

BY LES ONE

The day had turned into evening and the rain that had threatened to fall passed over without incident. Many people seemed to be out and about, taking advantage of the improvement in the weather. One man, however, paid no attention to any of it.

Johnny Smith sat alone in his darkened house. Normally, the isolation brought on by his unwanted fame left him feeling lonely, but for once he was glad of it. Walt had called him the day before to ask for his help. A girl had gone missing and there had been no leads. When the girl's parents had asked for Johnny to find her, Walt had agreed to call him.

The girl hadn't been seen since the previous morning when she was on her way to school and there had been a search along the route she always took to get there. No trace of her had been found, except for the backpack that she carried to school. Johnny had taken the bag in both hands, for once wanting a vision to

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come, hoping to get something that would give Walt and his deputies a clue to find the missing girl. The vision had come, but there was nothing to help them. He had tried several times, touching each item in the backpack. He had gotten a vision each time. He knew that she was blindfolded and locked in a small dark room, alone and terrified. Still there was nothing to identify her location. The house had also been searched for clues and Johnny again had tried to give them something to work with, but after three unsuccessful hours Walt had taken Johnny home.

Now Johnny sat where he had been for hours, thinking of the girl, his visions, and what might be happening to her. Some considered his second sight a gift, but at times like this he knew it was more of a curse than a blessing. Though he knew the girl was out there somewhere and that she needed help, there was nothing he could do for her.

Suddenly, he was startled out of his thoughts by the ringing of the phone. He considered not answering it. It could be Walt asking for his help again or even worse, it could be reporters asking him about the case and the missing girl. Then, even though he couldn't say why, Johnny got the feeling that the call might be important, so he decided to take it. With a sigh, he stood and picked up the receiver.

BY CALIFZONWOMAN TWO

The second he touched the phone, an image hit him with tornado force, throwing him off balance for an instant.

*"What have you done with her?" Philip screamed into the phone.*  
*"Why are you doing this?"*

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Johnny used his arm to steady himself against the wall, clutching his cane with his other hand. Balancing the phone between his cheek and his shoulder, he spoke into the receiver. "Phil?"

The girl's father responded. "Yeh, it's me, Mr. Smith. It's Phil Harden." Johnny was surprised at the evenness of Philip's voice. He seemed so calm and relaxed, almost deliberately so.

"I just wanted to tell you Louise and I really appreciate you coming over here and all. But Cara's all right. It was just a misunderstanding. "

The vision returned, replaying exactly as before. *"What have you done with her?" Philip's voice was anything but calm. "Why are you doing this?"*

"Look, Mr. Harden - Phil," Johnny said. He looked around the kitchen, trying to find the right words. "I know you've heard from the kidnappers. You need to let me help you."

There was silence on the other end, but Johnny knew the terror Philip was feeling.

"No," Philip said quietly. "No, everything's fine. Thanks, anyway. We're okay."

Johnny placed the phone in its cradle, wishing he could have learned more from his vision. If only he could control this gift of his better!

After considering his options for a few minutes, he knew what he had to do. The click-clicking of his cane on the tile floor echoed through the cavernous rooms as he approached the hallway table, grabbing his keys. Moving toward the front door, the clicking grew faster, seeming to speak for the urgency of his

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movements. Within minutes the cane was in the back of the jeep as Johnny sped out through the gated driveway, turning toward town.

"Hey, Johnny." Walt sat back in his chair, his legs on the corner of his desk, crossed at the ankles. "Turned out to be a false alarm. But I'm glad the girl's okay." He thumbed casually through papers on the clipboard in his lap.

"No, she's not," Johnny said quickly.

Walt looked up at him. Oh, no, he's got that look again, he thought.

"What do you mean? Mr. Harden called and said his daughter's okay. Was at a friend's place or something. " Walt was trying hard to be complacent, but just the fact that Johnny was here meant trouble.

"The kidnappers called," Johnny said. His words came out fast, clipped. "That's why Philip called you and me. The kidnappers still have her. They told the Hardens to keep us out of it."

Walt dropped his legs and sat up straight in the chair. "What else did you see?" he said. "Do you know who they are?"

Johnny shook his head, looking at the floor, wishing something more would come. Then he looked directly at Walt.

"No," he said evenly. "But I know they're not asking for money."

#### BY BLUE THREE

Walt furrows his brows and looks at Johnny. "What do they want?" Johnny stands and starts for the door, "That's what we have to find out."

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As they are leaving, Sarah walks into the station. "Oh no...what's going on this time. The only time I see you together...well, it's never a GOOD thing."

Walt hugs his wife and kisses her while Johnny tries to look anywhere but at them. "Johnny has brought something new to the case of that missing girl I was talking with you about. It's enough to at least check it out. I shouldn't be long. We still on for the movies tonight, or has Stillson found something else for you to do again?"

Sarah snakes her arm around his neck purring, "Oh no sheriff, even if he were President, you are not getting out of taking me on a date tonight."

Walt smiles and tells her he will call after he and Johnny have finished their business.

Walt and Johnny are driving through town talking about what the Hardens may be hiding from them concerning their daughter's kidnapping. As money has been eliminated as a motive for the crime, there must be something more to than what they have been told by Phil. Some motive worth the chance of keeping the authorities out of it all.

As they pull up to the house, Johnny stares, unblinking, as Phil comes out to meet them on the front porch.

"Sheriff...How can I help you?"

Walt hold out his hand to shake Harden's, "Well Mr. Harden, I'm just here to follow up on your report. I need to speak with your daughter before I can close the file on her case. I'm sure you understand."

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Johnny, who is standing off to the side of the porch, sees a barrette lying on the floorboards and leans over to pick it up.

"Mr. Smith, I don't think...," Harden says anxiously.

*Johnny sees the girl sitting on the front porch swing trying to remove the barrette from her hair, but it's caught. She hears her father arguing with someone over the phone..."I told you, I'm OUT of it! I have a family now. A new life. You can't expect me to be a part of all of this now!" The girl seems frightened, gets up and walks off of the porch, her barrette falling to the floorboards as she goes...*

Johnny snaps back to reality once more. He looks at Harden with an accusatory but questioning glance. "I think you had better invite us in Mr. Harden, and tell us what is really going on here."

Harden looks out to the lane, obviously nervous about something. "Alright, but not here. I can't do it here."

#### BY PAMALA FOUR

Its unexpected and I can feel desperation hanging in the air around us as this man, who seems to be hiding something, grabs hold of my arm to convey what he dare not speak.

The images come to me as I think he hoped they would but I have difficulty making any sense of them.

These moments in time are often hard to understand but there is something about the montage flashing through my mind that I cannot find an order too.

I think perhaps he can sense my confusion as I feel his grip tighten on my forearm, outside my mind, in an physical attempt to clarify what whirls about inside it.

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Maybe it helps, or maybe I've just begin to find order to what it is that I see. Either way it is clear that I am seeing visions prompted by this man that do not belong with him.

Somehow he is serving as a conduit and I see many visions belonging to another through this man's touch.

I pry his hand from me the instant I realize what I have seen.

" I know why they have her !"

Walt steps close, eager for if only partially believing the answers to come. Unlike Walt's move toward my side the man across from me steps away.

He says nothing. There is nothing for him to say or do but wait for me to tell the secret he's hidden since his daughter was just a toddler.

Walt grabs hold of my arm frustrated by my silence and the nearly electric tension suspended between myself and the missing girls father.

" For God's sake John! What! What did you see... why do they have her?"

I watch the child's fathers gaze drift down in shame and defeat while my own gaze, be it real or just in my mind, drifts back to the visions I'd just witnessed.

As if the moment is still upon me I still feel the presence of those innocent eyes within me as I speak what no one else has ever been able to say about Cara Harden.

" Because she's like me Walt.... They've taken her because she sees the visions "

## BY AKIRAMOM FIVE

Walt sputters incredulously. "What do you mean 'she's like you'?! How is that even possible?". He keeps glancing between Johnny and Phil Harden hoping to catch a glimpse of the truth as to what is going on.

"I don't know how it's possible Walt but I know that she does. Isn't that right Phil?".

Mr. Harden glances around nervously - "Uhh maybe you gentlemen better come inside. We can talk privately."

As Walt and Johnny follow him up the gravel driveway, minds spinning at the possibilities, the familiar crunch-crunch of shoes on stones is interrupted when Johnny's cane hits a loose pebble and goes out from under him. Johnny is unceremoniously dumped on the ground, hip screaming out in pain.

"John you okay?" Walt picks up the pace to cover the few feet between himself and Johnny's landing spot.

"Ahhh ..." Johnny barely has time to cry out before ....

Night ... dark van screeches up to the bottom of this driveway...door slides open, men jump out ... pounding up the driveway...hand over mouth ... fear, panic ... silent screams "DADDY!" ... "NO! You can't have her. She's no threat to you! Leave us alone!" ... "It's not your decision to make." ... door slams shut, van speeding off ...

Johnny looks up. Phil Harden's face is noticeably more pinched, sweat beads beginning to form on his temple. Walt bends down, cupping his hand under Johnny's elbow as he leverages himself up with the traitorous cane.

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"I know that look John. Spit it out. What'd you see?". Walt can tell this day is rapidly progressing from bad to worse with no end in sight.

"It's not safe to talk here". Johnny's mind flashes to how many run-ins with people in vans he's had. Between the government, major corporations, the Mob, Stillson and his favorite stalker ... It's never a good thing he notes wryly to himself. "But we have a lot to discuss. I can understand the need for discretion here Mr. Harden, but you DO need our help. Do you think you can meet us at the diner on Route 48 without being followed?".

Phil Harden's face has now gone a slight shade of green as he realizes he will not be able to extract himself from this. A slight look of relief is also present - though whether at the prospect of actually having help or at the idea of getting the sheriff and John Smith out of his driveway as quickly as possible it is hard to say.

"Yes I can meet you there" Phil stammers "In one hour".

Walt's hand hovers at Johnny's elbow for the first few steps back down the driveway, hoping to avert any more tumbles. Johnny's limp is greatly pronounced as he makes his way gingerly down, attempting to favor the sore hip as much as possible.

When settled back in Walt's cruiser, Walt confronts Johnny.

"Do you want to tell me what the hell is going on?". The slightly peeved tone to Walt's voice is perceptible.

"I will Walt but for now please just drive. And make sure we're not followed. I'm not sure what Phil Harden is involved in but it is not something we can take lightly. Not if we want to see that little girl again."

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## BY JERIKOR SIX

Johnny's hip was torturing him as Walt drove hurriedly to the diner. He had never taken a fall that horrible before, and now he felt as if spikes were being driven into leg. He propped it on the seat in Walt's cruise, stretching it to the length. Resting the cane against the front seat, he started to massage his leg, though it hurt him to do it in front of Walt. But the pain in his leg had prompted it enough.

"Are you okay, John?" Walt asked, his voice testy, his eyes glittering in the mirror back at Johnny. "You don't seem too good."

"I'm fine," Johnny replied, gritting his teeth. "You know me. I'm playing for your sympathy, man. Don't let me get to you." The massaging was helping only a little, but he continued.

"Don't look too good," Walt retorted, turning onto the ramp that would take them straight to the diner.

"Walt, you're worrying about a cripple. The very word "cripple" brings to mind a defect person who is hurt and pains. Cripples do not need worrying because they hurt all the time. Now drive."

"You've had time to work this out, haven't you?"

"Oh, I've only had a few hours every day to work that out," Johnny answered, seeing the diner come into view rather quickly. "There it is. Do you see Harden's car?"

"No," Walt said, scanning the driveway. "He's a jumpy sort, wouldn't you say?"

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"That's because he's hiding something," Johnny sighed. "He has things to tell us and he will, somehow. We have to make him. He knows things about his daughter that can help us."

"Johnny, what did you see?" Walt suddenly demanded, and Johnny instinctively knew that Walt had been burning to bring this up ever since they had left Phil Harden's home.

"Okay, Walt, you win." He painfully recalled. "A van came up and took the girl away. It was black. Harden watched as they snatched the girl. He told them that she wasn't a threat, but that it wasn't his decision to make."

"This day has been going downhill since the sun came up," Walt sorrowed.

"Oh, don't worry Walt. I'll buy you a beer." Johnny said it good-naturedly as he painfully slid down from the high cruiser.

"I don't drink."

"By the end of this day, you will." Grabbing his cane, he tested his leg. He felt wobbly and pained, but he would manage. Leaning heavily on the cane, he lurched forward with Walt following, hovering around him.

They entered the diner and seated in a high booth far away from other people. They ordered plates to make it look like they were simply traveling. Of course, Walt's uniform gave away things, but who would question an officer?

Johnny impatiently looked at his watch, rubbing his leg with one of his hands. "It's been an hour," he said, choking, really not believing that it had taken them that long to get to the diner and have their food. "And Harden's not here."

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"He had to make sure he wasn't followed," Walt said, but his voice was impatient as well. Suddenly they spied from out the window an SUV slamming into a parking space in the lot. From the depths of the SUV emerged a frightened looking Phil Harden, his hair rumpled, his clothes wrinkled and hanging loosely off of him. Clearly he had lost weight since his daughter had been abducted.

"There he is," Johnny breathed, feeling tension rise in him. "This should be interesting."

"This should be as interesting as a pimple on an elephant's butt."

"Walt?"

"Yes?"

"Next time warn me when you're going to be that graphic."

"Oh, sorry."

Harden entered the diner, pitifully confused, and Walt rose half-way up, singling with his arm. Harden saw him immediately and rushed over, his eyes daring around fearfully, suspicious of everything.

"Mr. Harden," Johnny greeted. "Sit down. We need to talk."

"Yes," Phil Harden said, his voice small and pinched. "We do." His eyes constantly roamed the diner. "It has to be quickly. You do realize what they will do to Cara if they discover that I am in contact with you?"

"Who are 'they,' Mr. Harden?" Walt seized the opportunity and pinned Harden with his own fiery eyes.

"I don't know, exactly," Harden sighed, and Johnny felt some dam inside him break, realizing that Harden may not have all the

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answer that he sought. "All I know is that they took Cara because they want her power."

Johnny felt an odd twinge at that word, the word "power."

"What powers, Mr. Harden?" Walt pressed, glancing at Johnny.

Harden looked at Johnny, who started to fidget uncomfortably.

"You know, Mr. Smith. You know."

"But you can confirm it?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, I can confirm it. She sees visions, just as you do, Mr. Smith. Just as you do, though I think that hers are not as terrifying or as frequent as yours."

Johnny let that sink in. So somebody else had this god-like power. He wasn't alone. That thought filled him with a void. He didn't know what to think.

Walt was glancing at Johnny in concern, at Johnny's frozen face, and then turned his attention back to Harden. "Tell us everything you know, Mr. Harden."

Harden's head twisted, watching, horribly frightened. "Okay, I will try. This only started recently, only a few months ago. Cara has your power, Mr. Smith. Ever since she was a toddler, she has been able to tell things about people just by looking at them."

Walt looked up in surprise.

Johnny felt taken aback. "I can't tell things just by looking at them, Mr. Harden. I have to touch things."

"Well, she can tell by thinking about it. We realized very early on what she was doing. When she does it, this trance comes over this person, and they turn violently sick, violently ill. At times, some were often close to death."

Walt stared at Johnny.

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"We taught her not to use it often, but still, sometimes, she did it. And also she could do it without thinking about it. It just happened. It still does."

"So you're telling me," Walt said carefully, glancing at Johnny and Harden with alternating eyes, "that Cara has almost killed people by probing their minds?"

Harden looked surprised at this, and almost a little angry. "Yes, she can! And it's not her fault, God knows its not. We have no idea why this happened to her, but it has."

"Okay, go on," Walt said. Johnny remained silent.

"It wasn't until recently that we started to receive phone calls." Harden's eyes rolled. "They weren't threatening, just inquiring about our daughter. I politely shut them off, telling them that it's not true and they must be mistaken. I wasn't truly frightened until . . . well, until she was taken."

Harden's voice started to shake. "We had no warning. They came right out of the blue as Cara and I were starting for the store. I had accidentally left my keys in the house. I went in to get them and when I came back out . . ." Harden held his head in his hands. "They had taken her. I ran back down the driveway, yelling for them to give her back, but they'd taken her."

He was trying to gain his voice back. "We called the police and you know what happened. But then they called us and demanded that we blow you off. That we "terminate our connections" with you, as they put it. I don't know who they are. And I don't know what they want." He slammed his fists on the table with great force. "They're not asking for money, they're not asking for ransom, they just don't want me to talk to you!"

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What am I supposed to do?"

Walt looked at Johnny, who remained still as a stone.

"MR. HARDEN, YOU-"

"I have to go," Harden suddenly said, looking down at his watch. "My wife will be home and she has forbidden me to see you. I don't mess with my wife." He got up, suddenly. "I have to go. You know where to reach me." He suddenly started away.

"Mr. Harden!" Walt got up, enraged.

Johnny grabbed Walt's arm, pulling him down.

"JOHN!" Walt said, outraged. "We have to ask him questions."

"It won't matter," Johnny said dispassionately. "It won't matter because he'll tell us lies."

Walt looked at Johnny. "Have you seen something, Johnny?" he asked suspiciously.

"No," Johnny said stonily, swallowing. He felt tired out, dead. His leg felt heavy. "He's lying, Walt. He's been lying to us since the beginning and he's lied to us now."

Walt stared at Johnny.

"Johnny," he said, "are you okay?"

"No," Johnny answered, and Walt was surprised to find that his face was white and stricken. "If Cara can kill people by probing their minds . . . "He stopped, his face stretched. "Then what can I do, Walt?"

BY ICE PRINCESS SEVEN

"I'm...not...sure," each word fell soft, slow as Walt quietly alarmed at Johnny's ghastly appearance. Walt sat down.

"Sit," he spoke in awe. Johnny was pale as death, his eyes sunken glass and skin slick with sweat. The sheriff watched the

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tall man fold into his seat. "You look terrible," Walt leaned forward to confide, "If you feel half as bad as you look, I say you need a doctor."

Johnny's blue eyes rolled up to meet his partially closed lids. He drug a hand across his face and shrugged, "It's a migraine. I'm fine."

Walt's brow crumbled. He frowned, "That's some migraine. How 'bout I just run you by the hospital? To be sure."

"No!" Johnny was adamant. He hated hospitals. He took a drink of the water that sulked in front of him, crunched a lonely ice cube that snuck into his mouth. He lightened his tone, "How 'bout you just run me home?"

"Whatever you want, John," he tried to disguise the concern in his voice as he stood.

Walt shadowed Johnny's movements as they walked to the car. He almost hoped Johnny would lose his balance so he could insist on some medical input. Johnny sat in the front of the cruiser. He longed for the back seat but chose the temptation of having a crisp breeze rush in on him instead. He immediately lowered the window as Walt started the car. "Just a little fresh air..."he whispered. He slumped in the seat and his eyes fluttered closed. Walt continued to assess the ghost next to him while he drove back to Cleeves.

When Walt followed Johnny to the front door, he offered once more, "It's no problem to run you by emergency - no problem at all."

"I've had migraines since I was a kid...they've become worse since the accident, that's all. It looks worse than it is."

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"I hope so. You can't imagine how bad you look."

"Thanks Walt." A weak smile. "I just need a dark room and complete silence. I feel better just thinking about it." Walt looked gravely at him.

"Really. The doctor would say the same thing but, we'd have to wait five hours and fill out a bunch of forms to hear it." Johnny pushed open the front door.

"Okay," Walt surrendered.

"I'll call you about Cara in the morning." Johnny offered a slight wave as he closed the door. He then pressed his back against it, needing its support. His leg ached from the fall he had taken in the Harden's driveway. Tormented by the intense pressure in his head, he leaned forward and pressed his hands against his eyes. His stomach twisted and cramped.

"A flu," he muttered. He relied heavily on his cane, he concentrated on getting to the couch. He collapsed into its comfort and realized he felt much better. Great, in fact. It was miraculous. He was grateful yet totally confused when the phone rang.

"Yeah."

"John Smith?"

"That's right," Johnny's eyes narrowed at the voice he couldn't recognize.

"We need to talk."

"Who is this?"

"You don't know. Interesting. We have Cara."

Johnny felt blind sided, the skin on his skull tightened. "Where is she?" he asked.

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"Meet us. Alone, of course. Please don't contact anyone - we'll know and be forced to hurt the girl."

"Can I see her?"

"Can we count on you, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes."

"We'll be in the parking lot of Bradbury Elementary in a half hour. We'll talk then." Barely audible, a click on the other end let Johnny know the conversation was over. He hung up the phone and started out the door. He noticed as night had crept onward it brought a light mist with it. He grabbed his jacket and walked into the darkness.

Johnny sat in the jeep and listened to a slow rendition of "Layla". He noticed as a black sedan prowled into the empty school lot. The car stopped several feet in front of the him. Headlights scratching at Johnny's eyes, he lifted his hand to shield the light. Two men exited the car. The driver stood as a sentinel while the passenger approached him. Shrouded in dread, Johnny stepped from his vehicle and met the man halfway.

The man who stood before Johnny wore a dark suit. He was middle aged and kept his hair completely shorn. He held his hands before him, clasped tight but still. When he spoke, it was with the calm confidence that made Johnny think of caged lunacy.

"Mr Smith. We have Cara and she is safe. I can assure you no harm will come to her. However, I don't have that same certainty about you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you should walk away from this. Mind your own business and you might become an old man. We're in contact with

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her parents. I believe they told you to back off. You didn't...now I'm telling you."

Johnny glanced down at the cane he gripped tighter than usual, and took a breath. "You're right, they did tell me to back off - reluctantly. They want their daughter home."

"Of course they do but Cara is special. She possesses a power with unimaginable potential."

"So?"

"So?" the man seemed amused, "I'm surprised at your ambivalence, Mr Smith. We know of the things you have accomplished with your talents...When someone is given an immense talent, like Cara has...maybe even the talent you have, it's meant to serve a greater purpose...it's our job to see she fulfills that role."

"She's a LITTLE girl."

"A very POWERFUL little girl...Can't you tell?" A hint of a smile curled his lips. "Forget the name of Cara Harden, or you'll mourn the first day you heard it."

"I'm not afraid of you." Johnny clenched his teeth expecting the man to close the short distance between them. Suddenly, he fell to his knees and heard himself scream out in anguish. He cradled his head as he bit down against the tortured stabbing in his brain. Every joint in his body protested and his stomach became a tangle of impossible knots.

"Oh, but you should be. You should be very afraid." The man knelt down beside Johnny and gripped his shoulder as he shared his dark secrets. His breath was hot against Johnny's face. He remained unaffected, emphatic and fanatical with intent.

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With his touch, Johnny found himself standing in a dimly lit room. He focused on a woman who wore a set of headphones, she seemed to be listening carefully. Johnny realized he could hear the conversation she heard.

"...she possesses a great power with unimaginable potential."

"So."

It was the conversation he just had. The woman pointed past Johnny which caused him to follow her direction. He turned to find there are other people in the room. Another man in a dark suit nodded at the woman's gesture. A little girl sat miserably in a chair next to him. Her face was streaked with tears and he recognized the child as Cara. The man handed a picture of Johnny to the little girl, she began to shake her head violently.

"I don't want to! It hurts him!" she cried, fresh droplets raced down her cheeks.

"If you don't do it we'll have to take you far away, where your mommy and daddy will never find you." The man who threatened sounded bored as he pushed the photograph at her.

"But it's bad...Mommy and Daddy said so!"

"It's just a quick scan. Deeper than before. Think hard and fast, Cara...If you don't help us, you'll never go home." His tone graduated to stern.

"I'm sorry," she said, her heart broke, tears splashed upon Johnny's picture. Reluctantly she squeezed her eyes shut. As Johnny's vision ended he was devastated by the acute pain. The man hovered close at his side.

"Feel bad? I know you do. It's Cara. She's probing your mind...Not a lot...We just wanted to show you what it's like. Can

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you understand it's potential? It's like a wild tiger. Too ferocious not to be controlled. You felt bad earlier, right? That was easy. She was just getting us basic info...your name, some history, simple facts. She's 'thinking' about your emotions now. Not in depth...everyone you care about mainly. No big deal. Can you imagine how you'd feel if we had her go after your deepest thoughts? Your dreams? You feel bad Mr Smith? Remember that feeling..." Johnny gasped as he felt the clamp of pain lessen. He took his hands from his head. Eager to stand, he reached for the cane that had fallen to his side. His fingers barely upon it when it felt it kicked from his clutch. He heard it skitter across the parking lot.

"It's your choice...all you have to do is walk away. Do it for the good of mankind. Trust me, somebody will possess this child...Far better if it's us."

"Us? Who are you? Government agents?" he managed to ask, his breath easier. He swiped the tears from his face, and he realized his nose had bled.

"What government would that be?" the man laughed as got into the car, "No, it's much bigger than that."

BY BROOKEDZ&AMHLOVER EIGHT

Johnny laid there on the ground as the pain slowly somewhat ceasing from the back of his head. Minutes past until he finally got into him jeep and drove home.

Early the next morning feeling a little weak Johnny set out to look for any clues that my give him a vision of where exactly the girl is. He has to stop this before things get worse. Johnny drove back to the elementary school and walked the lot where they

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were the night before. He walked a while but found nothing. Then suddenly a slicing pain jabbed through Johnny's head like a bolt of lightning. Johnny fell to the ground. Then wearily look up w/ his last ounce of strength he sees the black Sudan drive up. Unable to fight it the pain takes over and Johnny he's faint voices coming toward him. Put it's too painful to look up.

"We warned him. He was getting way too close." A dark man stood outside steel door.

"But did you have to do it right there in broad daylight?"

"I didn't want to risk him seeing anything. He's the one who got himself into it. We warned him!" Replied the man.

"I don't think Mr. John Smith is going to be helping too many people anymore."

The next morning Johnny woke and felt as if the weight of a thousand pounds bore down on him. "How and the hell did I get here?"

He reached for his cane beside his bed, but he felt too weak to get himself up. Finally after quite some time of struggling he pushed himself up. As he tried to stretch out he couldn't stand up straight. Hunched he made his way to the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror he switched the light on. Johnny's mouth fell w/ sudden shock. The sides of his hair had become gray and thin. His eyes looked heavy and his skin aged.

"What is happening to me?" Johnny questioned himself.

As quickly as he could reach the phone Johnny called Bruce.

"Bru..ce?" Even his voice sounded old and strained.

"Johnny? Is that you? Man you sound horrible. What the matter?"

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"Bruce...help me. Please...help." Now gasping for breath, Johnny managed to utter his last words..."Help!" Just before he collapsed to the floor.

BY JOHNNYSGIRL2 NINE

Lights flickered about in the darkness like fireflies dancing on the edge of night. Dull sounds echoed, hollow and desperate. Johnny groaned, dragging a weary hand across his face as the world slowly coalesced around him. Struggling to open his eyes, he recognized the angry sound of the disconnect tone hammering out of the phone receiver that laid beside his head. He opened an eye to glare at it, trying to remember who he had last called. A pounding at his front door startled him out of his sluggish reverie. "John!", came the desperate shout, followed by more pounding.

Clambering to his feet, Johnny frowned. "Bruce?" Finally reaching the door, he opened it, only to see a dark fist flying towards his face. He stepped back to avoid it, losing his balance and crashing to the floor. *I am getting really tired of this!*, he thought to himself as he landed in a graceless heap at Bruce's feet.

"Johnny!" Bruce reached down to him. "Man, I'm sorry!"

"'s okay," Johnny muttered, wary as he took Bruce's outstretched hand. The last thing he needed was another vision. Thankfully, he was hauled up from the floor without incident. "Man, what's going on?? First, you call me at a\$\$-thirty in the morning sounding like death warmed over, then you leave me out here pounding on your door for ten minutes--- "

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"Ten minutes?" Bruce nodded, fixing his dark eyes on his friend's startled gaze. "Yeah. At least. I was about ready to break your door down!"

"What? You have a key!"

"Had a key. I couldn't find it. And I was worried about you!" "Oh", was Johnny's distracted response. He turned away, limping back into the hallway.

Bruce closed the door and followed him. "So what is it, John? You look awful!"

Johnny glanced back at him, rolling his eyes. "Gee, thanks! You look pretty appalling yourself!"

Bruce ignored him. "You know what I mean. Is this about the missing girl?" At Johnny's quizzical frown, Bruce explained: "Walt filled me in on what's been going on the last few days. He's worried about you, too, by the way."

Johnny shook his head as he made his unsteady way to the kitchen. "Everybody's a mother hen. You want some coffee?"

"No, thanks. What I do want is for you to tell me what's going on!" He watched as Johnny took two coffee mugs out of the cabinet and set them on the counter with a noisy clang. Johnny filled his coffee pot with water, then turned back to Bruce as he decanted the water into the coffee maker. "I thought you said that Walt had already--- "

"I mean what's going on in here!" Bruce pointed at Johnny's head. "Walt told me about the terrible migraine you had yesterday, and that you refused to go to the hospital. So he dropped you off here instead. An hour later, he came back to check on you, and you were gone!"

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Johnny paused in the act of measuring coffee grounds into the filter basket. His eyes clouded, but he remained silent.

"Johnny...."

"I got a call," Johnny admitted. "Right after Walt left. From the kidnappers."

"And you didn't call --- ?"

"No, I didn't," Johnny cut in, his eyes suddenly sharp with anger. "They said that if I did they would hurt Cara, and I have no doubt that they would do just that if it served their purpose!"

Bruce visibly backed off. "So what happened?"

"I don't know...." Johnny's eyes clouded over once more. "I met them in the parking lot at Bradbury Elementary, but I don't remember what happened. To tell you the truth, I don't even know how I got home!"

"Okay... okay." Bruce slowly digested the information, then noticed the familiar look on Johnny's face. "What now?"

"I just remembered why I called you. I don't know if it was a vision, or just some twisted nightmare, but when I got up this morning, I looked in the mirror, and I was an old man!" Bruce laughed. "You're not there yet, my brother! But at the rate you're going...."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be old, toothless, and dead by the time I'm forty!" Johnny chuckled. "I keep telling you, man! Zen meditation is the answer."

"Yeah, right...." Johnny's smile faded. "On the other hand, if it was a vision, it could mean something...."

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"You mean like that time you thought you were disappearing?" Johnny nodded, his face grim. "Symbolically, it could mean that time is running out. And not just for me, but for Cara, too."

"So, how can I help?"

He gave Bruce a grateful look. "We need to go back to the school. Maybe I'll get some sense of what happened there last night."

"All right," Bruce conceded. "But if you get to feeling bad, I'm hauling your a\$\$ to the hospital, got it?"

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Johnny's wary gaze swept over the empty lot as he and Bruce got out of the car. He walked over to where he remembered standing the night before as the headlights had approached him. Leaning heavily on his cane, he inspected the pavement. A few feet away, he spotted tire tracks. He took a deep breath, steeling himself. It's now or never, he thought, the irony not escaping his notice. He knelt down, laying a trembling hand on the marred surface. The world around him vanished in an instant, leaving him reeling in a new reality of agonizing pain.

// "You feel bad, Mr. Smith? Remember that feeling...."//

Johnny gasped, clutching at his head as fire scorched his brain. Disjointed images assaulted his consciousness. The soulless eyes of the kidnapper... the terrified face of Phil Harden... Cara with helpless tears streaming down her cheeks... Walt's concerned gaze... his own eyes, icy and unfamiliar. The images flashed faster, tumbling through his mind's eye, wrenching his soul almost to the breaking point.

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// "We warned him. He was getting way too close.... I don't think Mr. John Smith is going to be helping too many people anymore...." //

Johnny stood rooted in place, dispassionate as he watched his unconscious form being dragged roughly into the black sedan.

// "Phil Harden will pay for his traitorous ways. But first, Mr. Smith is going to pay for interfering. His death will be the final test to see if Cara is ready.... Or perhaps her death will be a final test for him...."//

Johnny gasped as the whirlwind took him again, flinging him back to where he started. "NO!" he shouted.

Bruce was there, holding him steady. "John! What did you see?"

"Too much," Johnny muttered, digging the heels of his hands into his aching eyes. He was trembling from the sheer force of his vision.

"Could you make sense out of any of it?" Bruce persisted.

"Yeah... a little. I know what Phil Harden didn't want me to know...."

"Which is....?"

"He was a mercenary. With some sort of 'underground' section...." Bruce was astonished. "With the government?"

Listless, Johnny couldn't even manage to shake his head. "No. It's much bigger than that," he replied, unconsciously echoing the kidnapper's words. With a sudden surge of strength, he got to his feet. "Harden joined this... group... fresh out of college. Wanted to make a difference in the world somehow, since he was rated 4-F and rejected by the military during the first Gulf War.

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I think his intentions were noble in the beginning, but it all got out of control so fast. So fast...." Johnny started laughing, the sound of it descending into madness.

"John," Bruce warned him.

"Sorry.... I just... I think he joined these mercenaries to try to make a positive difference in the world. But it was nothing like he's been led to believe. They would do all the dirty work that even the military couldn't touch. No government wanted to lay claim to their actions, but they'd hire this group to do intelligence missions, recon, assassinations... whatever."

"Damn," Bruce breathed, awestruck.

"Yeah.... There were no real loyalties, either, except within the group. They would work for whoever paid them the most. And they were told that once they joined, only death would get them out again. But Harden got out somehow. Wanted to start over, I guess. Start a family, have all those normal things. But they must have been keeping tabs on him all along...." Johnny felt a familiar shiver. Nothing like being watched, he thought sourly. As he and Bruce walked back to the car, Johnny's mind churned up another of the myriad images that had barraged him. He stopped short. "A gorge," he said softly.

"A what?"

"A gorge... or a valley. In the woods."

Bruce let out a frustrated sigh. "Where, exactly?"

"I'm not sure...." Johnny began walking at a rapid pace, his limp almost disappearing in his intense determination. "It's around here somewhere."

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Bruce caught up to him, his long strides barely keeping up. As they rounded the building, a rutted road leading into the woods presented itself.

"It's there," Johnny said. "About half a mile down that trail...."

"You think that's where they're hiding the girl?" Disbelief colored Bruce's words. Heedless, Johnny started forward. "I'm not sure...."

"You keep saying that! What kind of psychic are you, anyway? Johnny!" Bruce jogged, struggling once again to keep up. Johnny moved faster as they entered the woods. The thick brush was merciless, clawing at them as though it were a living thing. Johnny didn't notice. "Dammit, John, slow down! Man, I almost regret teaching you how to walk again...." Bruce stopped short as he entered a clearing, where Johnny stood at the edge of a steep cliff, staring down. "Oh, man.... What are you doing?"

"It was here," Johnny whispered, uncertainty lacing his words.

"Or it will be...." he stepped over to a rotted tree trunk.

"What will be?" Bruce started as Johnny's footing slipped. "Geez, man, will you get away from the edge of the cliff? You're making me nervous!"

Johnny caught himself, reaching out and grasping the crumbling wood. The wind was sucked out of him again as his world spun out of control. The gorge yawned below. Johnny found himself standing opposite where he had been, a few feet away from the stump, where Cara was precariously perched. Terror in her eyes, she was frozen in place as she stared at Johnny.

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"It's the only way," the voice menaced in his ear. "The only way you'll find peace is to kill her."

Johnny reached out, hesitated. "I can't."

"You know what she can do to you. She's already doing it...."

Johnny could feel something tearing at the edges of his sanity. He fought it, but to no avail. Somewhere deep in his mind, something snapped.

"Do it," the voice hissed. "Just push her. No one will know. It will look like an accident. Just another poor little runaway girl, a victim of her own mischief...."

"Victim," Johnny echoed tonelessly, his head pounding. Then his sight suddenly blurred, and he collapsed as a viscious lance of pain sliced through him. When he was able to see again, he found himself on the stump at the edge of the gorge, staring impossibly into his own eyes. Cold, hard, soulless eyes; like granite. A murderous hand reaching out for him. His own hand. "Please... don't," he pleaded, tears spilling down his face. "Don't...." The hand shot out at him, and then he was falling, tumbling out of control, his own screams rending at his ears. The last thing he heard was the sickening snap of the his own neck as he hit the bottom. "NOOOOOOOOOOOO...." Johnny bellowed, jolting out of the vision.

"John! John, it's okay. Everything is okay. It was just a vision."

Johnny stared at Bruce, who had a firm grip on his arms. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was aware that his best friend had kept him from falling during the vision. "No," he gasped, desperation clawing at him. "It wasn't just a vision, Bruce!

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It was more than that...."

"What was it, then? What did you see?" "She's going to die, man! Cara is going to die, and I don't think I can stop it...."

"Whoa, whoa! What do you mean, John? Why can't you stop it?" "It's her powers. She can do things to my mind. She doesn't want to, but they will force her. I... I'm gonna lose control. I won't be able to stop it...." Johnny struggled to escape Bruce's grasp, but the physical therapist held him in an iron grip. "John! Listen to me!"

"NO!" Johnny redoubled his efforts. Bruce shook him hard. "Listen!!!!!"

Johnny froze, terror in his eyes. "She's going to die, Bruce...." He choked, helpless as his tears welled up.

"Okay. So you saw it in your vision. But that means we have a heads-up here. You can stop it."

Johnny's gaze drifted back to the gorge. "No... I don't think so...."

Bruce shook him again, more gently than before. "All right, man. We can do this. Just tell me, did you see who is going to kill Cara?"

"...Yes...." "Who was it, John?"

"... Can't stop it...."

"JOHN!"

Johnny's frantic gaze snapped back to Bruce. "I know who will kill Cara, and I can't stop it, Bruce!"

"Why? Who is her killer, John? Who did you see?" The sudden intensity in Johnny's eyes took Bruce by surprise. Cold fingers

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of dread trickled down his spine as he watched his best friend's eyes become frigid and soulless.

"It was me."

BY VIRGINIAGENTLEMAN TEN

"Hey man, snap out of it!! Johnny Smith does not go around killing people—especially little girls!" Bruce tried to bring Johnny back to reality. "Let's go back over the details one more time. Cara is being held by a bunch of crazy \*\*\* mercenaries who are running all over the world selling their services to the highest bidder. Phil Harden was a militant groupie who dropped out to create a normal life for his family and his daughter is being held hostage because of her visionary powers. And you are not going to save her, you're going to kill her. John, there's some big gaps here, my man."

"Bruce, if you could have seen the terror on Cara's face and the black, bottomless pupils of the thugs holding her, you'd know we aren't dealing with your ordinary, everyday kidnapppers. These guys have no conscience—and they have a life and death mission!

"Big time mercenaries don't usually stoop to kidnapping. And if they want you out of the way, why play around? Wouldn't a bullet in the head from one of their snipers be more efficient?"

"Thanks for the compassion—but it's more than that. It's a test!"

"A test of what?"

"Not what," Johnny mused. "But who? These guys think Cara is the key to their mission—whatever the hell it is! They keep referring to her as "meant to serve a greater purpose."

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They kept telling me she has this "unimaginable potential"—it's like they really believe that with her they can attain world peace."

"Or world control!! I still don't get it—what does this all have to do with you?"

"I'm not sure but they told me that I needed to leave her alone "for the good of mankind!" These guys see me as psychically gifted too!! If she can defeat me, she's unbeatable! Then whatever they have in mind for her, they have clear sailing, no fear!!

"OK, let's assume your predictions are correct" Bruce began to sense Johnny's urgency. "We have to get to this girl before these guys force her into the mastermind gunfight at the OK corral! Didn't you see anything in your visions that could tip us off where to look? A mailbox? A street sign? A license plate? Anything?"

"The only connection seems to the black sedan in the schoolyard. The guys threw me into the trunk and after that I didn't see anything until we got to where they were holding Cara."

"How about the men?" Bruce quizzed. "Anything unusual there? C'mon, John!! This is important!! For a psychic, your attention to detail sucks!"

"Let's head back to the car" Johnny muttered. " Maybe the walk will jog my mind"

The half-mile went much slower on the return trip, but as Johnny and Bruce reached the empty parking lot, Johnny saw something glisten on the ground in the reflection of the school safety lights. As he bent down to pick up the shiny, gold button, an all too familiar flash of light altered his present reality.

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Once again he was rooted in stillness, watching his unconscious body being lifted into the trunk.

"Man, this guy gives a whole new meaning to the concept of dead weight," complained the lean and scruffy chauffeur, as he lifted Johnny's feet and legs.

"Aw, quit complaining—I've got the "dead zone" end and it's none too light either!" As the man in the dark suit lifted Johnny's torso over the lip of the trunk, unknowingly his cuff button snagged and popped off, rolling under the rear of the car. As Johnny watched, he noticed a very distinctive tattoo on the now uncovered wrist of his assailant, a picture of the earth with a lightning bolt piercing through its center and under it the letters, CWM, USNA, 1988.

As Johnny burst back into reality, Bruce could tell he had captured another missing piece of the puzzle.

"John, what is it? What did you see?"

"With any luck, maybe the first clue to who these guys really are!! Get in the car—I'll explain on the way."

"On the way where?"

"I need you to drop me off at Walt's office—maybe he can help make some contacts with the state police—meanwhile I need you to go to the library."

"The library? John, I quit the library book talk series as soon as that foxy young thing from the university left for New York."

"And all this time I thought you were getting scholarly on me—I need you to get the list of the Naval Academy grads from 1988 and meet me at the sheriff's office."

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Johnny arrives at Walt's office, feeling optimistic that he may have the first big lead in this abduction. As he approaches the office, he sees a very frantic Sarah stuffing Walt Bannerman campaign literature into a large box. She obviously is not herself, with the glazed look of an animal trapped and moving as if movement itself will bring freedom!!

"Sarah, slow down—I know this job doesn't pay enough for this kind of effort!"

Startled out of her distraction, Sarah counters.

"Oh, Johnny. I didn't see you. I just wanted to clean up this pigsty Walt calls an office. Since his opponent mysteriously pulled out of the race, I guess we can trash these brochures!"

"Where is Walt, Sarah. I really need to see him. I may have a lead on this abduction case of Cara Harden."

At this, Sarah became visibly shaken. Her voice was tentative as she stammered, "Oh, I'm sure he will be interested..." But as she spoke, she lifted the large box of flyers and moved towards the closet. Her heel slipped on an errant brochure and she fell headlong into Johnny's waiting arms, brochures flying everywhere.

In a flash of light, Johnny found himself in the back storage room of Greg Stillson's campaign office. Sarah was organizing materials for an upcoming rally. Suddenly, she was startled by a familiar but often unwelcomed voice.

"Greg, you're amazing. You could fall into a pile of horse manure and come out smelling like a rose," bellowed Sonny Elliman. "Who would have thought that our little liaison with the mob on that Indian casino deal would turn into pure gold!!"

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"Yes, Sonny, my man, you are looking at the master!! You know what the good book says, He who is faithful over a little is rewarded with a lot!!" When those little meatheads saw that I could really deliver on my promises, they became very interested in good ole American politics. They clearly see the benefit for the free enterprise system to have Greg Stillson in Congress—and with our little curly haired ace-in-the-hole, negotiating Washington politics will be a piece of cake—hell, negotiating world politics will be a piece of cake."

Stillson gloats and pours a drink as he reflects on his good fortune.

"And the two for one is like a gift from God", Sonny adds. "Who would have thought that our friends would give us the key to the world and in the same stroke, remove our only viable enemy, Mr. Johnny Smith."

"Yes, I kept telling Mr. Smith that he was fighting destiny—but he never quite believed in me!! Imagine that!! What God has ordained, let not man, or psychic, put asunder!"

Sarah listens in shock, her vision of the Stillson world now turned to reality. But as if destiny truly does rule supreme, her cell phone broke the silence.

Quickly, Sonny pulls a terrified Sarah from the storeroom and presents her roughly to Greg.

"Oh hell, boss, this little bitch can ruin everything!" Sonny screams! "I told you she was too dangerous to keep around!"

Greg only smiles as he approaches Sarah.

"Now, now, let's remain calm. We are all reasonable people here," Stillson purrs.

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"What do you mean about removing Johnny? And what is this about your ace-in-the-hole?" Sarah is feisty, but fearful of the new Greg Stillson.

"Sonny, you know they say you should keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Well, little Mrs. Bannerman here has served us well. Who in the world would suspect foul play from a man who has the sheriff's wife on his campaign staff? And I was just hoping that if she kept spreading her legs for dear ole Johnny boy, we could control him as well!"

"You bastard!" Sarah screams, as she throws a wild slapping right hand at Stillson's face.

Stillson grabs her arm in mid-air and twists it fiercely backwards. "Now Miss Sarah we will play it my way. You see, while you know a lot that maybe is not to my advantage, your disappearance would cause quite a bit of unwanted attention around the campaign. So, I'll have to depend on your wisdom and discretion as a mother to make the best choices for the future."

Fear of the not so veiled threat hits Sarah in her soul. "If you lay one hand on JJ, I'll see that you rot in hell."

"Sarah, Sarah, I'd never think of touching one hair on that little boy's head. But, if your boyfriend psychic Johnny Smith or that Barney Fife of a husband of yours even appears to have an inkling of the things you have heard tonight, I just can't be responsible for what may happen. You know, you may want to call Phil Harden and ask him how he's sleeping these days before you do anything rash. Sometimes kids just go off to school or to soccer and they never return. It's really sad!!"

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In a whirring blur of light and sound, Johnny finds himself once again holding Sarah tightly in his arms in Walt's cluttered office.

"Johnny," Sarah pleaded, "what did you see?"

"Sarah, you can't carry this load alone."

"Johnny, Greg Stillson and his wacko army are everywhere. You can't let them know about this! JJ's our son!"

Suddenly, Walt appears in the doorway.

Johnny and Sarah awkwardly move apart but it is clear to Walt he has interrupted something significant.

Sarah breaks the strained silence, "Oh Walt, I almost took a terrible fall but luckily, Johnny was there to save me!"

Walt answers a bit sarcastically, "Yea, Johnny seems to be doing that quite a bit lately. Johnny, Bruce is parked outside and he told me you were looking for me. What was it?"

Johnny shares a knowing look with Sarah, "Oh it's nothing. I'll get with you later. You guys have a nice evening—and clean this place up—it's a mess!!