief. Beyond embarrassment now, he surrendered to his emotions. Fat tears spilled onto his cheeks as his face contorted and hoarse sobs erupted from his chest.

Dixie felt her own eyes welling with tears at seeing Johnny so overcome. She leaned towards him and he buried his face in her shoulder, his hot tears soaking her uniform. She rubbed his back and held him.

Roy pushed the door open, saw them, and eased back out again.

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Life at the station was different the first couple of weeks after the domestic call. The horror of it had had a profound effect on them all. The senseless, violent nature of the act perpetrated on the victim had hit everyone hard. The suffering of children was always particularly difficult for rescue workers to handle.

The first few shifts after it occurred, Johnny had managed to put professionalism first, stoically going about his duty and pushing the memories to the back of his mind. He was grateful that the prevailing mood was one of seriousness. He didn't feel much in the spirit for the usual jocularly that characterized the men's working relationships.

However, slowly but surely, the unflagging spirits of the crew rallied and their interactions began to approach a semblance of normality. It began with smiles, which made their first appearance the second shift after. Then small-talk, joking, and outright pranksterism followed, one by one. They all knew they'd never forget that night. But their own lives would go on, had to go on.

Johnny's face had healed almost completely, which helped. He still had twinges in his side, but they were becoming less frequent and less noticeable.

"What are you doing on your days off, Roy?" Johnny asked. They stood in the familiar confines of the locker room, dressing for another shift.

"Oh, probably stuff around the house. The usual. Joanne's been on me about cleaning the gutters before her folks show up next week."

"Why don't you get John to help you, Roy?" Chet offered. "His mind's always in the gutter."

"How would you know that, Chet? Been keeping me company in there?" Johnny tossed out sarcastically.

"Is that the best you can do, Gage?" Chet taunted.

Roy quickly intervened. "Nah, I wouldn't expect you to spend your day off doing my gutters, Johnny."

"No, really, I'd be glad to help!" Johnny assured him. "Sheesh, I don't have anything else to do, that's for sure."

"Careful Roy, he's angling for a free meal."

Roy laughed. "I think he'd earn it, don't you, Chet?"

"If you say so. Better tell Joanne to buy double the amount she usually gets, though."

"She's well aware of Johnny's appetite, Chet."

"Chester, for all your put-downs, I don't see *you* volunteering to help!" Johnny admonished.

"I think I hear the Cap calling me," Chet answered.

Johnny snorted. "What's he calling you now?"

Chet made a quick getaway, ignoring the remark.

"Seriously, Johnny. I'm sure you'd rather spend your day off doing something else," Roy said.

"I'm telling you, Roy, I don't have anything else to do. Besides, it *would* save me having to think about what to cook for supper." He grinned.

Roy smiled. "I'll tell Joanne to buy double."

"Oh, very funny."

Later, the paramedics were returning to the station following a routine follow-up at Rampart.

"Oh, by the way, I told Joanne you were going to help me with the gutters," Roy mentioned.

"Good. Did you tell her to get extra food too?" Johnny asked cynically.

Roy chuckled. "No. But, uh...she's thinking about inviting someone else for dinner."

"Who?"

"Oh, just a friend of a friend...someone she thinks is nice...." Roy couldn't help notice the sudden tension in the cab of the squad. Johnny wasn't exactly jumping at this opportunity.

"What do you think?" Roy finally asked his silent partner.

Johnny sighed. "That's nice, but...I mean, not to be ungrateful or anything, I just...."

"It's just dinner, Johnny."

Another minute of silence passed before Johnny said, "I just don't want to meet anyone right now. Okay?"

"Are you seeing someone?" Roy asked.

"No, no...and I don't want to, either. Not now."

"Johnny, all women aren't nuts, you know."

"I know that!" Johnny shot back.

Roy was taken aback. "Okay, okay. I'll tell her to forget it."

"Look, tell her...tell her I appreciate it. But, just...not...now." Johnny's leg twitched nervously.

"Okay. I understand. It's okay." Roy glimpsed sideways as he drove. *He's really messed up over this relationship stuff, no doubt thanks to his most recent experience. Hell, I would be too...I guess. He'll get over it.*

---

It was Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, and the crewmen of Station 51 had almost finished their shift. There was a holiday atmosphere in the air. The Los Angeles weather was unusually chilly, adding to the festive feel of the chattering men getting ready to celebrate their first Thanksgiving off in three years.

"What are your plans, Johnny?" Roy asked. He had extended the invitation to Johnny to join him and his family for the holiday, but John had declined. Thanksgiving didn't hold much meaning for him.

"I dunno. Maybe go backpacking. Probably have the whole forest to myself." He grinned.

"It's getting pretty cold!" Marco warned.

"It's supposed to frost tomorrow or the next day. You might want to reconsider, Pal." Hank said.

Johnny frowned. "Is it? Shoot, I don't know then."

"Yeah, you don't want to end up a frozen turkey, Gage." Chet joked feebly.

"That joke was a turkey," Hank said.

"At least he's seasonal," Marco quipped.

"Well, as soon as I get off, I've gotta run home, pack some clothes, and drive six hours to Santa Barbara!" Chet complained.

"Why didn't you pack and bring your stuff with you? Then you could just jump in the car and take off from here?" Marco asked.

"Besides, Santa Barbara isn't six hours away!" Mike stated.

"It is the day before Thanksgiving! Have you ever tried to drive *anywhere* in California on a holiday?" Chet said.

"Why would I be crazy enough to do that?" Mike teased.

"I'd be crazy *not* to!" Chet said. "My aunt Kathleen makes the *best* oyster dressing in the world!"

"Oysters! Yuck!" Marco groused.

"What are *you* having, Marco? Turkey tacos?" Chet asked.

"For your information, Chet, my *abuela* makes the best dressing! And it's cornbread dressing, none of this slimy oyster stuff!"

"Mmmm, cornbread dressing," Cap said dreamily. "I'm hungry already."

"And she puts just a teensy bit of chorizo, all crumbled up," Marco said excitedly. "It's her secret ingredient."

"It's not a secret anymore," Mike smirked.

"What are you looking forward to, Mike?" Roy asked.

"No question. My wife's sweet potatoes."

"No, we meant food-wise," Johnny remarked with a glint in his eyes.

Stoker blushed, much to everyone's amusement. The guys from C-shift entered the kitchen as a group, looking glum compared to the perky expressions of the A-shift.

"Don't look so depressed, guys," Chet gloated.

"Easy for you to say," one responded.

"Hey, the real losers are B-shift, you know," Marco reminded.

"Yeah, but they had last year off. Someone's gotta work,." Charlie said.

"It's always somebody's turn in *this* business," Cap said matter-of-factly. He scooted his chair out and stood up. The rest of A-shift followed suit.

"Good luck, guys. Hope you don't have too many runs tonight."

"Happy Thanksgiving, fellas," chorused around the room.

"Happy holidays, men," Stanley said warmly. "See you all back here Friday morning."

More congenial wishes were bandied about as the one guard took over for another. Johnny and Roy walked outside together.

"Johnny, the offer still holds, you know," Roy said quietly.

"What, tomorrow? Nah...thanks anyway." Johnny rubbed his cold hands together.

"You still gotta eat, Thanksgiving or not."

"I know. You have a good holiday, hear?" Johnny smiled crookedly and turned towards his vehicle.

"I will. Think about it," Roy called after him.

Johnny raised his arm in a wave and quickly climbed in his Land Rover. He rolled down the window.

"See you Friday!" he called.

This time Roy just waved. He watched his partner back out and pull away. It was cold. He could see his breath in the air. A chill passed through him and he shuddered. *Yup, see you.*

---

Johnny decided to stay in for the holiday. It was cold, and the idea of kicking back and watching football seemed more appealing than tromping through the frozen wilderness. Being alone didn't bother him at all. In fact, he rather looked forward to it. He had gone to the grocery store the night before, and decided right then that he wasn't in *any* mood to be with people. The store was brimming with shoppers grabbing last minute items for the feast, and the battle put him off crowds and people but good. His was probably the only cart laden with chips and beer instead of canned pumpkin and stuffing mix, he'd noticed while waiting in predictably long lines to check out. *If only I'd planned ahead better.*

Johnny was reveling in his bachelor existence, engrossed in football, eating a hot dog, and sipping beer, with his feet on the coffee table, when the phone rang. He debated whether or not to answer it, then decided he'd better, just in case. Could be the department.

"Hello?"

There was no answer. Silence. He strained to hear, but the game in the background was loud and he couldn't make out anything on the line.

"Hello?" he asked again. Still nothing. He hung up. It occurred to him that it was the second time today that had happened. Earlier, when he'd just exited the shower, he'd gotten a mystery call.

He'd just re-settled into the couch, accoutrements within arm's reach, when the phone rang again. With an exasperated groan, he hauled himself out of the sofa once again.

"Hello?!" he answered gruffly.

"Johnny?"

"Roy?"

"Did I call at a bad time?"

"Oh, no," Johnny's tone softened. "Sorry, I've gotten a couple of crank calls."

"Oh? That's strange."

"You haven't tried to call, have you Roy? Maybe my phone lines are screwed up."

"No, I haven't. Not until now, anyway."

"Hmmm." Johnny watched the game across the living room, his attention roving.

"Anyway, we've had dinner, and I called to see if I could bring you anything."

"Huh? Oh, that's nice of you. But, uh, I've got lots of stuff here. Thanks." Johnny found it hard to concentrate on the conversation.

"Are you sure I didn't call at a bad time?" Roy repeated.

Johnny laughed. "Sorry Roy. I'm watching the game."

"Oh! Geez, I'm sorry. Who's winning?" Roy asked, longing evident in his voice. The idea of getting away from his in-laws and watching the game sounded great.

"It's okay. Hey, I've got what I need. Thanks, though....Mom."

Roy could hear Johnny's smile through the phone. He *was* being a mother hen. *Johnny is a big boy now, and he can take care of himself. If only I could believe that.*

"I'll let you get back to it," Roy said. "See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Roy." Johnny hung up the phone and vaulted over the back of the couch, just in time for the big play.

---

It had been a great dream, while it lasted. Thinking back on it later, it would stand out as the last *good* dream he could remember. He was sailing on a tranquil sea the color of turquoise, the sun warm but not hot...the sound of seagulls overhead. It was so vivid, he could smell the salt water and feel the spray in his face. Johnny was no skipper, but in his dream he expertly manipulated the sails and the boat magically did whatever he wished. Everything was perfect.

Reluctantly, Johnny roused from his happy dream and instantly felt cheated. What the hell had come between him and his perfect getaway? The phone.

He glanced at the bedside clock. 4:30 a.m. Ah, go away, he thought. The incessant ringing didn't cease, and soon a nervous tightening in his stomach forced him out of bed. *What if it's the department calling him in early? What if one of the other paramedics has been injured, or worse?*

Throwing back the blanket, a cool rush of air made him shiver. His body was at its lowest temperature of the day, and it was going to take some doing to warm up now. He hurried stiff-legged to the phone.

"H'lo?" he answered hoarsely.

A pause, then a female voice very softly said "Johnny."

The tightening in his stomach turned into a full-fledged knot. "Lydia?" He wrapped his free arm around himself in a vain attempt to find warmth.

He heard several exaggerated breaths. "Johnny, don't be mad."

"I'm not...mad." *I am mad.*

"It's just...I didn't know who else to turn to." She sounded subdued.

Against his better judgment, Johnny asked, "What is it?"

"I can't think of any reason to keep living, Johnny." Her voice was weak and shaky.

Johnny sighed. "What are you talking about?"

"I have a bottle of sleeping pills. I'm going to take them. I wanted to hear your voice...."

"Lydia, come on."

"You think this is a joke, but I'm serious."

"Look, it's not a joke. You don't call someone in the middle of the night and tell them you're going to end it all."

"That's what I'm saying, Johnny. I'm not joking. I hate my life. No one loves me. You don't love me."

"Everything will seem better in the morning. You'll see. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"I'm not going to live to see morning, Johnny."

Johnny was getting agitated. He desperately wanted this to end and to be back in bed.

"Don't say that. Just put the pills away and go to bed."

"See? You don't care either. No one does." The sound of weeping came over the line.

"Is there someone I can call for you? Someone you'd like to talk to?" Johnny asked.

"Just you, Johnny. You're the only person I care about. I wish I could see you. I wish I could talk to you....in person."

"That's not a good idea."

"I knew you'd feel that way. My life isn't worth a little inconvenience on your part. See, I'm right. I might as well be dead."

Johnny rubbed his forehead, frustrated.

"I'm going to start taking these now, Johnny. Will you stay on the line with me, until the end?"

"Lydia, stop it. Get a hold of yourself."

"I've taken two. I can only take two at a time."

"Lydia, cut it out."

"Johnny, it's too late."

"Don't do this..." He felt guilty saying it. She'd think he meant *don't kill yourself* but he was actually saying *don't involve me in this*.

"Ooohhhhhhhhhhh" She wailed and resumed crying anew. "My life is over, it's over."

"Lydia, what do I have to do?"

"Johnny, oh Johnny...."

"Lydia, look. Don't take any more pills, all right? I'll come over and talk with you. Is that what you want?"

There was a minute of quiet.

"Okay," she sniffled.

*Geez, I don't BELIEVE this! How do I get myself into these messes?*

"All right then. Look, I can't stay too long. I have to be at work in a couple of hours."

"I know," she said in a small voice.

"Just don't do anything drastic, all right? I'll be there soon."

"Thank you Johnny."

"Bye."

"Bye..."

He hung up and rubbed his hand over his face. He was quite awake now. He stepped into the small bathroom and turned the shower on full blast.

---

Johnny tried the doorknob and found it unlocked. He let himself in slowly. It was a large condominium, very luxurious. He'd spent some time there when they dated, of course...but it had been a while. Still everything looked the same. The living area was dark, but a light emanated from a room down the hall. Her room.

"Lydia?" he called softly. He didn't want to startle her.

He crept across the living room, towards the hall. "Lydia?"

Moving down the hall, he couldn't hear a sound. *Maybe she's gone ahead and taken all the pills. Maybe she's just asleep...or maybe she's playing some kind of game.* With her, anything was possible.

He reached the bedroom door and found it ajar. "Lydia?" he called, but still didn't receive an answer. *Goddammit, answer me.*

He eased the door open. The room was illuminated by a bedside lamp, but the bed was empty. He entered. Looking around, Johnny felt uneasy. He scanned the room and something caught his eye. Something in the corner.... He went to get a closer look.

The corner was home to a new piece of furniture that hadn't been there before, a large table. Several shelves had been added to the wall above it. Framed photographs stood in carefully arranged clusters, artfully positioned around candles on intricate doilies. Johnny's eyes widened in disbelief. *All the pictures are of me!*

Before he could even begin to guess how Lydia had procured so many photos of him, he realized that even *he* had never seen any of these pictures. They were all candid shots taken during various on- and off-duty activities. He studied each one in stunned disbelief. Johnny getting out of his car. Johnny coming out of his apartment building. Johnny mailing his bills. Johnny picking up debris...*wait a minute, I remember this!* It was the scene of the little boy on his bicycle who'd been hit by a car. *That guy WAS taking my picture! And it wasn't the first or last time!*

"I see you've found my little shrine."

Johnny jumped and whirled around. Lydia stood in the doorway of the room.

"Didn't mean to startle you." She smiled.

"What IS this?" He gestured towards the shrine.

"I just told you, it's a shrine. Tacky, isn't it?"

Johnny was speechless.

"You see, when you wouldn't see me anymore, I took all these photographs and put them out, on display, where I could see them when I went to bed, when I woke up... whenever I wanted. Whenever I *needed*. I have needs, Johnny. That's something you never seemed to understand..." She fixed her vacant stare on him. "It didn't have to come to this, but you forced me to it, Johnny." Her tone was reasonable.

Johnny felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "But...but...the pills? Did you take them?" he asked lamely. His eyes searched the bedside table, but no pills were evident.

Lydia laughed. "Oh, Johnny. Poor, sweet, stupid Johnny. There were never any *pills*."

Johnny could hear his pulse pounding in his head. Lydia's steely eyes never wavered from their intense gaze into his. They looked soulless. It scared the hell out of him. He shuddered.

"You're insane," he said deeply. "I'm leaving." He started towards her.

"I don't think so."

Johnny found himself looking down the barrel of a revolver. She'd been hiding it in the folds of her robe. He stopped short and swallowed, his eyes glued to the firearm pointing at his heart.

"What...what do you want?" he croaked. He realized he was trembling.

"I want to see you suffer, the way you've made ME suffer!" she seethed.

"Look, we can talk about this—"

"SHUT UP!" she screamed. "The time for talking is over, Johnny! I gave you PLENTY of chances!"

"Lydia, if you shoot me, you'll go to prison," Johnny reasoned.

She smiled slowly. "No, Johnny. I'll go with you, don't you see? I always said we'd be together forever."

That argument useless, Johnny tried to stall. "Look, maybe I was hasty." He smiled winningly. "We should give it another go, see if we can work things out."

"DON'T TOY WITH ME, JOHNNY! I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO DO!"

"No, no, I mean it, Lydia...honey." The words tasted like vinegar.

Lydia's eyes narrowed as she studied him and his intentions.

"We could make a fresh start," he continued. "Maybe even...make plans."

"Plans?"

Johnny smiled wider. "You know, for the future. Together." He was going for soothing but the quaver in his voice betrayed him. "You have to put the gun down, though."

She smiled again. *Funny how her mouth is smiling but her eyes are shooting daggers.*

"No, Johnny. I'm not stupid. A minute ago you said I was insane! And now you expect me to believe you want to be with me?" She laughed demonically. "You're just trying to save yourself! It's so pathetic!" She laughed again. "WHY DON'T YOU TAKE IT LIKE A MAN?"

"Put the gun down, Lydia," he intoned calmly.

"NO! The time when you could jerk me around is OVER, Johnny! And I'm going to enjoy this SO MUCH!" She raised the weapon and fingered the trigger. The barrel was pointed at his chest.

Johnny shook like a leaf. He'd never felt so terrified in his life. The moment stretched on interminably. His mind raced in a tangle of desperate thoughts.

Just then, the sound of a distant siren could be heard coming from outside.

"What's that?" Lydia demanded angrily, momentarily distracted from her mission.

Johnny lunged towards her. He swung at her arm to knock the gun away but, miscalculating his movement, only deflected her arm downward as he brushed past her and into the dark hallway.

She retained her iron grip on the gun and his near-escape enraged her. She fired a volley of shots into the darkness.

Johnny heard the explosions of the firearm at the same time his body hit the carpet with a heavy thud. *Why did I drop? I should keep running, I need to get out of here!* That was when the searing hot pain flared in the back of his thigh. He tried to stand again but his leg gave out. He half-crawled, half-dragged himself into an open doorway to the right, panting heavily from terror and pain.

Like a woman possessed, Lydia had indiscriminately squeezed the trigger until the clip was empty, the bullets ricocheting down the darkened hallway. She feverishly kept pulling the trigger only to be answered with empty \*clicks\*. It didn't matter now, anyway. He wasn't in her line of fire anymore. Seething, she tossed the gun aside.

*So this is what it feels like to get shot. Johnny's eyes darted around in the darkness crazily. What room is this? Is there a way out? His leg felt on fire, but he had to concentrate on quieting his breathing so he could listen. Is she coming? I don't hear anything....all she has to do is come in here and pick me off. I'm a sitting duck!*

Lydia was listening as well. *I think I hit him. I must have...but how badly? What if I missed? If I go looking for him, he might overpower me and ruin everything!* She couldn't take that chance. She had to think of some way to debilitate him and even the equation so that she could carry out her mission. A slow smile spread across her face. She had an idea.

Johnny cowered in the darkness of the room. The minutes ticked by in eternity. The waiting was agonizing. *Is she having second thoughts? Is she going to let me go?* The pain in his leg was so intense he felt almost sick to his stomach. A cold sweat broke out on his brow, and he wondered if he was losing a lot of blood. *Man, if she hit an artery, I could be in trouble.*

He tried to listen to sounds in the hallway, but the hall was carpeted and would likely muffle her approach, *if she were coming.* Plus, the buzzing in his head was making it hard to hear anything, even his own breathing. He sat back, his head resting on the wall, and squeezed his eyes shut in concentration.

Suddenly, the room was flooded with light. Johnny's eyes flew open in time to see her, staring at him with a wild expression. She looked completely deranged, more frightening than anything he'd ever seen. She pointed what he guessed to be the gun directly at his face but he didn't have time to even focus before his eyes exploded in white-hot pain.

"Aggghh!" he screamed as he propelled himself in her direction to tackle her. His body collided with hers and knocked her back with a glancing blow. She twisted away and he fell heavily onto the floor.

*Mace!* His eyes burned and teared unmercifully and he couldn't force them open even a fraction.

"TRY TO RUN AWAY NOW!" Lydia screamed gleefully.

Johnny pulled himself to his feet and stumbled awkwardly away from the direction of her voice, waiting for another bullet to pierce his body. His right arm flailed as he tried to make his way blindly through the apartment. He bumped into something that gave way, tripping him as it fell and crashed to the tile floor. He untangled himself, panting with desperation, and pulled himself up again.

Lydia's evil laughter rang out to his right. "YOU CAN'T GET AWAY!" she screamed.

He turned away again, lurching in the opposite direction of her acid voice, his arms reaching

desperately for landmarks to guide him.

"You can't lose me!" she sneered from somewhere to his left. He whirled to the right, now completely disoriented, and banged his shin on something hard. He grunted from the sharp pain and nearly fell again.

"Come to Mama!" she sneered in a sing-song inflection directly in front of him.

"NO! No, stop it!" he cried hoarsely.

"SHUT UP!" she screamed.

"Lydia," he panted. "Stop now! Before it's too late!"

"It's already too late, JOHNNY!"

Johnny's eyes burned as intensely as ever. He pressed his fingers against them hard, an instinctive gesture in response to pain.

"Lydia...LYDIA!" he yelled. *Where is she? She's quiet all of a sudden!* He swayed uncertainly where he stood, his weight on his good leg. His head darted right and left, trying to pick up sounds he imagined he heard. "Lydia...stop this now....you have to stop!" he gasped. "If you kill me....your life *will* be over....you won't get away with it...LYDIA!"

"Run, Johnny, RUN!" she shrilled. "IF YOU CAN!" She laughed again.

Instinctively, Johnny began moving again. He tripped and fell over something, striking his forehead as he went down. He cried out from the pain.

Lydia laughed. "I WON'T HAVE TO KILL YOU JOHNNY! YOU'RE GOING TO KILL YOURSELF!" She laughed heartily, amused at the sight of the injured, helpless man stumbling blindly around her apartment.

*Shit, I'm gonna die...right here...today. She's going to take her sweet time, and then I'm gonna be dead..NO!* "Lydia..." He moaned. He didn't have any arguments left. He lay, half-propped, his leg, eyes and head throbbing.

"I hate you, Johnny," she said, suddenly near.

He gasped, startled by her unexpected proximity. He forced his eyes open. The burning intensified with even the slightest exposure, but through the thick secretions he could make out blurry images before he'd have to squeeze them shut again. Opening them again, he realized the hazy form swimming before him was Lydia.

He detected a quick movement from her just before the butcher knife pierced his left shoulder. The

renewed battle fortified his will to survive, and he threw his arms up protectively against the unrelenting assault.

"NO! NO! NO!" he yelled as his attempts to ward off the attack resulted in numerous slashings and stabbings to his forearms.

She shrieked and grunted ferally, stabbing towards him in a frenzy. While she managed to inflict serious cuts, she couldn't plunge the knife into his chest. The blows Johnny deflected resulted in deep cuts to her own flesh. She seemed not to notice. Lydia relentlessly jabbed the knife at the weakened object of her hatred who lay, weakened and at a disadvantage.

"*DIE, DAMN YOU, DIE!*" she screamed, She pushed forward, her seemingly superhuman strength allowing her to overcome Johnny's defenses. She buried the knife into his upper abdomen. She pulled it out and thrust it halfway in again. A strangled cry erupted from his throat and he fell back, his hands going to the offending foreign object.

Abruptly, Lydia seemed to enter a catatonic state, sitting on her hip, her legs splayed sideways. Oblivious to her own wounds, she stared, her eyes saucer-like, at the handle of the knife she'd just stabbed into her enemy.

Johnny lay on his back, his head held up by something hard and unforgiving. His chin was nearly touching his chest, making breathing difficult. He was aware of a paralyzing agony that originated in his center and radiated to the tips of his extremities. Whereas he'd fought valiantly only a moment before, suddenly he was finding it impossible to move. *Maybe this is how it feels to die.* As several minutes elapsed, he drifted in and out of awareness, but he didn't lose consciousness.

Lydia slowly rose and left the room. Trancelike, she glided down the dim hallway to her destination. She fell to her knees and began sweeping her hands in arcs across the floor, searching without seeing. Locating the object she desired, she lifted it, gingerly, cradling it as if it were made of glass. With a dazed expression, she carried the object reverently to her room. She sat on the bed and opened the drawer of the nightstand, robotically retrieving the small box. Expertly, she released the clip of the gun and loaded a single bullet into it. Her face was expressionless. Reassembling the firearm, she again cradled it delicately. She returned to the scene of the final battle and knelt in her previous spot.

"How does it feel to die, Johnny?" she asked quietly. "Is it frightening? Or is it comforting? Does it hurt?" She examined the revolver she held in her hand, feeling its smooth, cold metal, its substantial weight, its solidness.

Johnny forced his eyes open to slits. The room was blurry but he could make out shadows and movement. He moved his injured arms, absently bumping against the handle of the knife. Surprisingly, he didn't feel much pain. His body was going numb. He shuddered.

Lydia didn't seem to notice his meager activity. She positioned the gun's barrel in front of her heart. "I'll see you in hell, Sweetheart." She pulled the trigger.



[Part 4](#)