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## John

John's bones and muscles burned with every agonising step but he kept going. He had to for Helen ... Who was he kidding? He had to for his sanity. If there was a job here, he wanted it. He needed to get Helen out of the debt he had put her in. He looked through the grimy banister rails, twisting up from the fifth landing, at a broken door, skewed on one hinge, and felt his crotch contract in disappointment.

"Derelict!" just like you, Johnny boy he whispered. Head dropped in defeat, he turned to leave.

A stifled gasp snapped his reflexes into action. Tired limbs sloughed fatigue and contorted into a practised crouch against the wall. Five silent steps saw him to the threshold. He paused, sucking in the thrill of fear. Tightening his grip on the pepper spray in his pocket, he crushed all doubt and launched the suppressed rage of recent events, into an explosive kick and roll through the damaged door.

An arc of shattered wood flailed inward, from which he erupted in a low fighting stance. Stamping on the knee of the fallen brute entangled in the door wreckage, he sprang forward and upwards, with a palm thrust to a second assailant's chin, hooking clawed fingers into startled eyes and grinding his knee into a groin with a satisfying crunch. His right hand punched out, spraying the eyes of a third attacker, before he was stunned to immobility, by the hatchet click of a gun being cocked.

The dishevelled gunman, dribbling snot and blood, was much smaller than the others. Dragging a foot, he limped into John's peripheral vision. John waited wondering if he would hear the shot and feel pain or just know a release into darkness.

Three shots in quick succession confirmed the disappointing fact that life would not let go of him just yet. The erstwhile aggressors writhed and groaned, clutching at shattered knees, whilst the