

Rage

by [Starr](#)

'You're late again, Gage.' Drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, John Gage stared up at the traffic light that had been red for what seemed an eternity. He'd caught five red lights in a row, and the slim margin of time he'd allowed himself for the trip to Roy's house was quickly evaporating. One more, and he was going to be late for sure.

The light finally turned green. Traffic started moving, and he was able to maneuver into the right lane, intending to cut down Alameda to save time. No lights on Alameda, just a bunch of stop signs, and while that stop-and-go driving wreaked havoc with the brakes, it was quicker than risking the rest of the lights he'd be facing on Alpine. The way his luck was running, he was sure to hit every single one.

The car in front of him, an old pea-green Chevy Nova, made the right onto Alameda as well. Johnny groaned, tapping his brakes to keep from getting too close to the slow moving vehicle. "Oh, for pete's sake, come *on!*" he groaned, watching his speedometer needle wavering at the twenty-five mark. They rolled up on the first stop sign, and the Chevy came to a stop. A full, dead stop. He saw the driver look left, then right, then left, then right again, then left once more before finally starting to move again. Johnny closed his eyes and counted to five. Just his luck when he was in a hurry to get behind someone who not only followed the prescribed, by-the-book requirements at a stop sign, but who also felt compelled to take it a step further and make sure the entire world had come to a complete stop as well. Letting out a deep sigh, he nudged the accelerator. There was just no way around it. He was going to be late.

Second stop sign. This time the driver of the Chevy stayed stopped so long, Johnny almost got out to go check and make sure he hadn't had a heart attack or something, but he finally started to creep forward. Biting back a few choice adjectives, Johnny clenched his teeth and followed.

There was a fairly long stretch of road before the next stop sign, and Johnny started to feel a bit hopeful as the Chevy started to pick up speed. He matched it, and glanced down at his watch. Maybe he wouldn't be *too* late, if the Chevy didn't make the right with him onto Bonaire...

Bringing his eyes back up to the road, he was startled to see the brake lights on the Chevy flash on. He slammed his foot onto the brake, and felt the Land Rover shimmy just a bit, the tires letting out one short squeal as they found purchase on the asphalt. He truly thought he was going to be able to stop in time, but he was a few feet shy of road for that, and his bumper tapped the Chevy, sending the lighter car ahead by a few inches.

"Oh, man...." Shaking his head, Johnny slid out of the truck and approached the other car. There was a small dent on the trunk and some scratched paint, but all in all, it didn't look too bad. The driver emerged, and Johnny walked up to him. "Are you okay?"

A slightly balding man in his late thirties, the driver looked amazingly unperturbed. He gave a nod. "Fine, fine." He moved to the rear of his car to survey the damage.

"Look, I'm really sorry," Johnny said, following him. "It was totally my fault. I just took my eyes off the road for a second, and then, wham! There you were."

"No, problem," the driver said. "Could happen to anyone."

Relieved that the other man was taking it so well and hadn't turned into a raving lunatic, Johnny said, "Listen, it doesn't look too bad, so why don't you take it to a shop and get an estimate, and if it's not too much, we don't even have to go through the insurance company." *'Although it may end up costing me for a whole new paint job, because I doubt they still carry that rancid green color anymore,'* Johnny thought. *'Looks like somebody threw up after eating pea soup.'*

The driver nodded agreeably. "Yeah, sure, sounds good."

Johnny grinned. "Y'know, you're being an awfully good sport about this. I really appreciate it." He walked back to the Land Rover and grabbed the small notepad out of the glovebox and scrounged a pen so he could write down his name and phone number. "These stupid little accidents can drive your insurance rates right through the roof."

"No problem." The driver accepted the paper without looking at it, folding it in half and tucking it into his shirt pocket. "Accidents happen."

Holding out the pen and pad, Johnny said, "I guess I should get your name and stuff, too. I mean, you know, in case we end up having to go through the insurance company after all."

There was the briefest moment when the calm expression on the driver's face clouded over with anger, then he smiled and took the pen. "Sure, of course." He jotted the information down and handed it back to Johnny. "Looks like you were on your way to a party," he commented, nodded to the two cases of beer and soda on the passenger seat.

"Yeah, I was. I mean, I am." He glanced at his watch and winced. "I was supposed to be there about fifteen minutes ago, actually, so if you're sure you're okay and everything..."

The driver made a dismissive gesture. "I'm fine. You go on, have yourself a good time."

Johnny glanced at the paper. "Thanks, Mr. Bellovin. And again, I'm *really* sorry about all this."

"No problem."

The two men went back to their vehicles and departed. Johnny breathed a small sigh of relief when the Chevy made the left onto Bonaire. When he arrived at Roy's house, he lugged the drinks around to the back yard, where the aroma of barbecued steaks filled the air. "I know, I know," he said, depositing his burden on the picnic table, "I'm late. But I have a good reason."

Roy DeSoto grinned patiently at his friend. "You always do, partner."

"No, really, this time I do," Johnny insisted. "I was on Alameda, see, and I had this accident, and --"

"An accident?" Joanne said, her eyes widening. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Johnny assured her. "It was just a little fender-bender, but we had to exchange information and everything, so that's why I'm late."

"How bad was the other guy's car?" Roy asked, knowing that the Land Rover was a virtually indestructible behemoth.

“Just a little dent on his trunk.” Johnny shoved a potato chip in his mouth and popped open a beer. “The thing is, the guy was so cool about the whole thing, it was amazing. I mean, some people, they might’ve gotten all bent out of shape, but not him. He was great.”

“Sounds like you got lucky,” Roy commented as he turned the steaks.

“Yeah, I sure did,” Johnny agreed with a grin. “Couldn’t ask for a nicer guy to have an accident with.”

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Earl Bellovin pulled up in front of the small bungalow he’d lived in all his life. He got out of the Chevy and went inside, the same placid expression he’d held while talking to Johnny in place right up until the door closed behind him. Then the facade fell away, leaving behind eyes that were blank and empty.

‘He made a fool of you.’

Stalking into the kitchen, he pulled a glass from the cupboard.

‘He was laughing at you.’

He jerked the refrigerator open and grabbed the milk.

‘You’re a fool.’

“Shut up,” he whispered, pouring half a glass. He replaced the milk, then went to the pantry and found a box of ginger snaps.

‘He did it on purpose, you know.’

“It was an accident.” He brought both the milk and cookies to the table and sat in his spot, wishing the voice would let him alone just this once.

‘You saw him following you,’ the voice persisted. *‘He was going too fast, and he was right on your bumper the whole way. He knew he was going to hit you. He meant to hit you.’*

Trying hard not to be argumentative, because that was impolite, Earl asked, “Why would he want to hit me?”

‘To ruin your perfect driving record, of course!’ the voice shrieked. *‘He was jealous of you, of how careful you are.’*

“I am a careful driver,” Earl acknowledged slowly. “Very careful.”

‘He saw that,’ the voice said. *‘He wanted to take that away from you.’*

Earl nibbled on a cookie while he thought about that, careful to keep the crumbs on the napkin in front of him. Still not convinced, he said, “But we’re not reporting it to the insurance company. He’s going to pay for it himself. He said so.”

‘Fool!’ the voice screamed. *‘Do you really think he’s going to pay you anything? He’s going to tell you the*

check is in the mail, and when it doesn't come, then what will you do?'

"He seemed like an honest person," Earl countered.

'Why do you keep letting people take advantage of you?' the voice sighed wearily. *'When is it ever going to be enough?'*

"I..." Earl stared down at the cookie in his hand. "He was following too closely, wasn't he?"

'Yes,' the voice agreed readily.

"And he was going too fast."

'Yes, much too fast. Reckless.'

"And he had all that beer in his car."

'Couldn't wait to go get drunk with his friends,' the voiced sermonized. *'What did he care if he ran someone like you off the road? What are you to him?'*

Anger sparking in his eyes, Earl said, "Nothing. I'm nothing to him. He could've killed me."

'That's right. And he was laughing at you.'

His face drawing into a scowl, he whispered fiercely, "Nobody laughs at me."

'So do something about it. Make him stop laughing.'

The cookie dropped to the table, and he reached into his shirt pocket for the paper with Johnny's information on it. Unfolding it, he glared at the scrawlish handwriting. "Nobody laughs at me."

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Johnny had barely begun to drift off to sleep when the jarring ring of the phone assaulted him. With a groan he rolled out of bed and stumbled out into the living room to answer it. "Hello?"

He was rewarded with a sharp click in his ear. Replacing the receiver with a yawn, he muttered, "Nobody's got any manners anymore," and wandered back to bed.

The next time the phone rang, he blinked groggily at the alarm clock. 2:15. He briefly considered ignoring it, but after it rang for the fifth time, he began to worry that it was something important and rolled out of bed. He banged his shin on the door on his way out, and hobbled the rest of the way out to the living room seeing stars. "Hello?" No click this time, just dead air. "Hello?" he said again, frowning. After another ten seconds of nothing, he hung up, but he didn't go back to bed. Instead, he stood staring at the phone, several thoughts racing through his mind. It was remotely possible that one of his friends had called him for help, and had been too incapacitated to speak. It was more likely that it was just another wrong number. But the first possibility gnawed at him, and after some internal debate, he picked up the phone and dialed Roy's number. It rang four times before a garbled "Hello?" loosened the knot in his stomach.

"Roy, did you just try to call me?" Johnny asked quickly.

"Huh?" There was the sound of Joanne's voice in the background. "It's Johnny," Roy said to her. Into the

phone he said, "Do you know what time it is?"

With a wince Johnny replied, "Yeah, I'm sorry about that, but I just got this weird call, and I thought maybe it was you."

"No," Roy said through a yawn. "I was asleep. Goodnight."

"Oh, okay. Good--" He broke off when a loud click cut the connection. "Huh." Starting to second guess himself, he dialed Del Marten's number. It rang four, five, six times, and the knot started to come back. On the eighth ring, he finally got an answer. "What."

"Del, is everything okay?" Johnny asked.

"What? Johnny?" His friend's voice lowered. "What do you mean, is everything okay?"

"I guess you didn't just call me, huh?"

"Call..." Del's voice lowered even more. "John, I'm a little busy right now, and no, I definitely didn't call you. Good-bye."

He was halfway through dialing Jackie Sinclair's number when he sighed and hung up. He was letting his imagination get the better of him. It was just a wrong number.

Or so he thought until the phone rang again at 2:45. And at 3:30. And at 4:20. Every time, there was nothing but dead air on the other end. After the last call, he decided to leave it off the hook, but by then he was so aggravated that he couldn't fall back to sleep. After he showered and got dressed for work, he finally replaced the handset. It rang immediately.

"Son of a..." He snatched it up. "Hello?" Nothing. Slamming the receiver down, he grabbed his keys and left. As he was walking down the hallway, he heard the phone start to ring again. It was still ringing when the elevator doors closed behind him.

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"You look like hell. Late night?"

Johnny looked up at Chet and scowled slightly. "No. Well, yes, but..." He scowled harder and got up from the table. "Never mind."

Chet watched him pour himself another cup of coffee, then looked at Roy. "What's with him?"

Roy was watching his partner as well. "Another night of crank calls," he explained.

"Really?" Turning back to Johnny, Chet said, "I thought you had your number changed?"

"I did," Johnny snapped peevishly. "It didn't help." Rubbing tiredly at his eyes, he fought to hold back the yawn that so desperately wanted to come out.

"Wow, this is really turning into a problem. What's it been, two weeks?"

"I just don't get it," Johnny said, exasperated. "I mean, crank callers usually bug you for a couple of days,

then they go away. But this one isn't going away. And he's driving me *nuts*." He took a seat back at the table. "I even went so far as to try Jackie's suggestion, but it didn't do any good."

Chet raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Jackie's suggestion?"

"A whistle," Roy said.

"I just don't know what else to do. The only way I can get any sleep is to leave the phone off the hook. And how long am I supposed to do that?"

"Well, it's not like you'd have to worry about missing any important calls from chicks," Chet needled.

Johnny pulled a face. "Very funny."

"What did the police say?" Roy asked. He sympathized with his partner's predicament, but the lack of sleep was making his already erratic temper short, and that made for some very long shifts.

"Nothing that will help," Johnny snorted. "They're the ones who told me to change the number, and that didn't work. They said they'd try and trace it if the guy started making any threats, but until then..." He left off with a shrug.

"That really stinks," Chet commented. The phone started to ring, and Marco got up to answer it.

"Stinks doesn't even begin to cover it," Johnny muttered into his coffee. "At least things can't get any worse."

"Gage," Marco called. "Phone."

Moving with a lot less speed than usual, Johnny got up and made his way over to the phone. "Hello?" He frowned when he got no response. "Hello?" Dead air, then a distinctive click. Unable to believe it, Johnny slowly hung up the phone, then turned to look at the other men, who were watching him in silence. "I was wrong. It just got worse."

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'He called the police.'

"I know he did. They won't find me."

'You have to be careful.'

"I'm always careful."

'If they catch you, they'll lock you up.'

"I won't let them lock me up."

'He's not laughing at you anymore.'

"No, he's not."

'But you still haven't taught him his lesson yet.'

"I know."

'You have to make sure he understands.'

"He will."

'Now that you know where he works, he can't ignore you anymore.'

"He'll be sorry he ever laughed at me."

'Him and his friends.'

"They'll all be sorry."

'Just be careful.'

"I'm always careful. No one will ever know."

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"Station 51, structure fire. 157 Wilson Avenue. 157 Wilson Avenue. Time out, 5:28."

The men of A Shift sprang from their bunks and hurried to the rigs, yanking on bunker pants as they went. In the squad, Johnny squinted at the piece of paper Captain Stanley thrust through the window. "Weren't we just there a few days ago?" he said quizzically.

Pulling out of the station, Roy nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right. It was a false alarm."

"Great, just what we need this early." They jumped onto the Freeway for two exits to get to Wilson. There was practically no traffic at this early hour and they made good time.

"So, have you thought about it?" Roy asked.

"What, about coming to stay with you?" Johnny shifted in his seat. "I dunno, Roy, I don't want to put Joanne to any trouble."

"She was the one who suggested it," Roy told him. "Maybe if you're away from your apartment for a few days, whoever it is will stop calling you. At the very least, you'll get a couple nights of good sleep."

That above anything else sounded appealing to him, so he nodded. "Okay, yeah, sounds good." He smiled at his partner. "Thanks."

Pleased to see the first smile on Johnny's face in weeks, Roy returned it. "You're --"

He never got to finish the sentence.

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Driving the engine behind the squad, Mike Stoker was the first to see that something was wrong. Just as

they emerged from under an overpass, the smaller vehicle jammed on its brakes. Mike followed suit so as not to run into them. "Cap!" he yelled needlessly. They both watched helplessly as the squad veered off and lurched across two lanes of traffic before coming to a stop at the side of the Freeway. Mike brought the engine up behind it and they both scrambled out. Chet and Marco peered out of the jump seats.

"Cap, what's goin' on?" Chet called.

Hank ignored him for the moment and hurried over to the squad. When he came up even with the cab, he took in a sharp breath and bellowed, "Chet! Marco! Get over here on the double!" He ripped the Handy-Talkie from his pocket. "Dispatch, this is Engine 51. We have a code-I times two on the Midtown Freeway, under the Fulton Avenue overpass. We need a squad and ambulance to our location *immediately*." Almost as an afterthought he said, "Dispatch, you'll need to send another unit to our original call."

Carefully, Mike opened the passenger side door. "Gage?" His eyes were drawn past Johnny to the large chunk of concrete that had punched a hole through the windshield and landed on the seat between the two paramedics.

The dark haired paramedic slowly opened his eyes, blinking as a thin line of blood ran across his forehead and into them. "This day is really beginning to suck," he said softly.

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The sun was just starting to wink out behind the heavy storm clouds that were building in the afternoon sky. Perched atop the picnic table in Roy's backyard, Johnny sat in quiet contemplation, fingers laced around his knees.

Roy emerged through the patio door and watched his partner for a second. It had been three days since the accident with the squad, and two since Johnny had moved into the spare room at Roy's house. He was worried about the toll the past few weeks were taking on his friend. Usually bordering on a semi-permanent hyper personality, the last two days had found him unusually quiet and pensive. Roy had noticed that Johnny jumped every time the phone rang, and when he thought no one was around, he would often stand at the living room window and stare out as though looking for someone. Joanne had suggested that they just let him work things out for himself, and that perhaps after a few days he'd begin to feel safer and relax. Roy had agreed, but so far he saw no improvement.

"Who was on the phone?" Johnny asked, not turning.

Roy started. He hadn't thought Johnny had heard the phone from outside. "Captain Stanley. He said the police wanted to talk to us again."

Face still upturned to the building wind, Johnny asked, "What for?"

"Dunno," Roy answered with a shrug. "He just asked that we come down to the police station in half an hour."

Sighing, Johnny dropped his head and got up. "Better make sure the windows are closed," he said as he brushed past Roy into the house. "Storm's comin'."

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"We're still trying to determine whether or not it could have been an accident."

Captain Hank Stanley leaned back in his chair, a scowl set on his usually placid face. “Accident my Aunt Fanny! You didn’t see what the piece of concrete did to that squad! And what it almost did to my men!”

Detective Steve Frankel held up a hand to quiet him. “Captain, please.” Once he saw that he again had the full attention of the three men in the room, he continued. “I said *could* have been. But I happen to agree with you that there’s a good chance that it might have been a deliberate act. And,” he added as an aside, “I *did* see the damage done to the vehicle. You two were extremely lucky.”

Roy and Johnny were sitting quietly, still trying to digest that their near-brush with death might have been intentional.

Frankel referred to his notes. “It seems that the call you were responding to that morning was a false alarm. When Station 43 responded, they found no sign of a fire, and the callback number given to the dispatcher turned out to be phony. Plus,” he went on, “it was the same number given two days earlier when you had another false alarm at that same address.”

Johnny squirmed. “So we have someone who likes to call in false alarms. So what?”

“Yeah,” Roy added. “It happens sometimes. Some people get a kick out of seeing the trucks with lights and sirens.”

“But they don’t usually call in false alarms to the same address, do they?” Frankel probed.

“No,” Hank admitted, trying to figure out where the detective was going with this. “Not usually.”

Frankel nodded. “We think that perhaps whoever called in the false alarms was the same person who threw the concrete block off the overpass.”

“What??” All three firemen came up straight in their chairs.

“It’s possible that the first false alarm was merely a dry run, if you will, to see what route you would take so that they could plan their attack.”

“Why would someone want to do that?” Roy asked, incredulous. The whole idea seemed inconceivable to him.

It was the question the detective had been waiting for. He focused his attention on Johnny. “Mr. Gage, I understand that you’ve been having a problem with a crank caller.”

Johnny nodded. “Yeah, I have.” When the detective didn’t say anything, the paramedic’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You think this might have something to do with that?”

Frankel leaned against his desk. “Mr. Gage, do you have any enemies?”

“Enemies?”

“You know,” Frankel elaborated, “anyone who might be holding a grudge. Anyone in your private life, or maybe even on the job, either a coworker or someone you might have had a disagreement with on a call.”

Johnny shook his head, baffled. “No. No one.”

To Hank, the detective said, “We’d like to get a list of all the calls both Mr. Gage and Mr. DeSoto have been on for the past month. There may be something there, even if he doesn’t realize it.”

“You’ll need a subpoena for me to release that to you,” Hank said, glancing at his men with concern. They both seemed dazed.

“I’ll have one by the time you leave the station.” Frankel turned back to Johnny. “Mr. Gage, we’d like to put some tracing equipment on your telephone. It may be our best chance in tracking this person down.”

“Yeah, sure.” Johnny ran a hand through his hair and settled a bewildered stare on the detective. “What are the odds in finding this guy?”

“Depends on if he calls you again.”

“Oh, he’ll call,” Johnny assured him, the mere memory of the sound of his telephone ringing enough to give him a headache.

“Good. I can have my men at your apartment at, say, eight o’clock?”

“Sure.”

“Fine. I want to thank you gentlemen for coming down.” As Frankel extended a hand to Johnny, a sharp crack of thunder sounded right outside the building, making all of the men jump. Seconds later, a torrent of rain began pelting the window.

“Wow,” Hank commented, watching the flashes of lightening as they lit the dark sky in a strobe effect.

Frankel let out a low whistle of appreciation for the display. “Looks like it’s gonna be one hell of a storm.”

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Joanne jumped as the thunder cracked outside, then giggled nervously to herself. She’d always hated thunderstorms, even as a kid. When Roy was around, she’d snuggle up in his arms and it wouldn’t be so bad, but sitting around the house without even the kids to distract her was the worst. The storm had come on suddenly and with a ferocity she hadn’t seen in a long time, multiple forks of lightening flashing across the sky. Several had been way too close for comfort, the thunder following scant seconds behind, close enough to make the house tremble.

She sat at the kitchen table sipping a cup of tea, trying hard to ignore the storm and concentrate on the magazine she was reading. The phone rang, and she glanced at it hesitantly. Someone had once told her you shouldn’t use the phone during a lightening storm, something about being electrocuted if lightening struck. Still, it could be Roy, or it could be the kids calling to say they wanted to be picked up early from the Tierney’s because of the storm, so she shrugged off her concerns and picked it up. “Hello?”

Static filled the line.

“Hello?” she tried again, straining to hear past the static. “Is anyone there? Hello?”

Click.

She'd barely replaced the handset when it rang again. "Hello?" More static. "Roy, is that you?"

There was a small giggle on the other end of the line.

Frowning, Joanne put a hand on her hip. "Christopher DeSoto, what have I told you about fooling around on the phone?"

Another giggle, louder this time, more masculine, and the frown was replaced by uncertainty. "Who is this?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" came the chortled response.

Joanne slammed the receiver down, her heart pounding. Backing away from the phone, she bumped into the kitchen table with enough force to knock her teacup over, sending it to the tiled floor where it shattered. The phone started to ring again, and she fled into the living room. Sitting on the couch, she listened to it ring for almost five minutes before it finally stopped. The silence it left in its wake was quickly filled by a terrifying crack of thunder that sounded as though it had landed right outside the front door. The lights immediately went out, leaving her in darkness that was broken only by the occasional flashes of lightening.

'It was just kids playing around,' she told herself over and over. *'Just kids. It didn't mean anything. And the lights will be back on in a few minutes, and Roy will be home, and everything will be just fine.'* She told herself that, but she never truly believed it.

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In the lobby of the police station, Johnny leaned up against the wall next to the pay phone. "Ask her if she wants us to pick up some Chinese on the way home."

Busy dialing, Roy nodded.

"Or pizza. Maybe she'd rather have pizza."

"I'll ask." Roy waited for the call to connect, but got a fast busy signal. "Huh." He clicked down the receiver button and dialed again.

"I'm kinda in the mood for Chinese, myself, but if she'd rather have pizza, that's okay." Johnny watched as Roy frowned and hung up again. "What?"

"There must be something wrong with the line. I can't get through."

"Oh." Johnny glanced out the doors at the downpour. "Well, maybe it has to do with the storm."

"Yeah," Roy agreed. "Maybe."

Their eyes met, each knowing they were thinking the same thing. "Why don't we stop back at your place before getting dinner," Johnny said, pushing off the wall.

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

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The storm seemed as though it were starting to move away, the thunder growing more distant with each rumble. Joanne stayed curled up on the corner of the couch, one of the throw pillows hugged tightly to her chest. Almost twenty minutes had passed since the lights and phone had gone out, twenty long, isolated minutes that she would have rather been just about anywhere else on earth.

A small rattle grabbed her attention. In the dark, it was hard to tell exactly where it was coming from, but she got up and slowly followed the sound, which would continue for a moment, then stop, then start again. She finally ended up at the front door. The rattle began again, and she could see that it was the doorknob being twisted back and forth. With a cry, she pounced on the dead bolt that wasn't set and snapped it shut, realizing only after she did it that she'd alerted whoever was on the other side of the door to her presence. The doorknob began to rattle harder, and someone pounded on the door. She let out a small cry and instinctively ran for the phone, remembering only after she got there that it was dead. The pounding stopped suddenly, and she whirled to face the door, her breath coming in short, terrified gasps. There was no more pounding, no more rattling, but before she could start feeling good about that, she suddenly remembered the patio door. The *unlocked* patio door. In a panic, she bolted over to it and snapped the lock into place. Her hand was still on the doorknob when she felt it turn. With a scream, she fled back from it, sobbing in terror. She felt along the counter until she found the wooden block that held all of her cooking knives. Sliding her hand over the handles, she found the largest one and pulled it out.

The rattling turned again to pounding, and Joanne backed herself against the far wall of the kitchen next to the phone. "Go away!" she shouted, sobbing.

The pounding stopped.

Unsure what to expect next, Joanne stayed where she was, knife in one hand, the other wiping at the mascara that was running into her eyes and blurring her vision. A few minutes later, there was a rattle at the front door. "Go away," she whispered. "Please just go away." The rattle stopped, and then she heard the door open. "No!" she sobbed quietly, gripping the handle of the knife more tightly.

"Joanne?"

The sound of her name startled her, and she remained silent.

"Honey, are you home?"

"Roy?" she whispered hopefully. She stepped into the doorway. "Roy?"

"Jo, what's wrong?"

Dropping the knife, she rushed into her husband's arms, nearly knocking him off his feet. "Roy, oh Roy!" she sobbed against his neck.

Roy held her tightly, feeling his mouth go dry. "Easy, honey, everything's okay," he whispered softly, stroking her back. She was trembling like a live wire. "What happened?"

"The phone rang," she sobbed, "and then the lights went out, and... and... Someone was at the door, and..." She started to weep harder. "I was so *scared*."

"Shh," Roy murmured into her ear. "I'm here now. Everything's all right." He looked over at his partner, who was watching with a grim expression that echoed his own feelings. Everything definitely wasn't all right.

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Jackie Sinclair stepped up to Johnny's apartment and gave two short raps on the door. A moment later, the door swung open, and she was faced with a total stranger who regarded her suspiciously. "Can I help you?"

"Is Johnny here?" she asked.

"And who are you?" the stranger demanded.

Jackie scowled. "Well, who are you?" she challenged back.

Before the stranger could retort, Johnny emerged behind him. "It's okay," he said quickly, "she's a friend."

Jackie and the stranger exchanged a final set of glares before he turned and went back into the apartment. Johnny smiled apologetically as he opened the door to let her in. "Sorry about that. You should've called before you came over."

"I didn't realize you were going to have the border police guarding your front door," she replied. Glancing around the small apartment, she took in the detective that was sitting on the couch testing the recording equipment hooked to Johnny's telephone. The rude one that had answered the door had returned to the kitchen, where he sat at the table reading the newspaper. Turning back to Johnny she said, "This is unbelievable."

"Yeah," he agreed with a sigh, "the whole thing is pretty unbelievable." He started to lead her to the living room, but that was occupied, as was the kitchen, so instead he took her hand and brought her down the short hallway to his bedroom, ignoring the looks the two detectives exchanged. "You probably shouldn't be here, y'know," he said finally. "It hasn't been all that safe to be near me lately."

"I came because you're my friend, and I wanted to see how you were doing." Jackie sat on the edge of the bed. "So, how are you doing?"

"Lousy," Johnny admitted, sitting next to her. "Two days I've been cooped up in here with Rocky and Bullwinkle out there, and not once has the phone rang. I think they're beginning to think I made the whole thing up."

"Well, maybe that's a good thing," Jackie said, trying to be optimistic. "Maybe he decided he'd gone too far, and he's done messing with your head."

"I wish I could believe that, but I just don't. I think the minute those guys pack up their equipment and leave, the whole thing's gonna start all over again."

Jackie chewed on her lip a second. "How's Joanne?" she asked hesitantly.

A pained expression flashed across the paramedic's face. "Scared out of her wits. Roy took her and the kids down to her parents' place for a few days." He let out an exasperated sigh. "I just wish I knew why this guy was doing this."

"Sometimes people don't need a reason, Johnny," Jackie replied, placing a hand on his arm. "Sometimes they're just not wrapped too tight is all." There was a moment of heavy silence, then she exclaimed, "Oh!" Digging into her purse, she said, "I almost forgot. I finally got the pictures from the beach developed." She

handed him the envelope from the drugstore, then hung over his shoulder as he flipped through the photos, commenting on each of them as he went with “that came out good,” or “I forgot about that,” and “oh God, get rid of that one, it’s awful!”

Johnny’s grin grew as he progressed through the pictures. He and Jackie had spent the day at the beach with Roy, Joanne, Del, and Chet a few weeks back, and it had been one of the best outings he could remember. The weather had been perfect, there had been tons of food, and they’d built a bonfire once the sun had gone down, sitting around and swapping stories for hours as only friends could do. The highlight of the day had been a volleyball tournament which had started out as a lark, and had ended up with Johnny, Del and Jackie winning over Roy, Joanne and Chet in sudden-death overtime. He held up a picture of the three winners posing for the camera, arms slung victoriously around each other’s shoulders. “I have no idea how we won that game,” he said with a chuckle. “I could barely move my arms by the time we were done.”

“I can’t remember when I’ve had that much fun,” Jackie said. “We need to do that again. Soon.”

“Yeah, we should.” Johnny caught himself, the reality of the Twilight Zone he called his life slapping him in the face. “Maybe, if things ever get back to normal,” he added, stuffing the pictures back in the envelope and dropping them on the bed.

Jackie scooped it up and pulled the picture of the three of them out again. “We *will* do this again, and soon.” She propped the photo on his night stand between the alarm clock and the lamp. “And until we do, you just keep looking at that to remind yourself that your life *will* get back to normal.” She leaned her forehead against his. “You just have to hang in there.”

Johnny couldn’t help but smile. “You’re disgustingly optimistic, you know that?”

She laughed. “I guess that’s better than being called perky.” Giving him a quick kiss on the cheek, she got up. “Can you get parole to go out for dinner, or are you permanently chained to this apartment?”

“I think I might be able to get a few hours off for good behavior,” he replied.

“Good, because as hungry as I may be, I shudder to think about the options that are lurking in your refrigerator,” she teased over her shoulder, heading back out to the living room.

“Oh, and I suppose *I’m* the one who turned that poor pot roast into a charcoal briquette,” he shot back, reminding her of her first and only attempt to cook him dinner.

“Am I going to have that used against me for the rest of my life?” she demanded.

Johnny told the detectives he was going out to get something to eat, then followed Jackie out the door, picking up the conversation without losing a beat. “Until you can cook something without having to have the fire extinguisher on hand, yes,” he shot back, tongue in cheek.

As the door closed behind them, the detectives exchanged looks again. The one fiddling with the recorder and tracing equipment asked, “Girlfriend?”

Mr. Rude shook his head, having checked her name against the list of acquaintances Johnny had supplied them with. “Just a friend. Girlfriend’s some stewardess named Barbara.”

His partner snorted. “Could’ve fooled me.”

The calls started again on day four of the police surveillance. Johnny wasn't sure whether to be depressed or ecstatic. The detectives that were camped out in his apartment, glad for a chance to finally do something, encouraged him to try and engage the caller in conversation, but the most he was able to get out of him was a short giggle. The calls stayed short, making the trace useless. The best they could determine was that the calls were coming from somewhere inside the county lines. That left a whole lot of possible suspects.

The department had decided that for Johnny's protection, and that of his coworkers, he should be placed on administrative leave, with pay. Under any other circumstance, he would have considered it a paid vacation. But stuck in his apartment waiting for the phone to ring, with two detectives in constant attendance, it felt more like a prison sentence. The guys from the station had wanted to come by to keep him company on their days off, but with the phone calls back in full swing, Johnny had requested that they all stay away. He was still feeling guilty about what had happened to Joanne, even after Roy's insistence that neither he nor Joanne held Johnny responsible in any way. The last thing he wanted was for another of his friends to become a target of the lunatic that had taken over his life.

So of course Del ignored what he said and showed up on his doorstep Saturday night to drag him out to the movies.

Despite his objections, Johnny was grateful for the outing. The only downside to the plan was Del's insistence on seeing "Jaws."

"Man," Johnny said, shaking his head as they left the theater, "that was..."

"Awesome," Del finished, grinning. Horror movies were his second favorite genre, right after war movies.

"Disgusting," Johnny corrected. "I don't think I'm ever gonna be able to go in the water again."

Del clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't think that way, bud. I'm already planning our next beach adventure, and it's going to be even better than the last one."

"You've been conspiring with Jackie," Johnny guessed, sliding into Del's pickup.

Del pulled an innocent 'who, me?' face. "Conspiring is such an ugly word."

"Uh huh." Johnny stared out the side window as they drove, thinking. It finally hit him that the reason Del had taken him to that particular movie was to, in fact, gross him out, thereby taking his mind off of his problems. Surprisingly, it had worked. He hadn't been able to think about anything but shark attacks since the first victim went under. A strange tactic, but then, Del could be a strange guy. But a good friend. Definitely a good friend. "Thanks, man."

"For what?"

For everything. "For the movie. It was good to get out for a few hours."

"Sure thing." Del squinted and flipped his rearview mirror into the night position. "Jerk."

Johnny glanced over at him. "Excuse me?"

"No, not you," Del explained. "The jerk behind me has his high beams on." He shifted in his seat as the

lights began to reflect into his side view mirror as well. “What does this idiot think he’s doing?”

Johnny turned in his seat and looked out the back window of the cab, but all he could see was headlights trailing close to their bumper, weaving left and right in the lane. The good feeling he’d had started to slip away.

“What is this guy, drunk or something?” Del said in annoyance.

“Del, pull over and let him pass,” Johnny said.

“Why should --”

“Del, *please*.”

The urgency in Johnny’s tone shut him up, and Del eased the truck to the side of the road. The car blew past them with its horn blaring and disappeared into the night.

Johnny leaned back with a sigh of relief as Del brought them back onto the road. Neither of them spoke about what had just happened, neither sure if anything *had* happened. They were halfway back to Johnny’s when Del said, “Uh, John, I think he’s back.”

Johnny twisted quickly in his seat and was blinded by headlights that were quickly gaining on them. Too quickly. Without warning, the car rammed the back of the truck, sending both men jerking forward in their seats.

“Jesus H. Christ!” Del shouted, working hard to keep the truck from getting out of his control.

“Del, go faster!” Johnny shouted back, his eyes on the quickly reapproaching headlights.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Del muttered, sending the accelerator to the floor. The headlights receded, then started to gain again.

“He’s gonna hit us again!”

“Not if I can help it. Hang on!” Del jerked the wheel hard to the left, cutting across the opposite lane of traffic and through a red light. They heard tires squeal behind them, and the headlights made the turn as well.

“You didn’t lose him,” Johnny informed him, hanging onto the dash to keep from being thrown around the inside of the speeding truck. A quick glance at the speedometer told him they were probably going to die if they hit anything at this speed.

“I wasn’t trying to lose him.” Del made a quick right, this time luckily with the green. Again, the headlights stayed with them, gaining a little with every passing block.

“Then what the hell *are* you trying to do?” Johnny demanded.

“This.” Del hit the brakes, bringing the truck to a screeching halt right in front of the police station. Behind them, the car made a quick right, ducking down a side street and out of sight.

As police started swarming out of the building, Johnny turned to Del and offered him a weak grin. “You

never cease to amaze me.”

“Hell, I never cease to amaze myself,” Del replied, but the nonchalance didn’t cover the look in his eyes that said he knew that they’d just been lucky.

Johnny knew it, too. And this time, he felt like his luck was running out.

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

‘You almost got caught.’

“No I didn’t. It wasn’t even close.”

‘You let him trick you.’

“He’s scared.”

‘You let him trick you.’

“He’s afraid of me. They’re all afraid of me.”

‘They went to the movies. They’re not afraid of you. They’re laughing at you.’

“They’re not laughing! They ran. Ran like scared rabbits.”

‘Laughing, Earl. At you. I’ll bet they’re laughing right now, making you the butt of their jokes.’

“They shouldn’t laugh at me.”

‘Finish it, Earl.’

“I’ll make him stop laughing.”

‘Finish it, once and for all.’

“He’ll never laugh again. Not at me. Not at anybody. Not ever.”

‘Finish it.’

“I will. Tonight.”

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

“I already told you, I don’t *know!*” Flopping onto the couch in his apartment, Johnny stared up at the two detectives who had been tag-team questioning him for the past hour. “I didn’t see the car, I didn’t see the driver. All I saw were headlights.”

“What about the license plate?”

Johnny stared at him in disbelief. “If I didn’t see the car, then how the hell could I see the license plate?” he bellowed in frustration.

The detectives were undeterred. “What about the color? Make? American or foreign?”

“How... What... Arghh!” Throwing his hands up in defeat, Johnny groaned. He was saved from further grilling by the phone, the first time in a month he’d been happy to hear it ring. “Hello?”

“Glad to see you made it home safely. There are so many dangerous drivers on the road these days.”

The detectives didn’t need to be listening to know that it was their man on the line. The expression on Johnny’s face told them everything they needed to know. One pounced on the tracer as the other picked up a headset to listen in.

“Yeah, you should know,” Johnny retorted sharply. “You could’ve killed someone tonight.”

A chilling giggle came through the line. “The night’s still young.”

When Johnny left the threat hang unanswered, one of the detectives motioned for him to keep the conversation going. “Why are you doing this?” It was the million dollar question, one of two he really wanted the answer to. The second was ‘when are you going to stop?’

“You make me sick.” The voice was heavy with hate. “Glamorous job, girls hanging on your every word, running from one party to another... Don’t you know it’s against the law to have a fire on the beach?”

Johnny’s mouth hung open. “What? What are you talking about? What does that have --”

“See, that’s just like you, no respect for other people, for their property, for their perfect driving record,” the caller railed. “All you care about is you, you, *you*.” He cackled wickedly. “Well, now’s your chance to care about someone else for a change.”

“What are you *talking* about??” Johnny shouted. “Just stop this! Stop it. Why can’t you just leave me the hell alone!”

There was a long silence. Then, “When was the last time you spoke to your girlfriend?” Then a click and a dial tone.

“Damn, we lost the trace!”

Johnny slammed the receiver down, then picked it back up and started to dial, his heart pounding. “Oh God, please, she’s all right, just tell me she’s all right,” he said softly as it rang. He looked to the detective who’d been listening in for some sign or words of comfort, but all he got was the practiced mask of a professional who’d had to repeat the words ‘I hate to be the one to tell you this, but...’ one too many times in his career. “Come *on*, Barbara...”

“Aloha!” a trio of voices trilled into the phone. Johnny winced at the familiar answering machine recording. “This is Nadine, Barbara, and Phyllis,” the roommates intoned. It sounded as though they were trying to outdo each other in the cutesy department. “If you’re talking to our machine instead of one of us, then we’re either on a flight, or on the beach. Either way, we’re sorry we missed your call, so leave your name, number and who you called for, and we’ll call you back. Aloha!”

After an interminable wait for the beep, Johnny practically shouted into the phone, “Barb! Barb, are you there? Pick up, it’s Johnny. Barb, I need to talk to you!” He waited, his hand gripping the phone so tightly it

began to ache. “Phyllis? Nadine? If any of you are there, I need to talk to you *right now!*”

The detectives exchanged looks, neither having to voice what they were thinking.

Johnny finally hung up the phone and looked at each of them helplessly. One of the detectives took the phone and started to dial while the other took Johnny’s elbow and led him into the kitchen, out of earshot. “Mr. Gage, we’ll have a unit get right over to her place and check things out.”

Johnny waited for something a little more reassuring, something along the lines of ‘don’t worry, Mr. Gage, I’m sure she’s fine,’ or ‘I’ve dealt with this kind of nutso before, and I haven’t had one follow through on a threat to harm anyone yet.’ No, he didn’t say those things, as much as Johnny needed to hear them. Instead he said, “Want a beer?”

Sinking into a chair at the kitchen table, Johnny nodded silently. As the detective rummaged in the refrigerator, Johnny said, “She’s dead, isn’t she?”

The detective pressed the cold bottle into the paramedic’s hands. “We’ll know something soon,” was all the commitment he would offer.

Johnny put the beer down and laid his head on his arms. “I don’t think I can handle this much longer...”

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When the phone rang, Johnny felt as though he was going to jump right out of his skin. The detective picked it up. “Mayer.” He listened for a moment, nodded a few times, grunted “uh-huh” several times, then looked sharply over at the distraught paramedic. “I see. Okay, thanks.” He hung up.

Johnny stood slowly, gripping the back of the wooden chair. “Well?”

“She’s fine, Mr. Gage.”

It wasn’t what he’d expected, and at first he thought he was hearing what he wanted to hear instead of what the detective had actually said. “She’s okay?” he asked cautiously.

The detective nodded. “Mad as hell at the cops who nearly broke down her door, but fine.”

Johnny sank back into the chair, the relief making him weak-kneed. “Well, why didn’t she answer the phone?”

Mayer cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Evidently she was slightly... preoccupied.”

“Preoccupied?” Johnny repeated.

“By a Mr. Kevin Parker,” Mayer recited from memory. “Works for the same airline as Ms. King. We’ll be cross-referencing his alibis with the dates of the incidents, but it’s my guess that it’s going to be a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He’s not our man.”

Johnny was silent for a second as he contemplated the rather abrupt, but not altogether devastating, end of his relationship, then shrugged his shoulders. “Huh.”

“The good thing here, Mr. Gage,” Mayer continued, “is that the perp is starting to bluff. He’s getting

frustrated at not being able to get to you, and that means he's going to start making mistakes. This could be the break we've been waiting for. We'll keep a watch on Ms. King, of course," he added, "but I doubt he'd warn us before he made a move on her."

"So, what now?"

Mayer glanced at his watch. It was after one in the morning. "Now, we get some rest. It's still his ball game, but I think we just got the break we've been waiting for."

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Laying in bed, Johnny tossed from one side to the other, readjusted his pillow, kicked off the covers, pulled them back up, then compromised and stuck one foot out from under them. The alarm clock showed he'd been going through these contortions for close to forty-five minutes, but he felt as wide awake as when he'd first closed his eyes. The events of the evening had brought him to several adrenaline highs, and now he was paying the price.

Scrunching the pillow up, he settled onto his back and threw his arm over his face. *'Just think about something else,'* he told himself. *'Think about the cruise Del keeps talking about going on to Mexico. Lots of chicks on cruises. I'll need to work a ton of overtime to pay for it, but it'll be worth it.'*

Thinking about the trip worked, and slowly his mind began to drift. He was on the verge of falling asleep, awash in visions of bikini-clad vixens cavorting on a sandy beach in Mexico, when something the caller had said came back to him with sledgehammer clarity. *"Don't you know it's against the law to have a fire on the beach?"*

Johnny tore the covers back and sat up quickly, his heart pounding. He'd been following him. He'd followed him to the beach that day, back when all of this had first started. Barbara hadn't been at the beach that day. She'd been held on a layover in Hawaii for two days.

"When was the last time you spoke to your girlfriend?"

Johnny groped for the lamp on the night stand and stared at the photo that sat propped against it.

Barbara hadn't been there that day. But Jackie had.

He hurdled over the bed and out into the hallway, stumbling into the wall as he went, scaring the hell out of the two detectives. They were both in half-crouches, hands on their guns by the time he came to a stop at the couch. Ignoring them, he grabbed for the phone.

"Mr. Gage?"

He stared at the dial for a second, his mind blank. What was her number? He knew it by heart, why the hell couldn't he think of it now?

"Mr. Gage?" the detective said again, more forcefully.

Ignoring him, Johnny's fingers finally spun the dial. *God, please let me be wrong.*

Aggravated, Mayer made himself be heard. "Mr. Gage!" When he saw that he had Johnny's attention, at least partially, he asked, "Is there a problem?"

“I don’t know,” Johnny admitted, still fumbling with the dial. “I just... I don’t think it was Barbara he was talking about before.”

“Well, who then?”

“Jackie.” He listened to the phone ring for over a minute before he slid the receiver back down. In a moment of inspiration, he grabbed his address book.

“Now what?” Mayer asked.

“Her friend across the hall, Meagan,” Johnny explained, finding the number and dialing.

A sleepy voice answered. “Hello?”

“Meagan, it’s John Gage.” He rushed on before she could question why he was calling at such an ungodly hour. “Meg, I need you to do me a huge favor, okay, and I swear, I’ll explain everything later, but for now I just need you to go knock on Jackie’s door and see if she’s home.”

“Johnny, it’s almost three in the morning! Of *course* she’s home.”

Not caring if he sounded like a lunatic, Johnny begged, “*Please*, Meagan, just check for me, okay? It’s very, very important.”

With a sigh, she laid down the phone. He could hear he walk away, and faintly he could hear knocking. The knocking became louder, and he heard her calling Jackie’s name. Every second that passed added another brick to the growing pile in the pit of his stomach. Finally, Meagan came back on the line. “Johnny, I don’t think she’s in there,” she said, sounding more awake and slightly concerned. “Did you try calling her?”

“Yeah, I did.” Another brick.

“Maybe she just went to visit relatives,” one of the detectives suggested.

Willing to grasp at any straw that was handed to him, Johnny said to Meagan, “Is it possible she went to see Joe?”

“His ship’s somewhere near Manila,” she replied. “He won’t be back to the states for at least another two months.”

“Did she mention anything about going back east to visit friends? Anything?” Johnny asked. He could hear the desperation in his own voice.

“No, she didn’t. Johnny, what’s going on? Is something wrong? Is Jackie in some kind of trouble or something?”

Or something. “I don’t know, Meagan,” Johnny lied. “I just... can’t seem to track her down. Listen, you have her call me if you see her, okay?” He hung up and sank onto the couch. “He got to her. I know it.”

“We’ve already had one false alarm tonight, Mr. Gage,” Mayer said, picking up the phone. “Let’s not get worked up over what might be another.”

Trying to take solace in that slim possibility, Johnny sat numbly on the couch while Mayer placed a call for a unit to get over to Jackie's apartment. After that it was a waiting game, a game he wasn't very good at playing. He paced, sat, got a glass of water that he didn't drink, exchanged it for a beer he didn't drink, then paced some more until the phone rang. He got no more information from Mayer's expression than he had during the earlier call, but he did get a creepy sense of déjà vu from the whole thing.

When Mayer hung up, he turned to Johnny. What Johnny heard in his mind was him saying, "She's fine." What he really said was, "Mr. Gage, we're going to need some information from you."

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Earl sat on the bottom step of the stairs to his basement, unmoving, mesmerized by the sight of the unconscious girl on the cot a few yards away.

'It's time to finish it, Earl.'

"But I'm so tired," he said softly. He knew he wouldn't wake her, but he still felt the need to speak in hushed tones.

'Call him.'

"I need to sleep."

'Call him!'

Earl sighed. "In the morning." He stood up, but instead of going up the stairs, he walked over to Jackie and brushed away the hair that had fallen across her face. A large, angry lump marked her forehead, and his hand hovered over it, but he refrained from touching it. "I didn't mean for that to happen," he told her.

'Yes, you did.'

"No!" He sounded embarrassed.

'She scratched you. You had no choice. She deserved it.'

His hand went to his cheek, where Jackie's nails had dug four long furrows. He hadn't expected her to fight back like that. He'd forced her car off the road so easily, so unlike the pickup he'd chased earlier that night. But then she'd locked herself in the car, and he'd had to break a window to get to her, and when he did, it was like trying to get a hold on a hissing, spitting wildcat. She was small, though, and it wasn't too hard to drag her to his car, but then she'd scratched him, and there were headlights coming, and he had no choice but to slam her head against the side of the car, just to make her be quiet. It had worked, because she hadn't stirred since.

'She deserved it!' the voice said again. *'She's just a whore, one of his dozens of whores. She doesn't deserve your pity.'*

Nodding, Earl stepped back. The voice was right, of course. It always was. "I'll call him tomorrow."

'Tie her up.'

Dutifully, Earl went to the garage and got some laundry cord. He bound the unconscious girl's hands and feet, then used a strip of duct tape to cover her mouth. He left her eyes uncovered, because she'd already seen him, and that meant she was going to have to die right along with her boyfriend. But that was tomorrow. Tonight, he could still be compassionate, so he fetched a blanket and covered her against the chill of the damp basement. Then he went upstairs, turned out the lights, and went to bed.

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

When Roy showed up at Johnny's door early the next morning, he was greeted by a haggard shadow of his partner. Dark circles were etched deeply under haunted, bloodshot eyes. He looked as though he'd aged ten years since he'd last seen him.

Johnny waved him in. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks." Roy followed him to the kitchen. "Any word?"

"No." After pouring them each a cup, Johnny brought them to the table and they sat. "They checked her apartment, and it didn't look like she made it that far. No one seems to know what happened to her after she got off work at nine." He let out a deep, shaky sigh and ran a hand through his tousled hair. "If anything happens to her, I don't know how I'm gonna live with myself."

"I'm sure she's fine," Roy said, even though he wasn't sure of any such thing. In fact, he had a very bad feeling about things, but he wasn't about to share that with his friend. Johnny was already doing a good enough job of doom saying without his help. He picked up the stack of photos that were laying on the center of the table. "From the beach?"

Glancing at the pictures almost brought a hint of a smile to Johnny's face. "Yeah." Then the reason for the photos being out came back to him, and the veil of anxiety dropped back over him again. "The police wanted a picture of Jackie. To take to the hospitals. And the morgue." He got to his feet and started to pace. "I just wish I knew what he wanted. God, this waiting is driving me crazy!"

As if on cue, the phone rang. Johnny nearly dove on it. "Hello?" His anxious look dissolved to disappointment, and he held the phone out to the detective. "For you."

There was a brief conversation, during which the detective took notes and uttered several "uh-huhs," before hanging up and announcing, "They found her car."

Johnny stared at him. "Well, what does that mean, 'they found her car'? Did they find her? Do they know what happened? Is she all right?"

"Her car was found off the side of..." He referred to his notes. "Cook Street. There was body damage that would suggest that it had been rammed and possibly run off the road."

Johnny closed his eyes, visions of the headlights from the car that had chased Del's truck coming to mind. He could only imagine how terrified Jackie must have been, and his guilt level skyrocketed.

"The driver's side window was smashed in," the detective continued. "They found Ms. Sinclair's purse and gym bag inside, but no sign of her."

Johnny sank onto the couch, head in his hands.

“You should try and look at that as a good thing, Mr. Gage,” the detective told him. “If he didn’t just kill her right then and there, then there’s a good chance that she’s still alive.”

“A chance?” Johnny repeated miserably.

“The gym bag could tell us where she was after she left work. Do you know what gym she uses? We’ll need to interview the people there to see if anyone saw anything that might be any help.”

With a small nod, Johnny replied, “Yeah, she gave me a guest pass once, but I never got around to using it. It’s on the desk somewhere.” He got up and started rummaging through the pile of paperwork that cluttered the top of the roll top desk. As organized as he could be at work, somehow he was just never able to carry it over into his personal life.

His hand fell on the light blue ticket he was looking for, but his eye was caught by the small wrinkled page of notebook paper sticking out of the pile next to it. He pulled it out and groaned to himself, then brought both things back to the couch with him. He handed the blue guest pass to the detective. “Ryan’s Gym,” he said. “It’s not too far from where she works.” While the detective got on the phone to pass the information along, Johnny tried to smooth out the second piece of paper.

“What’s that?” Roy asked.

“The name of the guy I tapped into the back of a few weeks ago.” His brow furrowed. “He was supposed to call me when he got the estimate on his car, but he never did. With everything that was going on, I completely forgot about it.”

“Well,” Roy said, “maybe he tried to call after you got your number changed.”

“Oh, man!” Johnny shook his head in irritation at himself. “The guy probably thinks I stiffed him.”

“I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“Yeah, probably. He seemed like a really nice guy.” Johnny laid the paper down on the end table.

Hanging up the phone, the detective said, “We may have something.”

“What?” Johnny asked immediately, literally coming to the edge of his seat.

“Several of Ms. Sinclair’s coworkers who came on at the same time she was leaving remember seeing a strange car in the parking lot. They said they noticed it because it was parked all the way at the end of the lot, away from all the others, and because of the unusual green color. It was a two-door sedan, older model, but no one can quite agree on what make.”

‘I doubt they still make that rancid green color anymore.’ Johnny tensed as the errant memory came floating into his head.

“That would fit with the paint scrapings they got from her car.”

‘Looks like someone threw up after eating pea soup.’

“It’s just too bad no one got the license plate number,” the detective continued, “but at least it’s a start. Maybe the people at the gym will be able to fill in the blanks a little.”

“Oh my God,” Johnny said softly, his eyes going to the notebook page and the name and phone number scrawled there. “I had it all the time...”

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“I know you’re awake, so don’t bother pretending.” Earl stood over Jackie, hands on his hips. He watched her eyelids twitch slightly, then slowly open and look up at him.

‘She’s afraid of you. You can see it in her eyes.’

“You shouldn’t try to fool me,” he scolded her. “It’s not nice to try and fool me.”

‘It’s good that she’s afraid of you. It means she respects you.’

“You’re probably pretty thirsty, huh?” He watched her give a hesitant nod. “I’ll take your gag off if you promise not to scream.” Again, a nod. He reached for the corner of the tape, then added, “If you scream, you know I’ll have to kill you.” Satisfied with the terror that shone from her eyes, he yanked the tape off.

Jackie let out a soft mewl of pain as the tape took skin with it.

Earl grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged her into a sitting position, propping her up against the wall, hands still bound in front at the wrist. When he tried to press the glass of water he’d brought into her hands, however, she shook her head. “My hands are numb,” she croaked, her parched throat aching for a sip of the water. “I can’t hold it.”

“Oh.” After a second’s thought, Earl held the glass to her mouth, carefully tipping it so she could drink. She gratefully gulped half the glass before he pulled it away. “Better?”

“Yes,” she answered softly. “Thank you.” Jackie’s eyes darted around the room while he turned away to put the glass on the stairs. She was in a basement. Where, though? And why? She took it as a good sign that he’d cared enough to offer her water, so she took a chance and asked, “Do you think you could maybe untie my hands? They really are numb, and they’re starting to hurt, actually.”

‘No, don’t you do it! It’s a trick! She’s trying to trick you!’

Earl contemplated Jackie for a second, then came back and undid the ropes without a word.

Massaging her wrists, she smiled faintly at him. “Thank you.”

He smiled back. “You’re welcome.” Looking at the lump that was turning an ugly purple on her forehead he asked, “Would you like some aspirin?”

‘Don’t you be stupid, Earl!’ the voice screamed. *‘Don’t you start being nice to her!’*

“Yes, please, my head is really killing me.” She flinched slightly as the words left her mouth.

Earl didn’t notice. “Be right back.” He took the water glass to refill it and bounded up the steps.

‘You left her alone, Earl! How stupid was that?’

“Stop calling me stupid!” Earl hissed, slamming the medicine cabinet shut.

‘You untied her, then left her alone!’

“I didn’t untie her feet,” Earl pointed out testily. He ran the water for a few seconds to let it get cool, then filled the glass. “She’s not going to do anything.” Taking the glass and bottle of aspirin, he started back down the stairs. “If you’re hungry, I have some muffins...” He trailed off as he saw Jackie working frantically at the rope around her ankles. She had it almost undone, and let out a sob that was half terror and half frustration when she saw him.

With a roar of anger, Earl flung the things he carried aside, the glass shattering on the concrete floor. “This is how you thank me?” he bellowed. He grabbed her wrists and yanked them upward, eliciting a cry of pain from her. “I try to be nice to you, and you try to get away?”

“You *kidnapped* me!” Jackie screamed back, struggling futilely against him. “How is that being nice?”

Earl shoved her face down onto the cot, reaching for the rope he’d removed from her wrists. “I should’ve expected it from you,” he muttered angrily as he retied her, this time with her arms drawn up painfully behind her back. “I should’ve expected you to be just like him.”

“Just like who?” Jackie sobbed, fighting hard to catch her breath now that she was face down. “What are you talking about? What do you *want* with me?”

“Just like your boyfriend, just like him, only thinking about yourself, no one else.” He finished the final knot with a hard yank and stood back. “But you’ll be sorry. You’ll both be sorry.”

“My boyfriend?” Jackie repeated, confused. “I don’t...” Her eyes widened as it all started to make sense. “You’re the one,” she said, her voice trembling. “You’re *him*.”

‘See,’ the voice said smugly, *‘fear means respect.’*

“Please,” Jackie whispered, “please just let me go.”

“It’ll all be over soon,” Earl assured her. He ripped a new piece of duct tape from the roll and placed it over her mouth. “Don’t worry. I’m going to make your boyfriend suffer, but I promise to kill you quick.”

Jackie’s eyes went wide at the words. She fought against the ropes that bound her, but there was no give in them at all. As the lights went out and the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut, she screamed against the gag, but there was no one there to hear her.

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“Is that the car?”

Face pressed to the window in the rear of the unmarked police car, Johnny nodded. “Yeah, that’s it. See, you can see the dent in the trunk from here.”

The detective in the passenger seat got out and made his way across the street to where the pea-green Nova was parked in a driveway. He circled around to the front of it, keeping a wary eye on the bungalow, then started back across the street. “Body damage to the front end and right quarter panel,” he announced into the window. “Looks like we’ve found our man.”

His partner slid out from behind the wheel. When Johnny reached to open his door, the detective placed a hand on it, keeping it shut. "You'll have to stay in the car, Mr. Gage."

His fingers still wrapped around the door handle, Johnny protested, "But what if --"

"In the car, Mr. Gage," the detective ordered. His tone brooked no argument, and Johnny reluctantly leaned back in his seat, helpless to do anything but watch as the detectives and several uniformed officers got into position around the front door of the peaceful looking bungalow.

Roy placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, and watched with him.

Things seemed to start out peacefully. The detectives knocked on the door, and after a minute or two it was opened. Johnny could barely make out the face of the man who appeared in the open doorway, but he was almost positive it was the man he'd had the accident with. The screen door opened, and the two detectives entered the house. Minutes dragged by.

"What's taking so long?" Johnny fumed, his hand again curling around the door handle.

Any response Roy was going to offer was cut off by the sound of a gunshot from within the bungalow, followed by two more in quick succession. Both men were out of the car before the sound had faded.

The scene inside was chaos. Police were swarming around, one shouting for an ambulance, another for the coroner's wagon. The two paramedics went down a small hallway to where everyone's attention seemed to be focused. Sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, one of the detectives had one hand clamped to his arm, his suit jacket soaked with blood. "It's just a flesh wound," he assured Roy when he knelt to take a look.

Johnny stepped past them to the bedroom, where he found the very nice Mr. Bellovin sprawled on the floor, a pool of blood slowly inching its way out from his body. When he attempted to check on him, one of the uniformed officers grabbed his arm. "Crime scene, pal."

"I'm a paramedic," Johnny explained. "I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do for him."

The cop shook his head. "Only person who's gonna do anything for him is the coroner."

With a small nod, Johnny backed out into the hall, where Roy had helped the detective remove his jacket and was instructing one of the officers to check the medicine cabinet for antiseptic and bandages. Roy looked up and gave a dismissive shake of his head. "I can handle this. Go ahead."

As Johnny took off towards the living room, the detective scowled. "Should've never happened."

"What's that?"

"This," the detective said, glancing down at his wounded arm. "Bastard caught us off guard. The way he answered the door, invited us in.... He didn't give away a thing, just smiled and seemed right at ease. Just a real nice guy."

Roy seemed to recall Johnny once describing him exactly the same way. "What happened?"

"When we asked for his car registration, he came down to his bedroom, and then..." He indicated his arm.

“This. He had a whole arsenal in there. Looks like he was planning a bloodbath. You’re friend’s real lucky we stopped him when we did.”

Swallowing hard, Roy started cleaning his wound with the supplies that had been handed to him. “Yeah, that’s Johnny. Mr. Lucky.”

After leaving Roy to tend to the wounded detective, Johnny hurried into the living room, unsure of where he should even be looking. It was a small bungalow, and he’d already seen most of it, with no sign at all of Jackie. There was nothing that said she was even here. Or even still alive. He ducked into the kitchen, nearly bumped into a uniformed officer, then stopped at the back door. Frustrated, he turned and called out, “Jackie?” He retraced his steps back into the living room. “Jackie?”

“Sir?” The cop he’d nearly bumped into caught his attention, then pointed to the open door that led to the basement.

Johnny bounded past him, taking the stairs down two at a time, heart racing as he realized that the cop hadn’t offered any indication as to whether he was going to find her alive or dead. He hit the concrete and came to an abrupt stop, taking in the sight of Jackie -- alive! -- having a rope removed from around her legs. She looked like hell, but she was alive, and he felt a quick surge of relief release the knot in his chest. “Jackie.”

She looked past the officer who had finished untying her. “Johnny!” She tried to stand, but her legs still hadn’t gotten their circulation back and she teetered dangerously. In two long strides Johnny had her in his embrace, and she flung her arms around his neck, sobbing.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, tightening his hold on her. “You’re safe. It’s over.”

“He-- he was going to kill you,” she sobbed in hitching breaths, “and-- and me.”

Johnny rubbed her back consolingly. “He can’t hurt us, Jackie. He’s dead. He’ll never hurt us again.” But even as he said it, he had a feeling that the specter of Mr. Earl Bellovin was going to be haunting them all for a very long time.

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“Damn!”

“What?”

“Lost my marshmallow.”

“Here.” Johnny retrieved a fresh one from the bag and popped it onto the end of Jackie’s stick.

“Thanks.” She smiled and put it into the flames at the edge of the bonfire. “Think they’re ever going to come back?” she asked of their missing friends. Roy and Joanne had excused themselves to go take a walk on the beach well over an hour ago, and Del had escorted his latest girlfriend, Sandra, in the opposite direction not long after, mumbling something about wanting to show her Jupiter aligning with Mars, which had nearly sent Jackie into hysterics.

“You can’t beat a night like tonight for romance,” Johnny commented, looking up at the clear sky. The moon was full and hung low, giving the impression it was closer than usual.

“And you’re stuck here with me,” Jackie teased, pulling her marshmallow out and blowing on it. The outer crust was a delicate golden brown.

“So how come you can cook marshmallows without burning them, but everything else gets incinerated?” Johnny asked, smirking.

“I grew up on Long Island,” she reminded him, taking a tentative bite. “I practically lived at the beach, and roasting marshmallows was a requirement.”

“Ah.” He pulled his own stick from the fire, and shot Jackie a dirty look when she giggled at the charred remains that clung to the end of it.

“I can see you haven’t done a lot of this,” she said. Sliding the rest of hers from the stick, she offered it to him.

“Thanks.” Popping it in his mouth, he got two more from the bag and fed them onto their sticks.

“So, how’s Barbara?” Jackie asked.

“History.”

“That’s too bad.”

Johnny gave her a look. “You hated her.”

“Yeah,” Jackie agreed, “I did. But it’s the polite thing to say.”

That got a laugh. They roasted their marshmallows for a few minutes in silence, then Johnny asked, “How have you been sleeping?”

“Fine.” Jackie pulled her stick from the fire, checked it, then put it back in. “Want to go see an Angels game next week?”

“Jackie...”

“They’re playing the Yankees. Should be a good game.”

“Jackie,” Johnny said again. He was used to her diversion tactics, and wasn’t about to let her get away with it.

She sighed. “I’m fine, most nights.”

“What about the nightmares?” he prodded.

“Just once in awhile,” she admitted reluctantly. “But the doctor said they’ll go away entirely. Eventually.” She pulled the stick from the fire. “They’re done.”

Johnny removed his stick, but refused to be dissuaded from the conversation. “Jackie, if there’s anything I can do...”

“I thought I told you to stop doing that.”

His brow furrowed. “Doing what?”

“Acting all guilty and apologetic.” She nibbled at the marshmallow. “Enough already. I’m fine, you’re fine, let’s just get back to our lives, okay?”

Johnny regarded her a moment. Everyone had been telling him that, but it was still hard for him to shake off the feeling of responsibility. Everything that had happened to his friends was directly related to him, to their connection to him, so that ultimately made him responsible, didn’t it?

Recognizing the pensive expression on the young paramedic’s face, Jackie said, “He was insane, Johnny. The detectives said that after they read his journal, they were surprised he hadn’t gone after somebody sooner. He wrote about people he met every day, about how they hated him, and about how much he wanted to make them pay, to kill them.” She reached up and cupped his cheek softly. “It wasn’t you, John Gage, it was him, so stop trying to take the blame for what he did.”

Johnny smiled and raised his hand to hers. Removing it from his cheek, he kissed her palm. “You have an amazing way of always putting things into perspective.”

There was a fleeting shadow across her face. “Not always,” she said softly, remembering a time when she was very good at playing the guilt game herself. Shaking it off, she retrieved her hand and got to her feet, brushing loose sand from her butt. “So, are we going to let the moonlight go to waste, or do I get a walk on the beach?” she asked, hands on hips, the smile on her face teasing.

“I make it a point to never disappoint a lady,” Johnny answered, getting up and offering her his arm. She took it, and they headed off towards the surf, leaving both the bonfire and their old ghosts behind.

~fini~