

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

Obsession: Part 4

By Carol D.

Kevin Freeman didn't know what to do. For the last half-hour, he'd heard the most unsettling noises, thumps, muffled screams and loud popping sounds, in the condo above him. And it was only 7:00 a.m.

Now, suddenly, it was quiet.

That woman who lived up there, what was her name? She was a strange one. He'd tried to be friendly on one or two occasions. Tried to make small talk at the mailbox. She always seemed snobbish. Sure, she was beautiful...that was probably the whole problem. She couldn't be bothered with an "average joe" like him.

Now, he wondered if this "average joe" should act. She'd been screaming, that was for sure. But he'd heard her screaming at other times, when she was fighting with her boyfriend du jour. This time, though...the other sounds were ominous. He lay awake in bed, fully alert at this early hour, his stomach churning with concern.

Well, she wouldn't speak to him anyway. If he called the police and she was annoyed, it wouldn't make much difference in their neighborly interaction. And what if there really *was* an emergency? Maybe she'd actually be grateful and treat him like a human being for a change.

He picked up the phone.

The cruiser pulled up in front of the luxury condominium community. There had been a call about suspicious activity. These were often false alarms, so the officers climbed out leisurely and sauntered to the unit in question. The driver was a tall, husky, dark-haired man named Garcia. His partner was Officer Murphy, a slight, red-haired man

"Is this the place?" Garcia asked dubiously.

"This is it." Murphy acknowledged.

"I don't hear anything."

Garcia rapped on the door lightly. "Police, anyone home?" he called.

Nothing.

Johnny lay in the same spot, listening to the exchange outside the door. He could hear them clearly. *Come in come in come in....*He tried to call out, but, just as in dreams where one screams noiselessly,

his voice wasn't working.

The officers were joined by a 35-year old man who had run up the stairs.

"Aren't you going in?" Kevin asked.

"Are you the person who made the call?" Murphy questioned.

"Yeah, that's me. Look, something's wrong in there!"

"Where do you live?" the policeman asked him.

"I live right down there. I heard everything!"

"What exactly did you hear?" Garcia queried.

"Screaming, banging noises, popping noises, like firecrackers."

"Do you know who lives here?"

"It's a woman who lives alone. You'd better go in!" Kevin urged them.

Please please please, Johnny silently wished. He could hear everything just outside the door. He tried again to make a sound, but couldn't.

Garcia reached for the doorknob. "It's unlocked," he said quietly. To the neighbor, he warned, "You'd better get back." He opened the door slowly. Both officers drew their guns and stood to either side of the entrance.

"POLICE! Anyone here?" he called loudly. When he received no response, he entered the home stealthily, weapon at the ready. Murphy followed.

As Garcia's eyes adjusted to the dim light of the still-shuttered condo, the sight before him jolted him into action. He picked his way over to the two figures on the floor and squatted to check for pulses.

"Jesus," the second one muttered. Lamps and tables were overturned. A vase lay shattered on the floor. The pale green carpet was soaked in dark red blood at various spots. And two people were lying on the floor, covered in blood. "I'll check it out," he said, his gun still drawn as he made his way towards the rear of the unit.

"L.A., I need backup, plus paramedics and an ambulance at our location," Garcia radioed.

"Holy shit!" Kevin Freeman exclaimed. "That's her! That's the woman who lives here!" He pointed at the deathly still figure on the floor.

"Look, you'd better get out of here," the Garcia snapped, annoyed that the man had unknowingly followed them in to an unsecured scene. "Go outside and wait for the backup units and the paramedics!"

"Uh, okay! Holy shit..." he exclaimed again as he ran outside.

The officer checked for a pulse on the woman's neck. There was none. He scampered over to the man on the floor. As he touched the man's neck, the victim shifted, startling the officer.

Johnny's eyes fluttered open at the warm touch of the police officer. He swallowed and tried to speak, but only gurgled.

"Take it easy, help is on the way."

The second officer returned from the back of the unit as two more policemen entered.

"It's clear. No one else is here," Murphy declared.

"What happened?" one of the newly arrived policemen asked.

"Don't know yet." He turned back to the victim. "Hey, buddy. Can you talk at all? What's your name?"

"J- J- Jo-"

"Joe?"

Johnny shook his head.

"John?"

Johnny nodded, eyes closed. He swallowed repeatedly.

"Did someone break in and attack you?"

Johnny shook his head emphatically. "Sh- sh- she..." he whispered.

"It was just the two of you? No intruder?" the policeman asked, incredulous.

Johnny nodded.

Officer Garcia stood up and took a couple of steps away, speaking to his colleague *sotto voce*. "Looks like they got in a fight. She got carried away, attacked him, and he shot her in self defense."

"Looks that way."

In spite of their hushed tones, Johnny heard. "No!" he cried hoarsely.

The two men knelt beside him. "Can you tell us what went on?" Garcia asked.

"Sh-sh-she shot...herself," he rasped, letting his eyes close again.

Roy sat at the station's kitchen table, sipping coffee. It was only ten minutes to the start of the shift, and his partner wasn't around yet. Still, that didn't make Johnny technically "late." But at this rate, he was going to have to hustle.

"You have a nice Thanksgiving?" Tom Bledsoe asked him.

"It was real nice," Roy said with a smile. He sobered. "I'm, uh, kind of afraid to ask you the same question."

"Aww, it was pretty quiet. No big catastrophes," Tom answered. "And we had a pretty decent feast here, for a fire station anyway." He glanced at his watch.

Chris Chavez, Bledsoe's partner, entered the kitchen, yawning.

"Hey hey hey," he greeted half-heartedly. "What, no Gage?"

"Not yet," Roy answered apologetically. *Geez, Johnny, I'm getting a little sick of apologizing for you.*

Hank came in the kitchen, all imposing six feet, three inches of him.

"Roll call in five--... Roy, where's your partner?"

As if I should know. I'm not his keeper, as these people seem to think.

"Uhhhh...." Roy shrugged.

Cap sighed and headed to the coffee pot.

The engine crew of B-shift filed out the door. *Their* replacements were present and accounted for. Bledsoe and Chavez had no such luck. They had to wait for the other half of A-shift's paramedic team to show up before they were released from duty.

The tones sounded. "Squad 51, unknown-type rescue. Meet the police at 2112 Belmont, 2-1-1-2 Belmont, cross street, Hogestyn. Time out, 7:54."

Bledsoe slapped the tabletop in frustration as he rose. "Tell Gage he owes us one," he said to Roy.

"The paramedics are here," one of the policemen announced.

Tom Bledsoe and Chris Chavez carted their equipment into the scene and approached the victims.

"I'm pretty sure that one is..." one policeman said, indicating the woman with a negative headshake.

"Okay, Chris, check her." Tom set his equipment down and looked at the victim.

"Oh my God...Gage?" Tom's eyes widened as they tracked over the bloodied body of his friend. Johnny opened his eyes and grimaced.

Chris, his fingertips on the woman's throat, looked up quickly. "What?!"

"You guys know him?" Murphy asked.

"He's a paramedic at the station...our station," Tom said flatly. Momentarily distracted by the sight before him, Tom sat on his heels in shock, staring at the protruding knife handle. He quickly regained his bearings, however, and switched into paramedic mode.

"Okay, Johnny. I'm gonna get your vitals right quick and call Rampart. You're gonna be okay. Just be cool, man." Tom took Johnny's wrist to gauge his pulse. *Christ, John...you've outdone yourself this time.* Chris, who had determined that the woman was dead, had come over to assist. He took a blood pressure reading.

"She's dead," he said softly. "Looks like a gunshot wound to the chest. Probably hit her heart."

Johnny was becoming restless; he writhed weakly on the floor.

"John," Tom said loudly. "Where are you hurt?" *As if I can't see that knife in your belly.* "Are you having trouble breathing?"

"S-s-s-stomach....leg....sh-sh-sh-shoulder." Johnny swallowed. "C-c-c-cold."

"Okay, yeah, I can see that." Tom said soothingly.

Chris cut down the middle of Johnny's shirt, careful not to disturb the knife.

"This one's still bleeding a little." He pointed to the shoulder wound.

"John, is your head hurt at all? Besides this goose egg on your forehead?" Bledsoe asked.

"N-n-n-nah...." Johnny breathed. "Ahhhhh, hurts."

"BP's 85 over 40," Chris said.

Johnny's body shuddered once, and a rivulet of blood trickled out of the side of his mouth towards his

ear. He groaned. "Get it.....out...." Johnny gestured the knife.

"Johnny, no can do. You know that," Chris said apologetically.

Tom sighed nervously. "Rampart, this is squad 51."

"Go ahead, 51." Brackett's voice was calm and authoritative.

"Rampart, we have two victims of an assault. Victim #1 is Code F. Victim #2 is a male in his late 20s. He has three stab wounds, one to the left shoulder, two to the upper abdomen. The knife is still imbedded in his abdomen, just below the ribcage and left of midline. There are numerous lacerations about his torso. Vitals are, b.p. 85 over 40. Pulse is 120. Respirations 26 and labored."

"51, is the victim conscious?"

"The victim is conscious but groggy. He has a bump on his forehead. Also, he's bleeding from the mouth."

"51, do not attempt to remove the knife. Start an IV with Ringer's Lactate, wide open. Patch him in for an EKG and send a strip. Apply oxygen via high flow mask."

"10-4, Rampart."

Chris was slitting the sleeves of Johnny's shirt. He gasped. "Tom, look!" Johnny's arms were criss-crossed with deep lacerations.

"Damn." Tom picked up the biophone. "Rampart, the victim's forearms have multiple deep lacerations and starting an IV there is impossible."

"51, establish the IV in the victim's foot."

"10-4, Rampart." Tom scurried to John's feet and removed one shoe and sock.

"Owww." Johnny reacted to the needle in his foot.

Chris placed the patches on Johnny's chest and began the transmission.

Johnny's hand flew up to his forehead and he absently brushed a lock of hair off his face. He was swallowing back the nausea and trying to catch his breath, which was becoming increasingly difficult.

"Tom?" he whispered.

"Yeah, Johnny?"

"What...time is...?"

"What time? What time is it?" Tom asked. Johnny nodded. "It's 8:40," he replied, puzzled.

The left corner of Johnny's mouth twitched. "S-s-sorry.... late." Johnny shivered more markedly.

Ordinarily, Tom would have answered with a snide remark. This didn't seem to be the occasion for glibness, however.

"Johnny, just take it easy." To Chris, he said, "Go to the squad and get a blanket." Chris got up to fetch the item. Tom looked at the faces of the cops standing around.

"One of you guys needs to call the station. Station 51. Tell them to quit waiting for their missing paramedic."

Johnny moaned as one of his arms flailed weakly.

"You okay, John?" Tom asked solicitously.

Johnny's body shuddered as before, and more blood trickled down the side of his face. His eyes rolled back. He was losing the battle for consciousness.

"Johnny?" Tom quickly took another set of vitals. Johnny remained lethargic, moaning gutterally.

"Is the ambulance here?" Tom asked with a hint of desperation in his voice.

"Yeah, they're here. They just pulled up," One of the uniformed cops answered.

"Tell 'em to get the hell up here."

Tom relayed the new vital signs to Dr. Brackett. Johnny was fading. They had to move fast.

Hank decided to go ahead with roll call, sans Gage. He'd phoned Johnny's home and gotten no reply. Since the squad was out on a run anyway, he conducted roll. He sincerely hoped Johnny had a good excuse for being late. He didn't want to have to crack down on him, especially right after a holiday.

Roy couldn't shake the nagging questions in the back of his mind. Something about this morning wasn't right. Where was the squad's response? What was that address, and why did it send up a red flag?

After roll call, Roy examined the log. "2112 Belmont." He shook his head in frustration. *Why do I think I know that?*

The phone rang and Hank answered it in his office. Roy was just heading back to the kitchen for a quick refill of coffee before starting on his duty assignment, when Hank caught up to him.

"Roy," he said grimly.

"Cap? Was that Johnny?" A chill ran down his spine at Hank's somber expression.

"Roy, it was the police." *How much do I tell him? He's still gotta drive to the hospital.*

"What?" Roy asked impatiently.

"The squad's run....they're treating John now. You'd better get to the hospital."

"*Treating* him? For what?"

"Um...he's been assaulted." Hank scratched his head nervously. "He's hurt pretty bad, apparently. Why don't you go." The captain's face looked white.

"Assaulted? Cap, what--?"

"Look Roy, I don't know anything else. Just get down there. Call us as soon as you know something, okay?" Hank Stanley said unconvincingly.

Roy suddenly felt as if his heart would pound out of his chest. *Something's wrong...what isn't he saying?* "Uh...okay. I'm going." He ran to his locker to grab his keys and his jacket, operating on auto-pilot. His limbs felt numb, his head swam

"Where do you think you're going?" Chet asked laconically, poking his head out from the shower he'd been cleaning.

Roy was already gone, the door swinging shut in his wake. Chet shook his head in befuddlement.

Roy drove the familiar route to Rampart without thought. It occurred to him that he should try to pay more attention to the road. Thoughts and speculations bombarded his brain mercilessly. *Belmont....Belmont....Belmont! That's where Johnny said Lydia lived....shit! He was still seeing her and wouldn't admit it. THAT's why he wouldn't come for Thanksgiving....THAT's why he didn't want to meet Joanne's friend....THAT's why he was so distracted on the phone yesterday....damn it, Johnny! Now something's happened....no doubt a repeat of your earlier "mugging" incident! When are you gonna learn, John? That woman is TROUBLE! God! Why did you go back?*

Roy pounded the steering wheel in vexation. The light turned green and he stomped the accelerator. *Almost there.*

Pulling up to the emergency entrance, there was no ambulance in sight. *Is there some kind of mistake? Maybe it's all a mistake...or maybe I'm here before they are.* He parked his car hurriedly and ran in, finding Dixie and Dr. Brackett at the base station.

"Roy!" Dixie exclaimed, surprised. She sized up his mismatched appearance and worried expression.

"Dix, is Johnny here yet?" he panted.

"Johnny?" she asked.

"What do you mean, Roy? Isn't he working today with you?" Brackett inquired.

"He's hurt!" Roy stammered. "They're bringing him in! The police called us at the station...didn't you know?" Roy was beside himself.

"The only person en route is a stabbing victim," Brackett informed him.

"Stabbing! He was *stabbed*?"

"Hold on, Roy...we don't know that it's Johnny in that ambulance," Dixie cautioned.

"Squad 51, right?" Roy's voice trembled.

Brackett winced. "That's Johnny?"

"*Didn't they tell you?*" Roy ran a hand through his blond hair in frustration. "What the hell is going on? Why won't somebody tell me something!?"

"Look, it's news to us, Roy!" Brackett exclaimed defensively. "Dix, call the blood bank and have some of Johnny's blood type standing by. You'll have to look it up. I should know it by heart," he muttered.

"Right Kel," Dixie acknowledged. She looked down the corridor, then at her watch. "They should be here any minute now."

Roy and Brackett hurried to the emergency entrance. The ambulance was backing in quickly and expertly, lights flashing. The driver jumped out and opened the doors, and out jumped Tom Bledsoe, IV bag held aloft. Roy rushed forward and helped unload the stretcher.

"Tom!" he called out. Bledsoe shot Roy a look of weariness combined with sympathy.

"Roy, he's stable..." Tom lied without conviction. True, Johnny's vitals had rallied slightly with the IV infusion. On the ride to Rampart, he'd regained consciousness twice. But he was far from stable.

As the gurney was lifted out, Roy finally got his confirmation. He barely recognized his partner. The blood and his dark hair provided sharp contrast to Johnny's waxen complexion. The knife jutting from his mid-section made him look like a prop from one of Chet's favorite cheesy horror movies.

"Get him in 3!" Brackett commanded.

Roy leaned heavily against the wall of the ER corridor, his knees nearly buckling, the blood draining from his face. Dark spots swam before his eyes. He never dreamed it would be this bad.

Chris Chavez trotted into the E.R. entrance only moments later, spotting his stricken colleague. He approached Roy with concern.

"Roy, hey..."

Roy sighed. "Chris...what the hell...what happened?" he asked, his head shaking continuously.

"I'm not sure, Roy. I'm sorry. We were so busy..." he gestured helplessly.

A thought occurred to Roy and he glanced up and down the hallways of the ER. "Where is she?"

"Who?" Chris asked, confused.

"His girlfriend. Johnny's girlfriend. Where is she?" he inquired more forcefully. He half expected to see her sweep into the hospital at any second, her regal bearing intact as she demanded to see Johnny.

An image of the dead woman in the apartment flashed in Chris's mind. "Uh...I don't know, Roy. He has a girlfriend?"

"She had something to do with this," Roy announced, monotone. "If he dies, I'll..." Roy took a deep breath.

"Roy," Chris said gently. "There was another victim at the scene. She's dead."

"She's dead? Lydia's *dead*?" Roy stood, dumbstruck.

"I-I-I don't know if that was her!" Chris hastened to add. "There *was* a female victim, and she was DOA."

"Did Johnny...?" Roy couldn't conceive of the thought. Johnny would never kill anyone.

Now it was Chris's turn to sigh. "Roy, like I said, I'm not really sure what happened. But...I was there after the ambulance left, and the cops were talking, and I heard some of it..." He hesitated.

"And what? Chris, tell me," Roy implored in a desperate bid for answers.

"I guess...I guess John talked a little, when they first got there. They were theorizing that he'd shot her after she attacked him with the knife—"

"Whoa, wait a minute. You mean to tell me *she* attacked him? *She* did this to him?"

"Yeah." Chris paused, letting DeSoto digest this.

"So then what?"

"So, they thought he shot her, but he said no, she shot herself."

Roy massaged his temples, eyes shut. "How in the world did she manage to do it? It's not plausible. He's much bigger and stronger than she is...was."

"I don't know either, Roy."

"*Shit!*" Roy swore under his breath. He felt unsettled, nervous. *This isn't possible. Calm down, Roy, just think about Johnny. He's gonna need you more than ever, if he makes it.*

"Let's go see him. You ready?" Chris asked gently.

Roy nodded and pushed away from the wall that had been supporting him, following numbly.

"Cap, what's going on? First, Gage is a no-show, then DeSoto takes off," Chet complained.

"Kelly, tell everyone to come to the kitchen," Hank Stanley ordered curtly.

"Right, Cap." Chet deduced from Cap's demeanor that something serious was up. *What could it be? Is Gage suspended...or canned? And what about Roy?*

Hank was busily writing something on a notebook as Mike, Marco and Chet filed into the kitchen and sat down. They waited patiently but nervously while he finished.

"Where's Roy?" Mike muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Finally, Hank looked up. "Roy's at Rampart. He's there because the squad – Bledsoe and Chavez – responded to a call this morning, and the victim happened to be John."

"Johnny? Is he all right?" Marco asked.

"No, he's not all right, but I don't know any details. The police called—"

"The police?!" Chet exclaimed.

"Yes, the police," Hank continued patiently. "John was the victim of an assault, apparently."

"Again?" Chet asked.

"Not exactly like the last time," Hank said slowly. "It's much worse."

The three exchanged concerned glances.

Hank continued. "So, now we wait to hear from Roy. He'll call as soon as he knows anything. In the meantime, I suggest we keep busy."

"Wait, Cap...is that it? Don't you know anything else?" Chet pleaded.

"I'm afraid not." He gathered up his papers and rose to leave the room. After he'd gone, the three crewmates sat in stunned disbelief.

"I can't believe it," Mike remarked.

"I wonder what happened," Chet mused.

"Cap's pretty shook up about this, I can tell," Marco opined.

"I hope Roy calls soon. If he doesn't, I'm going to call the hospital myself!" Chet asserted.

"I guess all we can do is wait," Mike reasoned.

"Let's get back to work. It'll pass the time," Marco suggested.

Chris pushed his way into the treatment room, but Roy paused in the open doorway. He watched the proceedings with detachment. Dr. Brackett, Dixie, Tom, another nurse, worked fluidly to assess and treat the patient. Roy watched as he slowly drifted into the room. He realized he was holding his breath only when a wave of dizziness swept over him. He inhaled deeply.

"Dix, I want x-rays, CBC, urinalysis...oh, and get that blood started transfusing," Brackett ordered.

"Right, Kel." She hurried to fulfill the request.

Tom Bledsoe was cutting away John's pants, when he stopped suddenly, eyes wide. "Wait a minute, I think I missed something,"

Roy went closer to the exam table and forced himself to take a good look. He couldn't understand his reluctance. *God knows I've seen worse.* He'd seen innumerable severe injuries in his career as a paramedic, many sustained by his own partner and other colleagues in the fire department. He certainly wasn't squeamish. That would be a career-ending character flaw.

"There's a bunch of blood under here," Tom continued. He was busily cutting away the thick fabric.

"What is it?" Brackett inquired.

"Uhhhh..." Tom was trying to maneuver the limb to get a look at the underside. "Roy, get that tray and wash some of this off."

Roy went into action. He grabbed the bowl of water and began mopping away the thick, half-dried crust of blood on the underside of John's thigh while Tom held the leg in position.

"Dix, did you call x-ray? I want that portable unit down here STAT!" Brackett barked.

"I did, Kel. I'll call them again."

"Look, there is it." Tom said regretfully.

"Is that a gunshot wound?" Roy asked.

"Damn, I can't believe I missed it. He *told* me his leg hurt."

"Under the circumstances, Tom, I think it's understandable." Brackett said. "He's got much worse problems to worry about than a bullet in his leg."

"He told you?" Roy asked Tom softly. "Did he talk to you very much? Did he say what happened?"

"He was in and out, Roy. He didn't say much."

From the head of the table, Johnny groaned and began to squirm. The heart sounds on his monitor increased with his level of consciousness. Roy abandoned the cleaning and went to him.

"Johnny?" He placed a reassuring hand on John's shoulder.

Johnny groaned again and rolled his head back and forth. He began taking deep, rapid breaths. His body shuddered and another trickle of deep red blood snaked down his cheek. Johnny stared at the ceiling, awake now, moaning continuously.

Brackett cursed quietly. "Get me that NG tube, now!" Chris lunged towards the supply cabinet, fumbling for the item.

"Johnny, I'm here. You're going to be all right," Roy said.

"Roy?" he groaned. His facial features were taut from pain.

"Yeah, it's me. Don't try to talk."

"Unnnnhhh...hurts."

"I know." To the doctor, Roy added, "Can you give him something?"

"He's had 10 mg of MS already. Johnny, I'm going to put this NG tube in to suction your stomach. It'll help you, but *you* have to help *me*. Okay?"

"Nnnnnoooo," he protested.

"Johnny, you need it," Roy added.

"Hurts!" Johnny rasped. He raised his arms defensively as Brackett started feeding the tube.

"Swallow, John...keep swallowing."

Roy grasped Johnny's hand closest to him. Johnny squeezed Roy's hand tightly, inflicting considerable pain. Roy didn't flinch. With no choice in the matter, Johnny began swallowing, groaning between gulps. Soon, the tube was in place and attached to suction.

"Doc...hurts...please" Johnny repeated. His free hand repeatedly wandered to his stomach, only to stop short of touching the knife.

"Karen, 5 mg of MS," Brackett ordered. To Johnny, he said, "I know it hurts. We're going to get x-rays and find out what else is going on before we take you to surgery. It shouldn't be too long now. Just hang on, Johnny."

As if on cue, the x-ray machine showed up.

"I'll be back as soon as he's finished, Johnny," Roy assured him.

Johnny tightened his grip on Roy's hand for a moment. Finally, he loosened his hold. "kay," he said reluctantly, releasing Roy's hand. Everyone but the x-ray technician had already vacated the room.

Roy joined the others in the hallway. The prevailing mood was somber.

"Didn't I tell you it was Johnny?" Tom asked Brackett.

Brackett shook his head. "If you did, I didn't catch it. I didn't know until Roy here showed up."

Tom shook his head disparagingly. "Boy, my performance was really stellar on this one."

"Hey *I* was there too," Chavez grumbled.

"Don't beat yourselves up," Roy said. "You were at the end of a long shift."

"And the fact the victim was a friend didn't help matters any," Dixie added. "I've seen perfectly competent doctors go to pieces when a friend or family member is injured. You did remarkably well, considering."

"Doc, is he gonna be all right?" Roy asked pointedly.

"I want to see where that blade is before I go any farther," Brackett answered evasively.

Roy had his answer..

"Hey, what was with his eyes?" Chris asked. "They were blood red."

"I noticed. Some sort of irritant, obviously. I don't see any injuries that would explain it," Brackett said.

"The poor guy," Chavez said. "Shot, stabbed ...it's like he was tortured."

Roy looked up suddenly. *Tortured – that's the only word for it. With Lydia, it makes sense.*

"He's going to need a long time to recover from this one," Dixie remarked.

The x-ray technician emerged from the room, machine in tow.

"I want those films, stat," Brackett instructed him.

"Yes, sir."

Roy went straight to Johnny's side upon returning to the treatment room. "How you holding up, Junior?"

Johnny couldn't hold back the whimpers that escaped with each painful gasp of breath. He shook his head.

Roy was finding it difficult to stand by and watch his friend suffer. It almost caused him physical pain. He felt like a tightly wound spring, he was so full of anxiety. He took John's hand again.

"I know. Try to calm down, Johnny. Take it easy. You're getting the best care." *Look who's talking.*

Johnny closed his eyes and took several long, slow breaths, his brow knit in pain. He gradually drifted into a twilight sleep. Roy didn't move from his side.

Brackett took another blood pressure reading. "Karen, start a second liter of Ringer's wide open," he instructed.

"Yes, Doctor."

Dr. Brackett listened to Johnny's lungs carefully. He frowned. "I don't like how that left side is sounding. The knife must have knicked his lung. Breath sounds are diminished on that side."

"Chest tube?" Roy asked, dreading the answer.

Brackett sighed, not answering.

The stick in Johnny's foot jolted him back awake. "Doc?" Johnny spoke in a strained voice.

"I'm here, Johnny," Brackett answered.

"Get it out...iss killin' me."

The door burst open and Dixie came in, x-rays in hand. Dr. Brackett eagerly studied the films. The knife's blade was long and curved. "Okay, I think I have a clearer picture. Dixie, is that O.R. room ready?"

"They're standing by, Kel."

"Let's get a move-on." Brackett addressed his patient. "Okay, Johnny. It's time. We'll get you up to surgery, and when you wake up, you're going to be feeling a whole lot better."

Roy felt buoyed that something was being done, finally. "Johnny, I'll go up with you, and I'll be there when you wake up. It's gonna be all right."

"Good," Johnny whispered.

Once Johnny was in surgery, Roy returned to the ER to use the phone in the doctors' lounge. He had a few calls to make, and he was more comfortable in familiar surroundings than he would have been calling from the OR waiting room.

He dialed without thinking. "Hello?" came the sweet voice on the other end. It was the voice that brought him comfort, ease, safety.

"Joanne?"

"Hi sweetie," she replied lightly.

"Hi, how's it going?" he asked softly. He could hear the happy sounds of holiday reverie in the background. His in-laws' voices mingling with those of his children wafted over the phone lines.

"Roy, is something wrong?" Joanne plugged her opposite ear and turned towards the wall to better hear her husband, who seemed to be speaking much too softly.

Roy sighed, rubbing his eyebrows with his free hand. "Yeah. I'm at Rampart."

"Are you all right?" Joanne asked, an edge of panic in her voice. *He's only been at work 2-1/2 hours.*

"No, no, I'm fine," he hastened to assure her. "Jo, uh...remember Lydia?"

"Lydia? Johnny's girlfriend?"

"Right. She...I think she's dead."

"Dead! Roy, what happened? Oh my god!"

"Jo, she tried to kill Johnny."

"Oh god! No! Oh my god! I *knew* she was crazy, but I never dreamed! Oh my god...Is he all right?"
By this time, Joanne's exclamations had attracted the attention of her parents, who listened in attentively.

"He's in surgery. You're not going to believe this."

"What? Roy, tell me!"

"She shot and stabbed him."

Joanne gasped and her hand flew to her mouth. She sank heavily into the nearest chair.

"You okay?" Roy asked.

"I don't believe it! Is he...is he..."

"I don't know. I think he could be all right, but it depends on how the surgery turns out."

"I can't believe it."

"Me neither."

"Roy, this is partly my fault! I should have been more insistent with Johnny! I should have told him! I *knew* there was something wrong with her!"

"Joanne, it's not your fault. What I don't understand is, what was he *doing* still seeing her?"

"How do you know he was?"

"She attacked him at her house early this morning. I'm sure he wasn't there to deliver the paper." Roy's voice was tinged with sarcasm.

"Roy, do you know? Have you talked to him?"

"Not really," Roy conceded. "He couldn't talk much."

"Then don't jump to conclusions. God, I can't believe it!"

"Well, there are still a lot of questions. I'm sure we won't get answers for a while."

"I'm coming down. Mom and Dad can stay with the kids."

"I'm glad. I could use your company right now," Roy answered wanly.

"I'll be there soon. I'd better go. Bye."

"Bye."

Joanne scurried around, grabbing her purse and rummaging through it for the car keys. "I've got to get to the hospital. Roy's partner is hurt."

"Again? Isn't he the one who's always getting hurt?" her mother asked, irritated.

"What is he, some kind of klutz?" her father added.

"No, Dad, he's—" She stopped, keeping her temper in check. "Look, would you mind watching the kids?"

"No, honey, of course not. I just hate to see your holiday get ruined."

"Mom, my holiday is the *last* thing I'm worried about right now!" Joanne filled a glass with water and hurriedly drank it.

"I'm sure he'll be all right. He always is," her mother said.

That's supposed to comfort me but it just pisses me off! Joanne thought. "Yes, mother. I don't know. We'll see," she replied absently. "Oh, *don't* say anything to the kids! They love Johnny and I don't want them to panic."

"Of course, dear. You be careful driving over there. The traffic is insane today, I'm sure."

"I'll manage." Deciding she had everything, Joanne donned her wool cape. "Bye. I'll call." With that, she was off.

Roy called the station as well, bringing them up to date on the situation and Johnny's condition. Bledsoe and Chavez were going to work an extra ½ shift, to be relieved by Dwyer and Belliveau, who would come in ½ a shift early. Now all that was left was the waiting.

Roy was staring at the swirls and patterns in his cup of coffee when he heard the door swish open. Dixie came in, her hands thrust into the pockets of her nursing uniform. Roy looked up expectantly.

"Any news?"

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "No. I just thought I'd come and check on *you*."

"Oh. I'm okay."

"I'm glad to hear that, because I'm not so sure I am." Dixie said somberly as she eased down opposite him.

Roy regarded her with concern etched on his weary features. "What is it?"

"I can't get the image out of my head...the way he was brought in. It's worse than a nightmare."

"I know what you mean."

"It's so ironic. Johnny's such a peaceful person. I remember the night – you remember – when you brought in the woman who was attacked by her husband. The woman who died?"

Roy nodded.

"He was so broken up over it. The senseless nature of it." Dixie's eyes misted over. "That incident hurt him to the depths of his soul. I'll never forget how he cried...just like a little boy."

"Yeah." Roy stared at his coffee, struggling to keep his emotions at bay. He was so tired, so worried, he didn't know if he could maintain control.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Dixie finally broke the silence. "I'll go call up to the O.R. and get an update. Maybe they can tell us something by now."

The door burst open and Joanne rushed in, quickly taking in the sober expressions on her husband and friend.

"I got here as soon as I could. How is he? Any word?" She tossed her cape and purse down onto the couch and sat next to Roy. He gave her a quick hug.

"I'm getting ready to check now. I'll be back," Dixie answered. She left.

"Are you okay? You look terrible!" Joanne observed. Her hand went to the back of his neck, massaging away the tension.

Roy smiled ruefully. "That bad, huh? You saw me only three hours ago."

"You've changed a *lot* in three hours."

"I feel like I've aged about ten years. No, make that twenty."

"How bad is it?" she asked pointedly.

"It's pretty bad. He was shot in the leg, and he has several stab wounds. Lots of cuts." Roy ran his hand through his hair. "I just don't get it."

Joanne closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. "It's so unbelievable. Is she really dead? How did she die?"

"She had a gunshot wound to the chest."

"Did Johnny talk to you?"

"A little. He was pretty out of it."

"What do you think? Could he have...?"

"No way! Johnny could never do anything like that."

"Well, I mean, if it was self-defense," Joanne amended.

"No, no. I can't see it. What I don't understand, is why he was still seeing her. I thought for sure he'd realized how unstable she was. It's just beyond all reasoning that he'd stay in that warped relationship." Roy's agitation was building. "If he'd just ended it, like he said he did, he wouldn't be fighting for his life right now!"

Joanne gaped at her husband. He clearly was torn between worry and anger. The dichotomy must be tearing him up, she thought.

"What makes you so sure?" she asked calmly.

"Why else was he over there at that hour? Why else was he so moody for the last month, just like before? Why else wouldn't he accept our invitation yesterday? Open your eyes, Joanne! It's obvious!" Roy immediately regretted his harsh tone.

"I think you're letting your emotions cloud your judgment."

Roy pounded his fist on the table. "I'm just so goddamned upset, Jo. I'm sorry. I don't know what to think anymore."

Dixie re-entered the room, accompanied by two men. "I just talked to Lynn in surgery. Everything's going smoothly, so far, but it's going to be a while. They got the knife out, anyway."

Joanne averted her startled gaze to Roy. "The knife was still...?"

His rueful expression answered her question.

"Roy, this is Detective Lobato and Officer Murphy. They wanted to speak with you," Dixie said.

"Mr. DeSoto? I'm Detective Nick Lobato. Nice to meet you." He shook Roy's hand congenially. "I understand you're a friend of Mr. Gage's?"

"Yes. And partners, too," he said quietly.

"Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?"

Roy gestured to the empty chairs. "Go right ahead."

"Good. Thank you." The detective pulled out a notebook. "How long have you known Mr. Gage?"

"About five years."

"Do you feel you know him about as well as anyone?"

Roy nodded. "Probably better than anyone."

"The other victim, Lydia Conway. What kind of relationship did Mr. Gage have with her?"

The hell if I know. "Uh...they had been dating, having a relationship. Then, about a month ago, he broke up with her. Lately, I'm not sure."

"When did they first start dating?"

"It was...back in July or so. She was involved in an MVA we were called to. That's where they met."

"Do you recall if he mentioned why they broke up?"

Oh boy. "Well, they were fighting a lot, I guess." Roy immediately realized he'd said something that piqued their attention. The detective was recording everything on paper. "What I mean is, they were arguing, having different ideas about where the relationship was going."

"These fights...were they violent?" Murphy asked.

"No! I mean, not on *his* part! Her, I don't know."

"So what you're saying is, you don't know if they ever escalated to physical fighting," Detective Lobato asked.

"I *know* Johnny would never hit a woman. I *don't* know if *she* ever became violent. I do think it's

possible, based on what I observed about her."

"Would you elaborate on that?" Murphy requested.

"She was extremely possessive of him, almost obsessive. That was the main thing he didn't like. That was why he ended it."

"Did you have many chances to observe them together?"

"Only a couple, actually. He didn't bring her around his friends too much. Mostly I know from what he told me."

"I'm sure you've heard that she's dead." Lobato stated.

"Yeah, I heard."

"It appears she died from a gunshot wound to the chest. The gun was found on the floor between them." Nick Lobato let that statement sink in, waiting for a reaction.

"He didn't shoot her."

"That's what we're trying to figure out," the detective said laconically. "We think he might have, in self defense."

"I'm telling you, he didn't," Roy said more firmly. "He could never do that."

"Well, even if he *did*, it's obviously a case of self defense," the detective parried. "It doesn't fit the m.o. of the typical batterer, who assaults his mate, then inflicts a few puny wounds on himself to try to make it look like a justified shooting. Mr. Gage has life-threatening injuries that are obviously not self-inflicted."

"Look, I'm not going to say it again," Roy seethed. "He didn't shoot her. He wouldn't have to. He could easily overpower her...." Roy trailed off. *Then why hadn't he?*

"The coroner will be able to determine who did the shooting," Murphy said.

"As for him overpowering her, we have a theory as to why he didn't," Detective Lobato explained. "The can of Mace we found in the hallway may have had something to do with it."

"Mace?" Roy was incredulous. "The spray?"

"His eyes!" Dixie chimed in excitedly.

"She maced him, and he was blinded ...that's why he couldn't fight back!" Roy was elated to have finally discovered the missing piece of the puzzle.

"That's a possibility," Lobato said dispassionately. "We'll have to question him, of course. Get his side of the story."

"His eyes were irritated, but we didn't know why," Dixie explained.

"That'll do it," Murphy said..

"There were some other things. The woman had a lot of photographs of Mr. Gage in her apartment. Do you know anything about that?" Detective Lobato had a way of asking questions slowly, almost leisurely. Roy suspected the outwardly-calm man was actually a crack detective who had honed his delivery in such a way as to make interviewees relaxed and forthcoming.

Roy shrugged. "People always have pictures of their boyfriends or girlfriends."

"Well, this was a *lot* of pictures. Excessive by most people's standards. Did Mr. Gage, to your knowledge, display a lot of pictures of her in his home?"

Roy toured Johnny's apartment in his mind's eye. "No, none."

"Hmmm." Lobato scribbled more notes. "Now also, according to the neighbor, who heard the commotion in the apartment, everything happened around 5:30 a.m. or so. Is Mr. Gage an especially early riser, ordinarily?"

Roy had to chuckle at this question. "No, not at all. He has a problem with getting to work on time. He has to really work at it."

"Well, he was fully clothed and in her apartment at that hour. Would you have any speculation on the reason for this?"

"I don't know. How would I know?" Roy answered, irritated. *Yeah, Johnny. Why were you there? I'd like to know.*

"Just asking."

"Maybe she called him and he went over there," Joanne suggested.

"I can't imagine he'd jump out of bed and go over there like that," Roy opined.

"Or maybe he *was* there, they got into an argument, he got dressed, and the fight escalated." Murphy threw out his theory.

"We'll have to wait until he can answer some of these questions himself." Nick Lobato closed his notebook with a snap.

"Why all the questions? Is Johnny in some kind of trouble? Because if you think he shot her, you're dead...uh, you're wrong." Roy argued.

"Just routine questioning. We *do* have a death, and an attempted murder."

"I understand," Roy acquiesced. *He's right. This is serious, and not just from a medical standpoint...but from a legal one as well. Johnny may have more to worry about than his injuries.* "But you need to understand something. I know him. I know what he's capable of, and what's he's *not* capable of. He is trained to save lives, not take them, no matter what the circumstances." Roy fixed the policeman with an intent gaze.

Detective Lobato was struck by this man's earnestness. *He really wants to help his friend, but who wouldn't? I see it all the time.* Still, he had to admit to himself, that these two weren't typical of the slimeballs he usually encountered.

"Okay. If that's the case, then he has nothing to worry about." The detective responded mildly. To Dixie, he asked, "How soon can we interview Mr. Gage?"

She fought back a sarcastic reply. "He's in surgery, and will be for the next four to five hours, I'm guessing. At any rate, he won't be in any condition to undergo questioning for several days."

"Here is my card. Give me a call as soon as he's conscious."

"I'll give it to his physician. He'll tell you when Mr. Gage can answer questions." She shot the men a withering glare as they brushed past to leave. After the policemen were safely out of earshot, she said, "Can you believe those guys?"

"They're doing their job," Roy sighed. "They don't know Johnny, or any of us either. But if they think they're going to pin anything on him, they're barking up the wrong tree."

"*You* know that, and *I* know that....but how are we going to convince *them*?" Dixie asked.

The question hung in the air.

The day passed excruciatingly slowly for Roy. He tried to occupy himself reading magazines or newspapers, but found he'd re-read the same page or article over and over without comprehension. He switched on the TV in the doctor's lounge, but the drivel that came across was only annoying him further. Joanne had brought a paperback with her and was actually able to concentrate on the story for stretches at a time, leaving him adrift by himself. The several calls he made to the station to give updates were a woefully inadequate way to pass the time. Dixie would visit sporadically, but she was on-duty and couldn't spend much time worrying about Johnny. Roy found himself envious. At least she had something to occupy herself while they waited.

"Maybe we should get some lunch," Joanne suggested at one point.

"No. I don't want to be gone if they finish. They won't be able to find us."

"Roy, they probably won't be finished until at least mid-afternoon. You heard Dixie. Besides, I'm sure she'd come for us if we tell her we're going to be in the cafeteria."

Roy shook his head. "No. I couldn't eat anyway."

Joanne sighed. *He's right. He wouldn't eat. I know him.* She closed her book and stuffed it into her purse. "I'm going to go down there and get some sandwiches and coffee and bring them back here."

Roy nodded, relieved. "You don't mind going alone?"

"No." She smiled. "Be right back." She gave him a peck on the forehead. As she was leaving the doctor's lounge, Chavez and Bledsoe entered. "Hi guys, I was just going to get some sandwiches. Want anything?"

"Oh, no Joanne. Thanks anyway," Tom said.

"Me neither. Thanks," Chris replied.

Tom plopped on the sofa. "What's the good word?"

"No words lately. I haven't heard anything in a while," Roy said, frustrated.

"That's not necessarily bad, Roy. They've just got a big job on their hands, you know?" Chris offered.

"I know, I know. I just wish it'd end. It's so hard to just *sit* here," Roy seethed.

"Man, I could hardly believe my eyes this morning when I walked in that place and saw it was John." Tom shook his head, blinking away the memory. "I mean, it was bad enough...but being someone we know made it ten times worse."

Roy tried to picture the scene in his mind. "I'm glad I wasn't there," he finally said softly.

"I'm glad you weren't there either," Chris said. *He would've freaked out.*

Dixie came in then. "Hi guys; I wondered if I'd find you in here," she said, indicating the two on-duty medics.

"Any news, Dix?" Roy asked anxiously.

"He's got damage to his spleen and his stomach. They're trying to get the bleeding under control so they can check for any other damage. So far, they don't think any other major organs are involved."

"How much longer?" Roy asked.

"Another couple of hours, at least. They haven't even looked at his leg yet."

"Hmmm." Roy rubbed his forehead with the heels of his hands. "Well, I guess we keep waiting."

"He's doing well, Roy," Dixie added sympathetically. "From all accounts, his vitals are holding strong and they haven't found anything he can't recover from."

Joanne came back with the food. "Hey, everyone. What did I miss?"

"Dixie gave us an update. The surgery's still going fine. They found out his stomach and spleen are damaged, but maybe nothing else," Chris explained.

"Have the cops been back yet?" Tom asked.

Roy looked up sharply. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no big deal. They were at the station today, asking around about Johnny and his girlfriend."

"Yeah, you know what one of them said? He said that Johnny's girlfriend had a shrine set up in her bedroom. About a hundred pictures of Johnny, right next to her bed. I guess that's what they were talking about earlier." Chris continued with a snort, "She musta been obsessed with him or something. Imagine that!"

Roy's mind traveled back to the conversation he'd had with Johnny in the parking lot of the station all those weeks prior. Johnny had expressed his confusion and misgivings at that time, and had even seemed a little frightened. , "*and I don't think she loves me either. It's like....an obsession, you know?*"

Was he afraid of her even back then? Roy wondered.

"Squad 51, what is your status?" squawked the Handi-talkie. The sudden noise jolted Roy from his mind's wanderings.

"Squad 51, available," answered Tom.

"Squad 51, possible heart attack. 103 Inman Court. 1-0-3 Inman Court. Cross street, Comanche. Time out, 1308."

"Squad 51, 10-4." Tom waved the HT at the group. "We'll be back." The paramedics hustled out of the room.

Dixie studied Roy. "You look lost in thought."

"Yeah," he admitted. "Something Chris said triggered a memory....a conversation Johnny and I had a few weeks ago. He used that same word, obsession."

"What do you mean? His girlfriend was obsessed with him? If she was so crazy about him, why would she do this to him?" Dixie asked.

Roy paused, thinking. *That's it. Maybe I've been wrong, thinking Johnny was seeing her again. The only reason she'd want to kill him is because.....* Roy looked up, his clear blue eyes shining. "Because she couldn't have him."

"Roy?"

Roy whirled around from his perch in front of the window. He'd been staring out it, unseeing, for at least thirty minutes. He hadn't even heard Brackett approach.

"How is he?" he asked tentatively.

Brackett smiled wearily. His hair was rumpled from the surgical cap, and his eyes were blood-shot from hours spent huddled over the surgical task. Still, his face looked relaxed and not overly grim. "He looks good, Roy. Let's go to the lounge and chat."

Back in the doctors' lounge, Joanne and Dixie were talking with Hank Stanley.

"Cap? When did you get here?" Roy asked.

"I showed up about fifteen minutes ago. I would have been here earlier, but the department couldn't find a replacement for me any sooner. Holiday and all."

Brackett sat down at the table. "John's doing fine, just fine. His stomach and spleen were both damaged, but his liver is untouched. Which is very good." The doctor smiled encouragingly. "His subclavian was knicked," Brackett touched his own shoulder, "and he bled quite a lot due to that. His lung was also punctured, which caused the collapse. He's going to have a chest tube for a few days, but he seems to be breathing without difficulty now."

"What about his leg?" Roy interjected.

"He has a clean break to the femur, courtesy the bullet." Brackett winced. "He'll be in a cast for a few weeks. We were able to get the bullet out, so he won't have any problems later."

Roy shrugged. "So...he's okay!"

"More or less. He's going to be in some pain for a while. I'm going to keep him in ICU for at least a couple of days because of the danger of infection and bleeding. He's pretty vulnerable and I want him watched closely. Needless to say, he's in for a lengthy recuperation, which, unfortunately, is not Johnny's strong suit."

"He *hates* to be laid up," Joanne agreed.

"Yeah," Roy concurred absently. He was already jumping ahead in his thoughts.

"Doc, what about his emotional state?" Hank asked. "An on-the-job injury is one thing, but this is a heck of a lot more complicated than that."

Brackett's mouth twitched. "Don't worry, I haven't overlooked that," he said ruefully. "The fact is, the physical injuries, while severe, may be the easiest part of this ordeal for Johnny. There's no telling how he's going to handle this."

"Depression could hinder his recovery, couldn't it?" Roy asked.

"Very much so," Dixie replied. "I've seen it over and over. Patients with emotional issues sometimes don't have the will to get better."

"I can't imagine Johnny not wanting to get back on his feet," Joanne opined. "I mean, he's so...kinetic." She laughed softly. "If anyone can overcome negative circumstances, Johnny can. At least, that's what I think." She glanced at the others.

"Maybe you're right. I hope so," Brackett said. "He's going to need all the help and support we can give him, regardless."

"That's one thing we *do* know," Dixie stated. "Johnny won't be alone. He's got too many people who care about him too much to let him languish."

"No doubt about that," Hank agreed, nodding.

"Speaking of being there for him....Doc? Is it okay if I...?" Roy ventured.

"Absolutely. Let's go see how he's doing." Brackett stood up, energized. Roy followed him to the door.

"Hey, don't forget to report back to us, soon!" Hank said.

"Give him my love, Roy," Joanne said.

"I will." Roy was smiling nervously. "Be back soon."

Dr. Brackett studied John's chart while Roy approached the side of the bed. Jane, one of the recovery room nurses, stood on the other side, checking the IV drip and blood transfusion. She smiled at Roy.

"He woke up once, but he's being a sleepyhead now," she said, teasing.

Roy smiled back. *They really do have the best staff in this place.* Looking at Johnny, he honestly felt his partner's appearance hadn't improved much since he last saw him. His face was deathly pale and

covered in a sheen of perspiration, giving him a plastic look. His dark hair only accentuated the effect, tendrils of it stuck to his face and neck by who-knows-what. The bruise on his forehead was in full bloom, a nice shade of deep bluish-purple. *At least he isn't sporting any more foreign protruberances.*

Brackett hung the chart back on the bed and approached the head. "Let's try to rouse him." He leaned over the patient. "Johnny?" Receiving no response, he gently shook Johnny's shoulder. "John."

Johnny's eyes fluttered open halfway. He stared at the ceiling for a few seconds before letting them drift shut again.

"Johnny?" Roy tried.

Johnny's eyes opened more readily this time, and turned in the direction of Roy's voice.

"I think he's back now," Brackett said, smiling. "Johnny, how do you feel? Are you in any pain?"

Johnny thought for a moment before answering. "A little," he whispered. He swallowed several times.

"Jane?" Brackett hinted.

"Yes, doctor." She quickly went to get the medication.

"S'okay," Johnny said. "Not like before." He whispered so softly they could barely hear him.

"Hey, Johnny." Roy smiled. "Doc says you're going to be all right."

Johnny closed his eyes and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Johnny, we had to repair your stomach and your spleen. You had a collapsed lung, too. And you lost a lot of blood," Brackett explained. "Your left femur is broken. But there's no reason to believe you won't be up and around in a week or two."

Johnny tried to listen to the inventory of injuries, but he was feeling foggy. *If they'd just let me sleep a little more, I'm sure I'd be able to remember better later..* He forced his eyes back open part-way.

"He's pretty out of it, looks like," Roy commented.

"Not surprising, after that long under anesthesia," Dr. Brackett said. "He might not remember any of this later." To Johnny, he added, "John, I'll be back to check on you a little later. Roy will be here." Brackett looked at Roy questioningly, satisfied when the paramedic nodded in confirmation. He gave Johnny a light pat on the leg and turned away.

Johnny's eyes opened again. "'kay." He cleared his throat weakly and grimaced.

"Your throat's probably sore from the tube," Roy ventured.

"Yeah," Johnny whispered. *I've had this enough to know.*

"Johnny, I'm really relieved that you're all right. We've all been worried."

"Thanks," John whispered. He cleared his throat again.

"Joanne's here, Cap's here, and the guys at the station have been thinking about ya. Bledsoe and Chavez have been in as much as they can." *I want him to know from the get-go that we're behind him.*

"Bledsoe...?" Johnny repeated. He became visibly more alert, his dark eyes darting back and forth.

"Tom and Chris, you know..." Roy trailed off. *Shit, the last time he saw those guys was in that condo this morning. I shouldn't have mentioned them.* "Anyway, everyone's pulling for you."

A pained expression overtook Johnny's face. "Ahhhhh." His breathing sped up. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Johnny, what is it? Are you in pain?" Roy asked hastily, although he knew in his heart what was going on. *He's remembering.*

John's eyes opened again and scanned his surroundings, finally settling on Roy's face. He studied his partner's open and accepting expression.

"Roy... I think she's dead." Johnny's voice was gravelly.

Roy was caught off guard. He didn't know whether to confirm Johnny's speculation or ignore it. He didn't feel this was the ideal time to discuss the subject.

"Don't worry about anything now, Johnny," Roy finally said. "Just worry about getting better."

"They...think I killed her...I din'."

Okay, he's not going to let it drop now. "Johnny, I don't know what they think. But you and I both know you could never kill anyone."

"Sh-sh-she—" Johnny's breath caught in a spasm of pain. Slowly, it relinquished. "She...tol' me...she was gonna...kill herself," he went on. He gathered his strength again. "I din' wanna go.... She said she was gonna take 'em" he swallowed hard. "so...I went, an'...." He paused, then added bitterly, "there were no...pills." By this time, his breathing was rapid and shaky.

Roy blinked, confused. Johnny's ramblings were too cryptic to decipher. But the message was clear. Lydia had inflicted this suffering on him, and then killed herself.

"Look, now is not the time to talk about this. You need to save your strength for getting better."

"I jus'...din' want you to...think I coul' do tha'"

"Johnny, nobody thinks you could harm a fly. You've got to be still now."

"The cops...said I shot her...I din'."

"Well, the cops don't know the whole story. They don't know *you*."

"Roy, they can't get me for this," Johnny said desperately. "I don' know what I'm...gonna do."

Jane had returned a moment before. "Mr. Gage, you're getting yourself all worked up. You need to calm down." She looked searchingly at Roy.

"She's right, Johnny. You need to listen to the nurse, now. Everything's going to work out."

Jane inserted the needle of the hypodermic into the port of the I.V. tubing and injected the medication. She gave Roy a knowing look.

Johnny's eyes glazed over in a matter of seconds. His breathing slowed and he relaxed.

"We'll be moving him up to ICU shortly," Jane explained to Roy. "Why don't you wait in the lounge, and I'll let you know when he's settled in."

"Uh..well, I don't—" Roy began.

Jane smiled. "Don't worry. Brackett's already laid down the law. You'll have unrestricted visiting privileges. I'm not trying to get rid of you. But I think," she glanced down at the now-sleeping patient. "he's down for the count now, anyway."

Roy nodded, relieved to see John at peace. "Yeah, okay. I need to give everyone an update."

"I promise I'll contact you," Jane assured him.

"Thanks," Roy said gratefully. He wearily left the recovery area.

Roy sat alone in a chair next to John's bed in the ICU. It was Friday night. So much had happened in the past 18 hours, it boggled his mind. He was nearly overcome with fatigue, staring trance-like at the heart monitor as the lighted display bounced and traveled with each heartbeat, over and over, over and over.

Johnny had experienced brief periods of wakefulness, but had remained stubbornly "out" for the most part. More troublesome, his temperature was climbing. Roy was determined to remain by his side as much as humanly possible through the difficult first few days. *Who'm I kidding? This could affect John for years to come...*

A stirring from the bed attracted Roy's attention. He stood and leaned over his friend, waiting for consciousness to return, but all Johnny did was roll his head back and forth a couple of times. Roy returned to his chair, disappointed. He rested his chin in his hand and closed his eyes.

"No." The protest was weak but unmistakable. Roy shot out of his chair again.

"Johnny?"

John's eyes were still closed but his head movements increased and his brow was furrowed worriedly. His hands clenched and jerked restlessly at the end of heavily-bandaged forearms.

"Stop. Stop." He was panting and becoming frantic.

"Johnny, can you hear me?" Roy demanded.

"No!" Each utterance became more emphatic.

"Johnny, it's okay."

"No! Don't!"

A nurse, having heard the commotion, rushed in. "What's wrong?"

"He's having a nightmare or something," Roy ventured.

"Mr. Gage!" the nurse said loudly.

At the sound of the woman's voice, Johnny's hands flew up to shield his face. "NO!" he yelled.

"Johnny, it's me, Roy! It's all right!" Roy grasped the hand closest to him and held it tight.

"I'll go page Dr. Brackett," the nurse said as she rushed to the nurse's station.

"Stop! Stop!" Johnny repeated breathlessly. His free hand roamed from the guardrail to his forehead to his stomach and back again. Roy held his other hand steadfastly.

"Johnny! Johnny!" Roy spoke quietly but firmly in between the patient's ramblings. Still, he couldn't get through.

After what seemed forever, Dr. Brackett appeared. "What've we got, Roy?"

"He's really agitated and upset. He's not awake though, I don't think."

"Johnny, can you hear me?" Brackett intoned.

"Stop! No!" Johnny's forehead was beaded with sweat and Roy was having difficulty restraining his arm.

"Give him 10 mg of Diazepam," Brackett instructed the nurse.

"What do you think it is?" Roy asked.

Brackett winced. "Probably a nightmare, like you said. The fever isn't helping. What *is* his temp now, anyway?" The doctor searched the chart for the latest temperature reading. He shook his head ruefully. "Up another degree. I don't like it."

The nurse returned and administered the tranquilizer. Within a minute, Johnny calmed and resumed slow, deep breathing.

"Roy," Brackett motioned with his head towards the hallway. Roy followed him out. "You should go on home and get some rest."

"I'd rather stay here...in case he needs me," Roy said quietly.

Brackett raised his eyebrows. "He just got a wallop of tranquilizers. He's going to be out for hours."

"I-I know," Roy stammered, smiling. "It's important to me to be here. At least for now. I hope you don't kick me out." He glanced back through the glass window at his peaceful partner.

"I won't kick you out," the doctor acquiesced. "You *do* realize he's going to have a long, drawn-out recovery, don't you? I don't want to see you burning yourself out right at the start. John's going to need your strength and support over the long haul. You're the closest thing to family he's got."

Roy nodded solemnly. "I know, only too well. That's why I *have* to be here. He's *my* family too."

Dr. Brackett sighed and studied the paramedic, his eyes crinkling. "I had to try."

Roy smiled. "Thanks. I'll take care of myself. Just take care of Johnny, okay?"

"It's a deal." With nothing more to say, the two men parted ways.

Exhausted, Roy slept fitfully in the impossibly-uncomfortable chair, a light thermal blanket draped over him. The ICU was a place where time didn't exist, where lights and machines buzzed perpetually and the absence of windows further obscured the distinction between day and night.

The last vital signs check had revealed a disturbingly high fever. The cause of the high temperature wasn't known, but broad spectrum antibiotics were being rapidly infused to battle a suspected

infection.

A groan from the bed jolted Roy from his fitful rest. Bleary-eyed, he stood and readied himself to offer any assistance Johnny might need. John's eyes blinked open and found his partner.

"Roy."

"I'm here."

Johnny's eyes drifted shut again and Roy assumed he'd gone back to sleep. But as he began to re-settle into the torturous chair, Johnny suddenly came to life again. His eyes opened widely, panic evident in their rapid movements.

"Get out!" he hissed.

"What?" Roy asked, confused.

Johnny's eyes darted chaotically, seemingly unable to focus. "I said get out! Now!"

"Johnny, why do you—"

"She's coming!" He was panting

"Johnny, it's okay."

"No! Sh-sh-she has a gun!" His voice rose an octave.

"It's over, Johnny. She's not here. You're safe."

"No! You! You'll get shot!"

"I'm fine, John. No one's coming."

"Knife! She has a knife! Get out!" He thrashed suddenly.

"What's going on?" the nurse, Jean, asked, having come into the room.

"He's delirious," Roy said.

"No! Get out! Get out!" John shrieked.

"John!" Jean leaned in, placing her hand on his forehead.

"Don't touch me!" His face registered terror.

Jean shook her head. "He's burning up." She scurried out of the room.

"Johnny, it's me, Roy! Do you understand?" He placed a hand on Johnny's chest.

"Roy, you gotta go...gotta go...please," Johnny whimpered. He was losing strength fast.

"No, John. It's all right. You're in the hospital. It's a safe place."

Johnny closed his eyes, a pained expression on his pale face. He took rapid, shallow breaths. "Safe?" he whispered at last.

"Yes, safe. You're safe, I'm safe. It's okay," Roy reiterated.

Johnny's features relaxed and his eyes opened, this time appearing more focused. "Safe...she's dead. I...I remember now." His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

Roy sighed. "That's right."

Jean came in with a thermometer. "John, I need to get your temp," she stated with exaggerated enunciation. Johnny offered no resistance when she placed the bulb in his mouth. His chest rose and fell with difficulty as they all waited for the thermometer. Finally, Jean removed it, glanced at it and frowned. "Page Dr. Brackett" she muttered as she went back to the nurses' station.

Johnny continued to breathe laboriously, his jaw slack, his eyes dull. "Roy?" he asked.

"Yeah?" Roy leaned in close.

"I'm not...doin' too good."

"You'll be all right," Roy said firmly.

"Fever's...bad. I can...feel it."

"You're in the ICU. They're taking good care of you, Johnny. You just need a little time."

"Chest hurts." He raised his arms weakly and noticed the bandages. "Wha's wrong...my arms."

Roy was alarmed by the question. *Doesn't he remember? Is the delirium returning?*

"Just some cuts. They're all right," Roy answered as calmly as he could.

"She's dead," he said, repeating his earlier statement.

"Yeah."

Johnny seemed to consider this again. "Did I...do it?"

Dear god, I hope not. "Don't you remember anything, Johnny?"

"A little." He licked his parched lips. "Someone...cops...said I...shot her...did I?"

Roy shook his head. "*I don't think so.*"

"You don't?"

"I don't."

Johnny's eyes drifted wearily. "Tired," he whispered.

"Get some rest." Roy watched as Johnny lapsed into an exhausted slumber almost instantaneously. He eased back into the metal chair and pulled the blanket into a bunch under his chin, his eyes staring but not seeing. *He was so sure earlier...now he doesn't remember. What am I supposed to think? Can I continue to defend him?*

Neither man stirred when Jean returned with a new antibiotic and added it to the tangled mess of bagged fluids dangling from the IV pole.

Saturday morning dawned bright and frosty. Roy didn't notice the police cruiser parked near the emergency entrance when he returned to the hospital. He'd gone home to shower and change and had been gone only a little over an hour. The night had been long and his head swam with fatigue, a dull ache throbbing behind his scratchy eyes. Nothing could keep him away, however.

Roy entered the familiar portals of the emergency entrance, more from habit than anything. He used these doors like the rest of the population used the main entrance. Approaching the base station, he stopped short. There, chatting with Dixie, was Detective Nick Lobato. Roy approached the two apprehensively.

"Mornin', uh...DeSoto, isn't it?" Lobato greeted him.

"Roy DeSoto," the paramedic confirmed. He nodded a greeting.

"Roy, the detective here has good news," Dixie said tentatively. Roy looked to Lobato for elaboration.

"I think you'll be relieved to know that the coroner has definitely ruled Miss Conway's death a suicide."

Roy smiled genuinely. "Really? I mean, it's official?"

"Signed, sealed and delivered. There was no doubt, once they got the body in for examination," the detective said. "Self-inflicted gunshot wound. They see it enough to know. Looks like your partner's

off the hook." He smiled.

"Dix, does Johnny know yet?" Roy asked.

"Nnnno," she answered deliberately. *I don't want to talk about John in front of the cop.* She made meaningful eye contact with Roy.

"Oh," he said, nodding. *Something's up.*

"Well, I need to get back to it. I'll be in touch. We still need to get a statement from Mr. Gage, don't forget, Miss McCall," Lobato said casually. "As soon as possible. We like to close cases while everyone's memory is still fresh."

Dixie forced a thin smile. "I'll let you know," she promised. She and Roy watched the two men strut toward the exit.

"Dix, what's up?" Roy ventured.

Dixie sighed. "Roy, Johnny suffered convulsions about an hour ago. It's the fever. They can't get a rein on it."

"How high?" Roy's voice cracked.

"Last I checked, it was over 105."

"Shhh—" Roy cursed softly. He felt deflated. "I'm going up."

"I'll go with you."

Dr. Brackett, Dr. Early and two nurses Roy didn't recognize crowded near the apparatus-framed bed. Johnny lay on a cooling blanket, sheets covering only his pelvic area. He was still, white and vulnerable looking. A wet cloth lay draped across his forehead, an oxygen mask covered his lower face, EKG patches peppered his chest, bandages zig-zagged across his torso and a cast encased his leg. The medical team didn't acknowledge the presence of the two newcomers as they continued their huddled murmurs. After a minute, they parted.

"Roy," Dr. Brackett greeted succinctly.

"Hi Roy," Dr. Early said slightly more warmly.

Dr. Brackett motioned towards the hallway. He, Early, Roy and Dixie convened outside John's area.

"We're doing everything humanly possible," Brackett said, responding to the unspoken plea in Roy's eyes.

"It's peritonitis, Roy," Dr. Early explained. "Not that it's surprising, considering his abdominal injuries."

"But the antibiotics...?" Roy asked.

"We haven't found the right combination or dosage yet. But we're constantly adjusting it, and I'm sure he'll respond soon," Brackett insisted.

"You're sure," Roy responded flatly. *And if he doesn't?*

"Roy, Johnny's a fighter. He's not going to give up after making it this far," Dixie reasoned.

Roy remembered his meandering conversation with Johnny just a few hours previous. *He IS a fighter, if he thinks there is something to fight for. He doesn't even know if he pulled the trigger or not. It would kill him to think he ended someone's life.*

"I'm going to talk to him," Roy said resolutely.

"Roy, he's sedated. He probably won't—" Brackett started.

But Roy was already gone.

"Hey Junior."

Roy hovered at the side of the bed.

"What do you think you're doing, Johnny?" He smiled. "I leave for a little while, and you go and pull a stunt like this."

The still form on the bed didn't respond.

"Johnny, I know you're tired. I'm a little tired myself. I was here with you all night, you know. Well, maybe you don't know. Look, I, uh...don't quite know what to say. I mean, I know what I *want* to say; I just don't know if you're going to want to hear it. See, I ...thought...what I mean is, I wasn't sure what happened over there. You know, when you got hurt. I didn't understand any of it, and frankly, I was a little miffed...I figured maybe you, you know...did something to bring this on yourself. And I was angry, and a little resentful, that you'd put yourself in a situation where something like this could happen to you. Because, if you could see the way we're all mopin' around, worryin' about you, maybe you could understand why I'd react that way. It's hard to sit here, lookin' at you, in the condition you're in. Maybe that's hard for you to believe, that it takes ten years off my life seeing you this way. Maybe...I don't know...maybe, it's because you're like a brother to me...I know that sounds kind of lame, but it's true. I don't know the reasons for it, and I don't care. I just know it feels like crap, and I need to come clean with some of this."

Before it's too late...

"Johnny, I know you can't answer me. Maybe you can just listen right now, and we can talk about it some more later, okay?" Roy felt his throat tighten. "Johnny, why were you over there? At Lydia's house? I guess that's the biggest question. You told me you were through with her, and I believed you! For the life of me, I can't conjure up a good explanation for you being there at five in the morning, unless you spent the night with her. I guess I figured that a lot of things started making sense, you know? You've been kinda moody the past few weeks. Don't deny it! And then on Thanksgiving, when I couldn't get you to come over, or even accept anything from us...were you with her then? It...it hurts to think you'd deceive me like that, Johnny. And then for everything to turn out like this!"

Roy wandered to the end of the bed and back again.

"But the worst part of it is, I hate myself for doubting you, Johnny. I know you better than I know anyone, except maybe Joanne. And, in spite of all my suspicions, I just can't believe you'd lie to me. I *know* you wouldn't, not about something that big. And you know how that makes me feel? Like a shithhead." Roy snorted. "It's tearing me up, not knowing what happened or why. Or if I could have done something to stop it. And on top of it, all I can do is think about how *I've* been screwed. How shitty can you get? You're lying there, fighting for your next breath, and I'm whining about *my* problems. Pretty incredible, as you'd say.

"Johnny, I just want to tell you that, no matter what you had going on in your life, or...or what the story is...I'm here, and I'm not leaving. In fact, it doesn't even matter. I just want to give you the help and support you need to get better. Period." Roy swallowed, unshed tears glistening in his blue eyes. "Don't forget, Johnny, you have a family. Me, Jo, the kids. We need you. What would the kids do without you? Who would babysit on our anniversary?" Roy smiled.

"I'm sorry for rambling on like this. You need rest, and here I am, babbling in your face. Well, you'll be glad to know I'm almost finished. I have one more important thing to say. Johnny, the police officers were here a little while ago. The coroner ruled Lydia's death a suicide. It's official. You're cleared of any wrongdoing. I know you were worried about that, but now you can rest easy. Okay, partner?"

"Roy." Dr. Brackett spoke quietly from the doorway. Roy started slightly. *How long was he listening? Hell, I don't care.*

"You'll have to step out. We're going to intubate him now."

Roy clasped Johnny's hand between his two and gave it a prolonged squeeze. He released it finally, reluctantly, and left the bedside.

Roy knocked lightly on the hospital room door, then slid it open. Two pairs of eyes raised to greet him.

"Oh...I'm sorry. I'll come back later," Roy stammered.

Johnny shook his head. "No," he rasped. "Come in. Please."

"DeSoto," Detective Nick Lobato said pleasantly in greeting. He sat in a chair near the windowsill on the opposite side of the bed.

"A-are you sure?" Roy addressed the question to his partner. *I don't give a hoot what the cop says.*

Johnny attempted a friendly grin, which fell a few watts short of convincing. "Yeah, Roy. Stay. I want you to." He nodded encouragingly, his eyes pleading.

Roy acquiesced, slipping into the room unobtrusively in the manner of someone arriving after the start of a performance. He took the other chair.

This was a regular room on the post-surgical floor of Rampart. Johnny had graduated out of ICU just two days earlier. He was weak and far from well, but on the mend. There was an untouched lunch tray on the bedside table, containing the rudiments of a liquid diet. A couple dozen get-well cards were taped to the wall. The IV pole sported fewer bottles and bags than it had days before. Roy turned his attention to the patient. Johnny rested limply at a half-incline, his body slumping to one side. His face was drawn and pale, his eyes framed by dark purple circles. He had the blanket pulled up nearly to his chin, only one arm resting on top. *He looks like hell.*

"All right, you were saying that you'd broken up with her around..." the detective waved his hand in a circular pattern. "...oh, around the beginning of the month. Right?"

"Yeah," Johnny answered dispassionately.

"And so, when did you next have contact with her?"

"Uh..." Johnny cleared his throat in a vain attempt to make his voice work. "I was in bed, asleep, the day after Thanksgiving." He spoke slowly. "The phone woke me up. It was her."

"What time was that?"

Johnny closed his eyes and concentrated. "M-maybe around...4:30...I'm not sure."

"Okay. Go on."

"So...she said she was gonna kill herself. I...I tried to reason with her. I told her to go back to sleep." Johnny rested a few moments. "She said she was gonna take sleeping pills...that, in fact, she'd already *started* taking them."

The pills...that's what he was talking about, Roy thought.

"Did she say why she was going to kill herself?"

"She said no one loved her...including me."

"Which was...basically true?"

Johnny nodded. "Yeah. For me."

"So then what?"

Johnny sighed. "So then she said she really just wanted to talk to me. That if I came over...then...."
Johnny rubbed his brow. "Then maybe she wouldn't...I don't know. I got the impression that...if I went over, I could help her out."

"How did she sound on the phone?"

"Kinda quiet. Sad."

"So you went."

"Yeah. I showered and went over. I was supposed to work that day."

"What did you find when you got there?"

"I went in. She wasn't around, so I went to her room. I still didn't see her, so I...wait, she had all these pictures... of me. In her room! Like, dozens of pictures I'd never seen, of *me*." Johnny's eyes roamed back and forth across the blanket as he pictured the scene in his mind. "That's when I first started thinkin'...something's wrong."

"Then what?"

"She...came up behind me and said something. I don't remember. It scared me. I decided I needed to leave, but..."

Roy kept a watch on the heart monitor. Johnny's pulse had increased steadily since he'd begun his account.

"But she pulled a gun...from somewhere." John's eyes had a faraway look. "She pointed it at me. I thought I was dead."

The room went silent as Roy and Nick Lobato waited for John to continue.

"Somehow, I got past her, into the hallway, and she...she started shooting. I fell...I didn't know I was shot. I crawled into a room and my leg started really hurting. Like it was on fire." He paused to rest. "I sat there a long time, waiting...for her to come in and kill me."

Roy felt his own pulse quickening. Hearing Johnny recount his ordeal firsthand was unexpectedly

disquieting.

"Then, the lights came on, and she sprayed the Mace in my eyes. It burned like hell. I knocked her down and tried to run down the hallway, but my leg was givin' out and I kept runnin' into things and falling..."

"So you tried to get away?"

Johnny nodded. "Yeah, I *tried*, but shit...my leg was messed up and I couldn't see. And she..." His eyes narrowed. "She was taunting me. Saying things...I kept trying to move away from the sound of her voice, but...I couldn't." He stared dully at a fixed point.

"What happened then?" the detective asked gently.

"I was on the floor, somewhere...I'd fallen...again. She sort of...came up suddenly and said 'I hate you' and started..." Johnny's brow furrowed and he shut his eyes against the memory. His lips were pressed tightly together and his chest heaved with slow deep breaths.

Roy looked away. *He shouldn't have to go through this so soon. He's reliving the terror.*

"...started sta--..." He shook his head slightly. "Using the knife."

"Then what?"

"I tried to fight her off, but...I couldn't see..."

"After she attacked you, what did she do?"

"I'm not sure after that...I wasn't doing too well."

"Do you remember anything?"

Johnny thought. "Just a lot of pain. I don't...I don't remember her shooting..." Johnny reached for a cup with a straw on his nightstand. His hand shook markedly as he brought the straw to his lips. He took a small sip and grimaced.

"What's the next thing you remember?"

"The cops comin' in. I heard 'em say she was dead...and that I probably shot her. Then the paramedics were there. It's all kind of a blur. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I think I have all the information I need."

Johnny nodded, relieved.

Roy exhaled. *It feels like I haven't breathed in hours.* He massaged his eyes.

"I'm sorry you had to answer these questions," the detective went on. "I probably don't have to tell you that we don't see a case like this every day." He tucked his pen in his breast pocket and clutched set down his notebook as he rose to don his raincoat. "Now that I have your account, I can finalize my report and close the file." He stepped to the bed and held took John's right hand in his, shaking it gently. "Take it easy and get well."

"I will," Johnny whispered.

"Call me if you have any questions. Anything at all."

Johnny nodded, eyes downcast.

Roy half-stood to shake the detective's hand as he left. "Thanks," he mumbled, at a loss as to anything else to say.

After Lobato left, Johnny's eyes tracked slowly across the bed and up into his partner's face. Roy was staring into space, appearing deep in thought. "It's all true," Johnny said with the little amount of voice he had remaining.

Roy, jolted from his daydream, turned towards John. *What does he mean?*

"Somehow, I...think you blame me...for this," Johnny continued. "Everything happened...just like I said."

"I don't blame you." Roy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I...admit that I...had questions in my mind about you and Lydia. I *did* wonder if you'd been with her." He paused. "But I *don't* think this is your fault, Johnny." *Especially now.* "Hearing what you went through...I can't imagine how terrified you must have been."

Johnny looked away. His jaw muscles were visibly tense. *He had doubts. Does he still? Do I care?*

Roy recognized John's tense countenance. *He's hurt by my suspicions. Why wouldn't he be?* "John, I'm sorry. You told me how things were, and I should have believed you. I'm sorry."

Johnny sighed deeply, his gaze still averted. "I'm tired."

I guess I'm not getting off the hook easily. "Yeah, okay. I'll...go now. Get some rest." Roy lingered, studying his friend. John stared at the window, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge Roy's departure. Resigned, Roy left.

Only after the door closed did Johnny blink, releasing the tear that coursed down his cheek.

"Ho ho ho!" Chet bellowed from the open doorway.

"Hey, shut that door! We're not heating the whole outdoors, you know!" Roy admonished teasingly.

"Whoa, it really *is* just like a down-home Christmas, complete with my dad!" Chet retorted. He elbowed Roy in the ribs as he scooted past his host.

"Merry Christmas, Chet! Make yourself at home!" Joanne insisted. "The fridge is fully stocked, and there's lots of munchies on the dining room table."

"Say no more, Mrs. DeSoto," Chet acknowledged, making a bee-line for the kitchen.

"How do you like that?" Marco groused. "Not even a 'hello'!" He grinned from his perch on the arm of the overstuffed chair, his plate of goodies in one hand a cup of wassail in the other. His boss, Hank Stanley, sat in the seat of the chair.

"Chet's priorities are one, beer. Two, food. Three, niceties. You should know that," Mike reminded his colleague. He stood on the perimeter of the gathering, a beer in his hand. Occasionally he'd saunter to the dining room table and partake of a morsel or two. His wife, Pam, alternated between helping Joanne and Irma Stanley in the kitchen and socializing with the main group.

"I've never known Chet to worry about niceties," Hank chimed in. "Even *after* he's taken care of numbers one and two."

Chet had re-entered, catching the last of the exchange. "Numbers one and two? Are we down to toilet humor already? What've I missed?"

"Chet! This is a CHRISTMAS party. Could we have some decorum?" Joanne said with mock seriousness.

The wan figure on the couch smiled weakly but remained silent. The moment was a bittersweet one for Johnny. He was recovering but still had a long way to go. He'd been released from the hospital only days earlier; now he sat, parked on the couch, his casted leg resting on a folded blanket on the coffee table in front of him. His cheekbones jutted sharply between the hollows of his eyes and those of his face, and more than a hint of facial hair further darkened his appearance. He was attired in a motley assemblage of garments, including a pair of Army pants from the surplus store, the only things that would fit over the cast; a plaid flannel shirt, its tails hanging out; and a moth-eaten wool sweater that had definitely seen better days. *But it's warm*, he thought, mentally justifying wearing it to the DeSoto's nice get-together. Lately, he never seemed to be able to get warm enough. It was as though the holes in his body made by the gun and knife still gaped open, allowing all his warmth to flow out and the cold air to take up residence, permanently. He shuddered involuntarily. *I wish I had a blanket, but then I'd look like a complete invalid*. He hugged his thin arms around himself, tucking his chin into the stretched-out neck of the sweater.

The shiver didn't escape Roy's attention, and he sidled over to the fireplace to toss in another log and stir things up. The fire roared appreciatively.

"Daddy, Frosty's over!" Jennifer announced loudly, thumping into the room from the nearby family room where she and Chris had been watching a network TV special.

"Okay, honey. Why don't you get yourself something to drink?" Roy suggested.

"Dad, can I watch *Dracula Has Risen*?" Chris asked, close on the heels of his sister.

"Oh cool!" Chet enthused. "Is that on?"

"What? They're showing that *tonight*? On Christmas Eve?" Joanne asked, flabbergasted.

"Sure, Mom! Not everyone wants to watch *baby* shows, you know!" Chris said, looking pointedly at Jennifer.

"Chris, that's enough," Roy warned.

"Mommy, he called Frosty a baby show!" Jennifer whined.

"I know, dear. But it seems to me he was watching it as closely as you," Joanne said.

Jennifer brightened. "Yeah! So see!" She stuck her tongue out at Chris.

Hank Stanley snickered in spite of himself.

"Jennifer Lynn, I don't *ever* want to see that again!" Roy said sternly.

"But Daddy—"

"I think it's almost time for bed, at least for a couple of partyers," Joanne opined.

"But Dad!" Chris turned to his father.

"But nothing! You heard your mother."

"Children, say your goodnights to our guests," Joanne instructed.

Jennifer smiled winningly and began her rounds. As she said goodnight to each guest in turn, she proffered a kiss on the cheek of each of her "uncles," eliciting blushes from the recipients. She saved Johnny for last. She climbed carefully onto the couch next to him.

"Jennifer, don't climb on Uncle Johnny," Joanne reminded her.

"I won't," Jennifer promised somemnly.

"Goodnight Sweetheart," he said hoarsely, his eyes smiling. He reached out and enveloped her in a gentle hug.

"Uncle Johnny, what do you want for Christmas?" Jennifer asked.

"Nothing, Jen. I have everything already."

She scrutinized his clothing and frowned. "You could use a new sweater." Everyone laughed.

"Jennifer!" Joanne was mortified.

"I guess you're right," Johnny acquiesced.

"You know what I want?" Jennifer chirped.

"What?"

"Snow!"

Johnny chuckled. "Honey, this is California. I wouldn't count on any snow."

Jennifer frowned again. "I know. But it would be so neat to make my *own* Frosty!"

Johnny nodded sagely. "That it would. And I promise you, if it ever *does* snow, I'll be here with boots on!" He panted softly from the exertion of speaking.

"Okay!"

Chris had dutifully followed his sister, giving manly handshakes and mumbled "goodnights" to the guests. He stood waiting to bid goodnight to Johnny as well.

"Jennifer, time to go," Roy said.

Jennifer kissed Uncle Johnny's scratchy cheek, lingering to whisper "Merry Christmas, Uncle Johnny." The feel of her sweet warm breath near his ear melted him. He blinked rapidly as the blood rushed to his face, tingling. He didn't dare look up to see who might have noticed. Had he done so, he'd have seen every eye in the room transfixed upon the touching scene.

Roy tore his gaze away. He knew Johnny felt self-conscious about his circumstances and would hate to know everyone was ogling him, even though the curiosity was based on genuine caring, not voyeurism.

"Jennifer," Roy cajoled softly.

Her mission accomplished, Jennifer cheerfully jumped off the couch, unaware of the effect she'd had

on the roomful of macho firemen.

"Good night, Uncle Johnny," Chris offered, extending his hand. Johnny smiled at the gesture, so grown up.

"Run along, kids. Santa's watching!" Joanne teased.

"Oh Mom!" Chris whined.

"Those kids of yours are something else, Roy," Hank finally said to break the tension.

Roy smiled, pleased. "Yeah, they're pretty good squirts."

The conversation picked up where it had left off minutes earlier. Ice cubes clinked in glasses, laughter rang out frequently, and Christmas carols emanated from the console stereo. In the middle of it all, one person sat silent, a bystander to the merriment swirling around him. Johnny stared at the reflections of the tree lights twinkling in the glass he held.

"Do you need anything Johnny?"

"Uh, no," Johnny replied, glancing around his immediate surroundings. "I'm all set."

The last guest had gone, the lights were dimmed, and the fire was dying. Joanne had turned in. Roy eased himself into the chair adjacent to the couch where Johnny seemed to have grown roots, and studied the face of his friend in the golden glow cast by the smoldering embers. *Even the sparks from the fireplace can't put a spark of life back in his empty eyes.*

Johnny suddenly turned to catch Roy staring at him. Roy looked away, realizing he'd been caught.

"Nice party," Johnny commented. He effected a dutiful smile.

"Yeah, really nice." Roy nodded. "It's the guests who make the party, after all." He grinned. "Did you see the look on Chet's face when he opened his Pet Rock?"

A glimmer of amusement crossed Johnny's face. "That was priceless."

"Sure was." Roy chuckled. "And the Mr. Microphone Mike got!"

Johnny nodded. "I don't think it's gonna help."

"No, no, probably not."

A silence ensued, broken by the pops and crackles of the fire and the gentle melodies of the orchestral arrangements of holiday classics playing over the radio. Roy leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He absently twirled the cup he held between his fingertips.

"I'm glad you let me talk you into staying tonight," Roy said.

"I still feel like I'm intruding," Johnny responded. He coughed dryly, flinching from the pain. "But thanks. It *would* have been a little lonely at home."

"Yeah." A thought occurred to Roy. "It's not too hard on you, is it? With the kids running around? I didn't think about that. Maybe you'd have rather been someplace quiet where you could rest..."

"No, not at all," Johnny protested. The left corner of his mouth turned up. "The kids...they really define it, don't they?"

"Define...what?" Roy asked, perplexed.

"Life. Living. The meaning of it all." Johnny looked down, embarrassed. "That sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"No. It doesn't sound silly at all."

"I'm still in this...weird state of mind." Johnny shrugged. "I'm full of questions but I got no answers. Full of self-doubt. Confused. Wondering what the point of it all is." Johnny shook his head slowly. "And then a little girl, so innocent, just...casts her spell. And she's not even aware she's doing it. She's alive. She knows about living life...to the fullest...and she doesn't even *know* she knows. All kids, they just live and dream. They haven't been hurt and scarred. Well, most of them haven't." *Except for the ones who've seen the viciousness of the world, like the little toddler...*

"What about you?" Roy asked quietly. "Do you think that because you're scarred, you live half a life? That you don't get to rejoin the rest of us? Do you think you're any different to us?"

Johnny stared at the dying embers of the fire. "I only *feel* half alive. Maybe less." His voice was deep and harsh. *Maybe that's why I'm so cold.*

Roy studied his friend, a knot in his stomach. *He's got to want to recover and get back to work. Or else he's going to linger and wither away.* "Johnny, what happened to you happened. It can't be undone. But you survived it, and you've been given another chance. Hell, you've *earned* another chance. You've worked damn hard, whether you realize it or not. You could have died. You almost *did* die, more than once. And it wasn't just the doctors that saved you. You saved yourself. Because you *wanted* to live, you *had* that spark." Roy looked down, realizing he'd spoken in past tense. He decided to forge ahead. "But I gotta be honest with you, Johnny. I don't see it now. Your eyes are empty. And that scares the hell out of me."

Johnny slowly raised his downcast eyes and met Roy's worried gaze. *I'm scared too.*

That was when Roy saw the fear in Johnny's eyes. His heart leapt. *Emotion, REAL emotion! He's still in there, and he can get back out again.*

"Look, Johnny, I-I don't want to overwhelm you. I just want to remind you, you *have* a place in this world, an important place. In your job – in *our* jobs – we help people. There's nothing more honorable. And you're good at it. You have a purpose in life; you just have to step back up and reclaim it." Roy sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "And you will, because it's your calling. Your life has meaning, Johnny. Don't think for a minute you can fall off the face of this earth and not be missed."

Johnny sat huddled, his arms around him, his chin tucked in. Strains of "O Come All Ye Faithful" wafted from the stereo.

Roy jumped out of his chair suddenly, startling Johnny. "Oh, I almost forgot, there's something here..." He rummaged through the gifts at the base of the tree. "I wanted to give this to you tonight." He held out a cube-shaped, wrapped present towards Johnny, who looked up with a dumbfounded expression.

"Well, don't just sit there, take it!" Roy smiled.

"But...Roy, I didn't..." Johnny stammered.

"Of course you didn't." Roy laughed. "At least, you *better* not have! You'd be mincemeat in those crowds!"

Johnny chuckled. He accepted the package with both hands and slowly brought it to his lap. "Roy, I can't, I really —"

"Come on, just open it."

Reluctantly, Johnny began to tear away the wrapping.

"It's not a sweater," Roy quipped.

Johnny laughed again, a genuine laugh that came from within. He pried open the box and lifted out a snow globe of Cinderella's castle. It was similar to the one he'd had, only a bit more ornamental. His face crinkled into a broad grin, which quickly faded. He shot Roy a questioning look. "But how'd you--?"

"Doesn't matter. I know it meant something to you, though, so I picked this up."

"Yeah, it *did*. Still does, actually." He smiled sadly. "I still have it, even though she...it got broken."

"Really?" Roy asked with mock surprise, smiling conspiratorially.

Johnny knew then that Roy must have seen it.

Johnny turned the orb around in his hand, admiring it. "Thanks, Roy. For everything." He inverted it and gave it a gentle shake, watching with child-like delight as the specks of "snow" drifted aimlessly in the water. Johnny smiled happily. "Hey, know what?"

Roy, having been mesmerized himself by the globe's hypnotic effect, snapped back to attention. "What?"

"Looks like snow on Christmas after all." Johnny smiled at Roy, his eyes sparkling. Roy laughed softly.

A peaceful arrangement of "Silent Night" filled the room.

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