

Gardens foster peace. Tranquility. Right? But the Queen of Hearts demanded red roses. And what about Eve, who craved fertile fruits? Maybe gardens grow sins. Desire. Secrets. Perhaps *peace* is a storybook fallacy.

But stories were sanctuary for Reggie.

Reggie threaded his wrist through a metal band and *clicked* his watch clasp. He blew dust off his switchblade, holstered his revolver. For Johnny, he would be prepared.

Reggie's revolver hung foreign on his hip.

He got out. For good.

He fought to create the fantasy he'd yearned for – got a 9-5. A desk job; a cubicle. He'd even earned a promotion, effective Monday. Picket fences and garden strolls would come next. He was certain.

But he feared for Johnny, who oozed confidence and naivety; believed himself *death proof*. So, when Johnny had a job and no partner, Reggie insisted on going. His dream faltered without Johnny. Besides, what's *just one more*?

For Johnny.

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Confronting Reggie's doubts, Johnny said, "It's an easy drop."

Reggie didn't anticipate Johnny mentioning his pay raise. His new office with a door he could close. Still, Reggie hoped praise would come pending this nightmare ending – if ever either did. Johnny was still *in*, after all.

"--A quick stroll through Central Park."

But upon entering the dusky Conservatory Garden, unease pricked Reggie's neck, weighed the soles of his shoes.

*Snap! Rustle!*

Johnny's pace remained consistent; chipper. His demeanor, impenetrable glee. *Death proof*.

Reggie wondered what this garden grew.

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Despite their same age, Johnny raised Reggie in the Bronx while his mother slept like a princess— by the prick of a needle. Surviving and Living: Non-synonymous, except – as they learned young - where they intercept:

You must make a living to survive.

As teenagers, Al, Johnny’s uncle - their knight - taught them survival. Criminal odd jobs; theft, drops, middle-man shit. They swore *only until picket fences, and white-sneakered strolls through gardens, through Central Park*, and commemorated their vow, their devotion with matching stolen watches. Engraved on the back of each; “*I got your six.*”

And when Billy, a friend, then a lookout-turned-rat betrayed Johnny at 23, Reggie spotted the snake watching Johnny’s six – as promised. As always.

With Billy, amends were made, but faults remained unforgotten.

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Reggie slowed his pace four short behind Johnny when his eyes met another’s. Dark and half-hidden.

A setup.

Reggie lurched towards rosebushes. There, stood Billy. *Once bitten.*

Johnny was in danger.

Reggie’s switchblade was swift. Silent. Effective. Gargling mocked white noise with Billy’s jugular sliced.

“Hey!” A voice shouted. Reggie unholstered his gun. Spun a 180. His sight found another amicable face.

Al.

Reggie detached; found rhythm in watch ticks, a fairytale behind his eyelids - then pulled the trigger.

More silhouettes scattered.

*Panic. Rage.*

With a scorched, thundering chest, Reggie fired until bullets stopped following *clicks*.

“What are you doing!” Shouted Johnny- stunned by the fruits of Reggie’s labor. The roses he’d painted red. For Johnny.

Behind him in the garden hung a banner.

*“Congratulations, Reggie!”*