

Author's Note: This story continues the events of Going Home: The Road Back, Going Home: The Past Revisited and Going Home: The First Step. These stories take place somewhere between the episodes Virus and Snakebite. Loosely. Enjoy!

GOING HOME: Mending Fences

By Lisa O'Brien

John stared out the window of the small plane as it made the final approach to Panama City. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans, then reached up to loosen his tie. *The flight from L.A. to New Orleans wasn't bad. But this 17-seat thing scares me.* Hot air that smelled faintly of oil threatened to suffocate him. *Of course, Chet telling me about every plane crash in the history of flight didn't help. Wish I'd never told him I was planning this trip. Then Roy had to go and tell him I'd never flown on a plane in my life.*

The rhythm of the engines changed and John heard a whine as the flaps on the left wing moved. He closed his eyes and gripped the arm rests of the seat. His heart pounded and his ears popped as the plane dropped. *God, please don't kill me in a plane crash. Please don't kill me in a plane crash.*

The plane continued to drop and John's heart made a break for it, leaping into his throat. His stomach was right behind. He felt a bump and the plane shuddered, causing John to swallow in an attempt to get his stomach back where it belonged, rather than all over the seat in front of him. *If I don't get some fresh air, I'm gonna puke.*

Instead of exploding into a fiery ball, the plane rolled, eventually slowing and turning. John risked opening his eyes, looking out the window as the plane rolled toward a small terminal building in the distance. He rubbed his face, then swallowed, this time attempting to equalize the pressure in his ears. He yawned, then tried opening and closing his mouth several times. Finally, he resorted to opening and closing his ears with the palms of his hands.

The pilot was talking when John finally cleared his ears. *I don't understand a word he's saying. It's probably the speakers.*

He waited for the plane to come to a stop and the hatch at the front to be opened, then stood and filed out into the aisle behind the other three passengers on the flight. *Fresh air!* He stepped out of the plane onto a set of metal stairs. The sudden irrational fear that he wouldn't recognize his father, or, worse, that his father wouldn't recognize him hit as John stepped onto the tarmac.

Well, there can't be that many people in this airport. I guess we'll just both have to wait until everybody's gone. John followed the other passengers into the terminal building.

"JOHNNY!" Jim grinned broadly, taking John by the shoulders as he stepped into the air conditioned building. "My God, just look at you." He pulled John into a hug, then pulled back, still grinning.

John felt like a weight had lifted from his shoulders. "Dad." He grinned back. *Aside from a few gray hairs, Dad hasn't changed. I guess I don't have to worry about getting old as much as I thought I did.*

Jim looked at his son's empty hands. "Where's your bag? You're staying, aren't you?"

John laughed. "They wouldn't let me bring it on the plane. They made me put it in the hold."

Jim shook his head and laughed. "Damn puddle jumpers." He shrugged. "Well, we'll just wait for 'em to bring it out."

They moved over to a row of chairs and sat down, watching through the glass as handlers unloaded the plane still sitting on the tarmac.

What do I say now? He and his father had talked on the phone dozens of times in the two months since John's first call. The conversations had been relatively short and had avoided the past. *I don't even know what he's doing in Panama City.*

"I heard about the boat. Why didn't Aunt Helen tell me?" *And I thought she wasn't good at keeping secrets. Wonder what else she's keeping from me?*

"There's the cart." Jim stood and walked across to the cart that had been wheeled into the terminal.

John frowned. *What the hell happened? And why won't he tell me?* He stood and followed, reaching past Jim to pull his bag from the pile.

"I'll get that." Jim took the bag, then pulled a set of keys from his pocket. "We're probably gonna run into some lunch hour traffic on the way. Do you wanna stop and get something to eat, or something to drink?"

The thought of food made John's stomach flip. "I'm fine." He followed as his father led the way out the other terminal door and through the parking lot.

Jim wound his way through the lot to a new pick-up truck. He opened a box behind the cab, set John's bag inside, then unlocked the driver's door. By the time John reached the passenger door, Jim had unlocked it, too.

John climbed into the truck and closed the door. He looked over at Jim, who had inserted the key in the ignition and cranked the engine. Jim turned to him and started to say something. *Maybe he'll answer my question now.*

Instead, Jim turned his attention to a panel on the dash. He switched the air conditioner to "on," adjusting the vents to direct some of the cooling air toward the passenger side. John rested his arm on the door, turning to look out the window as Jim backed the truck out of its space, then rolled forward and headed out of the parking lot.

John finally spoke when they pulled onto the four lane feeder road leading from the airport. "So, what're you doin' in Panama City? Running another boat?"

Jim chuckled. "Ah, no." He paused. "I'm a dispatcher with a commercial dive company." He chuckled again. "I work from 7 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. No overtime. I'm off every Sunday and Monday." He paused, turning briefly to look at his son. "It's a pretty good job and my paycheck's the

same every week."

Too bad you didn't find something like that . . . John cut the thought off. *He did the best he could. Just let it go.*

"Speaking of paychecks. Mind if we stop at the office? It won't take more than a minute."

John laughed. "It's your truck, Dad."

Jim changed lanes, slowing and stopping at a red light. "I can go later, if you're too tired." He looked over at John. "You've been on a plane for the last seven hours."

"Two planes," John corrected as the light changed and the truck moved forward.

Jim turned and headed south on the main highway. "Two planes," he repeated. "How were the flights?"

John shrugged. "I wasn't crazy about taking off and landing, but it was pretty smooth otherwise." He paused and snorted. "Course, I developed a close relationship with my knees on the flight from L.A. to New Orleans. Who designs those planes? The munchkins?"

Jim laughed.

"And the guy next to me kept pushin' my arm off the armrest." John paused. "And the food. It's barely nine in the morning and they gave us lunch." He snorted. "And that was barely a snack. What the airline called a meal was a piece of chicken, four noodles and about four peas and four carrots. The salad was a piece of lettuce and tomato. The dressing was orange . . . I don't even wanna know how they got it that color." He paused. "Oh, and a brownie that I finished in one bite for dessert." He paused and snorted again. "I asked the stewardess for seconds and she looked at me like I'd grown a second head."

Again, Jim laughed, but didn't comment.

"Then the second plane nearly did me in. It was hot and it smelled like oil." Another pause. "You'd think something intended to carry passengers would be built a little bit better. The heat in the cabin is bled off the engines, for Pete's sake." He snorted. "It's terrible." He paused. "I've flown in helicopters plenty of times. And I'd rather fly in a helicopter any day."

"On rescues?"

"Yeah. We've had couple of remote sites we couldn't get to in the squad."

"Well, that's why you prefer helicopters." Jim paused. "Your mind's occupied with the rescue and the patient."

John looked out the passenger window, then chuckled. "Yeah, you're right about that." He paused. "I was surprised the airport in New Orleans wasn't bigger. I thought it'd be the same as LAX."

Jim chuckled. "They still have everything in that big hangar?" He paused. "I went out there about 6 years ago to interview with an offshore crewboat outfit. The whole airport was in this one hangar."

"Nah, that's just a waiting area now. They've got two concourses branching off from it, though." John chuckled. "It only took me about three minutes to walk from one end to the other." He looked over at Jim. "You didn't take the job?"

Jim stopped the truck, then turned east. "When it came right down to it, I didn't wanna give up bein' my own boss."

They lapsed into silence as the road turned south again, then crossed a short causeway. John looked out the window as they drove along a peninsula on the Gulf of Mexico. Several military jets flew overhead and he craned his neck to watch them through the front windshield.

"Tarver Air Force Base is just up ahead," Jim informed.

John sat back, turning to the passenger window again. "Nice beaches."

"Yeah, if you like looking at girls in bathing suits," Jim said mildly.

My father has a sense of humor! John chuckled at the remark. The chuckle turned into laughter. He was still laughing when his father pulled the truck onto a shell drive. He took a deep breath in an attempt to get the laughter under control. By the time he'd managed that, Jim had pulled the truck into an empty slot at the side of a two story Quonset structure. "So, we're goin' to the beach next, right?"

Jim laughed. "Right after I get my check." He shook his head, still laughing, then reached over and ruffled John's hair. "Why don't you come in with me? You'll fry in this truck."

"Kay." John was still grinning as he followed Jim up the stairs to a door on the second floor of the building.

"We've got the shop downstairs. Compressors, tanks, hoses. Deep water apparatus," Jim explained as he opened the door and stepped into a cramped office. "I'll give you the nickel tour if you want."

"Good deal." *Maybe he'll tell me what happened to the boat on the tour.*

"Kati, this is my son John."

The young woman behind the desk smiled and stood. "Nice to meet you, John."

"Hi." John smiled.

"Wow! When your dad told us you were coming, I was expecting a kid." Kati smiled again, tilting her head and regarding him through a fringe of lashes. "You two could pass for brothers."

John felt his ears blush. "Thanks." When he looked over at his father, Jim was grinning. *Okay, I'm not here to meet women. I'm here to visit my Dad.* "Nice meeting you."

Jim motioned, then led the way to a short hallway. "This is the manager's office." He knocked on the closed door, then opened it. "How's it goin', Al?"

John followed Jim into the office, which wasn't much bigger than the room out front.

The man at the desk looked up, then opened a drawer. "Ah, you're just here to get your money." He leaned across the desk and held an envelope out to Jim.

"I don't even get an E for effort?" Jim asked, taking the envelope and putting it in his shirt pocket. "Al, this is my son John."

"Nice to meet you." John nodded, then shook hands as Al stood and leaned across the desk.

"You came all the way out from California to visit this guy?" Al grinned at them.

This guy must be Dad's Chet Kelly. John shrugged. "Yeah, well, he's my dad."

"Don't pay any attention to Al, Johnny." Jim clapped John's shoulder. "I never do."

"Go bother somebody else." Al grinned at them, then sat. "Nice meetin' you, John."

"Yeah, same here." John followed Jim into the hall, where an open door stood at the end.

The static and squawk of a marine radio drifted into the hall as they approached.

". . . copy, COASTAL MOON. Coastal Base, out."

Jim knocked on the frame of the door. "Have you got a minute, Lewis?"

A heavy set man dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt swiveled his chair around. "Sure, it's quiet." He grinned up at John. "Soon's I say that, it's gonna pick up."

"So, I'm not the only person that happens to." John laughed.

"Johnny, this is Lewis. He's the other dispatcher here," Jim introduced. "Lewis, this is my son John."

"Nice to meet ya, Johnny." Lewis leaned forward in the chair, shook John's hand, then sat back.

"Same here." John smiled.

"So, your dad tells us you're a fireman out in California." Lewis crossed his massive arms, leaning back in the already precariously over-loaded chair. "Must be pretty exciting."

"And a paramedic," Jim corrected.

What else does Dad know about me? And why don't I know as much about him? John shrugged, then nodded. "Yeah, it's pretty exciting. I've been with the Department almost six years."

A stream of mostly unintelligible gibberish suddenly erupted from the radio behind Lewis.

"That damn Coonass!" Lewis exclaimed, swiveling around in the chair and depressing the transmit button on the base of the microphone. "Channel 27 is licensed to Coastal Diving and Salvage. Vessel currently transmitting on 27, get off the air."

"WHOOO-HOOOO!" The radio squawked back. A string of barely intelligible expletives followed.

Lewis repeated the expletives between clenched teeth. "That man's gonna drive me nuts!"

John looked to Jim for an explanation.

"We've got some nut out there who thinks it's funny to tie up our channel."

An instrumental version of *Jambalaya* came next. Lewis rolled his eyes. "The FCC's gotta do somethin' about this clown."

"Did the authorization for a new channel come through?" Jim leaned against a nearby table and crossed his arms.

Lewis shook his head. "We can get by on 23. It's not monitored this far out, anyway. We're gonna have a lotta traffic."

"The FCC licenses certain channels to marine operators," Jim explained. "We share 27 with a couple of fishing vessels and an offshore crew company. When the Coonass ties up 27, we've gotta switch to another channel that's licensed to other marine operations."

John nodded. "We've had to deal with problems like that in L.A.," he began, then chuckled. "We've also got hills and mountains that block transmission." He paused. "What if there's an emergency? Will the traffic interfere with getting through for that?"

Lewis shook his head. "We'd switch to Channel 9, or 16 for an accident, or some other emergency." He indicated three other radio sets. "We monitor 9, 16 and 22. So does the Coast Guard. Which is why the Coonass stays off the air on those."

"Yeah. As long as he's not tying up the emergency channels, the Coast Guard can't touch him," Jim added.

The music stopped. "WHOOO-HOOO!"

I've got an idea. John grinned and his eyes lit up. "Mind if I try something?"

"Be my guest." Lewis rolled his chair away from the radio.

John stepped over to the table and picked up the mic. He depressed the talk button. "Vessel transmitting on Channel 27, identify." He paused and released the talk button. "Repeat, vessel transmitting on Channel 27, this is the United States Coast Guard. Identify."

The radio remained silent for a minute. "United States Coast Guard, this is COASTAL MOON. Thank you."

John set the mic down. "Guess that did it." He grinned at his father and Lewis.

Lewis looked over at Jim. "Does the Coast Guard monitor 27?"

John eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "Bad idea?" His voice squeaked like an adolescent's.

Jim laughed. "He's yankin' your chain, Son." He winked at John, then turned back to Lewis. "Johnny just solved our problem. "

"He solved it for now," Lewis corrected.

Jim laughed. "If the Coonass gets on the air again, just get Al to pretend he's the Coast Guard." He paused. "Say `thank you', Lewis."

Lewis grinned. "Thank you, Lewis."

John rolled his eyes. "Nice meetin' you, Lewis." He laughed.

Lewis leaned forward again. "Same here, kid." He held his hand out, shook John's hand, then sat back in his chair.

"Coastal Base, this is COASTAL STAR. Come in."

"Back to work," Jim teased, following John out of the office. He put his hand on John's shoulder and steered him back to the front office. "Bye, Kati." He opened the door.

"Bye, Jim. Nice meeting you, John." Kati flashed a smile at John as he stepped through the door.

"I'll show you around the shop." Jim followed John out of the office and down the stairs.

"Good deal." John stopped at the bottom of the stairs and waited for Jim, then followed him through the open bay door. "Are we gonna need hard hats and steel-toed shoes in here?"

"Nah. Just don't get too close to the tanks." Jim grinned.

John shook his head and laughed as he followed Jim into the shop.

After lunch at a small restaurant near Jim's office, they went to Jim's apartment to drop off John's suitcase.

"I'm gonna change clothes, then we can check out the beach." John grinned and waggled his eyebrows at his father.

Jim closed the apartment door. "Good deal." He winked, then led the way across the living room to a short hallway. "My room's at the end of the hall." He opened a closed door. "And this'll be your room."

Jim stepped back and John stepped into the medium sized room. A double bed and two nightstands

took up most of the rear wall. Louvered closet doors took up most of the interior wall. A dresser sat beneath a curtained picture window.

John dropped his bag on the bed, then turned to Jim, who was leaning against the frame of the door. "I'm gonna unpack. Gimme a few minutes and we can go out and do tourist stuff."

Jim smiled and nodded, then straightened. "I'll be in the living room. Just yell if you need anything."

John returned the smile. "Thanks, Dad." He watched Jim turn and disappear down the hall, then turned back to his bag. He unpacked, then set the bag in the closet. He then sat down on the bed and kicked off his shoes. "New mattress," he muttered, bouncing experimentally on the mattress. He turned and stretched out.

The day caught up with him and, in less than a minute, he was asleep.

Half an hour later, Jim looked up from the catalog he'd been reading and checked his watch. He closed the catalog, took off his glasses and set them on the table, then stood. "Did you change your mind, Johnny?" He called as he entered the hall.

Jim smiled at the sight he found when he reached John's room. *He looks like a kid.* His smile broadened. *He still is. And he's your kid.* He went to a closet in the hall, opened the door and pulled a blanket from the top shelf.

Jim crept into the room, shaking out the blanket and gently laying it over John.

John's eyes cracked open. "Dad?"

Jim reached out to pat the dark hair, then drew back. "Go back to sleep," he whispered, smoothing the blanket over John.

John mumbled, turned onto his left side and snuggled into the blanket.

Jim chuckled, then crept out of the room, quietly pulling the door closed behind him.

What happened to the sun? John blinked in the darkened room, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. *Oh, yeah, I'm at Dad's apartment.* He sat up and rubbed his face, then reached over and fumbled for a lamp on the nightstand. When he didn't find one, he stood and stumbled across the room, stubbing his toe on the foot of the bed.

"Damn!" John exclaimed, hopping across to the door and switching on the light. He then hopped back to the bed and sat down hard, pulling his foot up and massaging his big toe.

When he was pretty sure the injury was minor, John stood and gingerly walked to the door.

Jim was sitting on the couch, watching the news when John stepped into the living room.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I fell asleep," John announced.

Jim laughed, then leaned forward and turned the sound down. "Don't worry about it." He turned. "I thought we'd go out for dinner. But there's no hurry."

At the mention of food, John's stomach gurgled. He blushed, then laughed. "Gimme five minutes."

Jim and John were seated at a table in the center of the small restaurant. The menus made the silence between them a little less awkward.

"Hi, Jimmy. It's good to see you again." A waitress set napkins on the table in front of Jim and then John.

"How're the specials tonight, Lucy?" Jim smiled.

"Stick to the menu." Lucy laughed. "Can I get y'all somethin' to drink?"

"I'll have the usual." Jim looked over at John.

"I'll have a beer." John spared a glance over at Jim, whose face remained neutral.

Lucy chuckled and put a hand on John's shoulder. "Before I can serve you a beer, Son, I'm gonna have to see some I.D."

"You just made my day." John grinned, pulled his wallet from his back pocket and took his driver's license out.

Lucy took the license, looking from it to John several times before handing it back. "I've got clothes older than you, but you're legal." She laughed.

Still grinning, John replaced his license, then stuffed his wallet back into his pocket. "Do I look that young?"

Jim laughed. "Yep." He grinned. "You'll appreciate it when you're 35."

John laughed. "I appreciate it now," he returned.

"John, there's something . . ."

Lucy came back with their drinks. "Do you need a few more minutes?" She set John's beer and Jim's iced tea on the table.

Jim smiled. "Thanks, Lucy." He went back to his menu. "The crab's really good here." He kept the menu open, absently reaching over and stirring his tea, even though he hadn't added sugar to the glass. Still concentrating on the menu, Jim put the spoon down, then lifted the glass. He grimaced after taking a sip.

What's he so nervous about? John closed his menu and set it down. "I'm gonna have the Seafood Platter. A little bit of everything." He grinned at Jim, then took a sip of his beer.

A tall woman with brown hair walked over to their table, leaned down and kissed Jim's cheek. "I can't believe I made it."

John nearly choked on his beer. He set the bottle down and coughed into his napkin.

The woman looked from John, then to Jim. "You didn't tell him." She snickered.

"You're early." Jim stood. He put an arm around the woman's waist. "Johnny, this is a friend of mine. Peggy Sullivan."

Still coughing, John stood. "Nice to . . . meet you," he managed.

Peggy smiled. "It's nice to finally meet you in person, John." She walked around Jim and sat in the chair between Jim and John.

John sat down again, coughing into his napkin, then taking a drink of water. "Sorry about that."

Peggy smiled. "I'm the one who should apologize." She laid her napkin across her lap. "I should've made sure Jim talked to you before I waltzed in." She winked at Jim. "When it comes right down to it, it's your fault, hunny."

"You're early!" Jim exclaimed, then laughed. "You're never early."

Peggy laughed, then turned to John and winked. "So, it is my fault." She looked over at Jim. "Have you two ordered?"

Jim closed his menu and handed it to her. "We were waiting for you," he informed.

Peggy scanned the menu, then closed it. "I'll have the Shrimp Dinner and a side salad."

The waitress came back to the table. "Can I get you something to drink, ma'am?"

"Iced tea?" Jim looked at Peggy for confirmation. She nodded and he turned back to the waitress. "And we're ready to order."

The waitress pulled a small pad and pen from her apron.

"I'll have the Shrimp and Oyster Platter. And the lady'll have the Shrimp Dinner. And could we get extra cocktail sauce with both of those?" Jim looked at John. "John?"

He knows she wants extra cocktail sauce?? How long has this been going on? John blinked at the waitress. "Ah...sorry," he stammered. "The Seafood Platter. And a side salad. Please."

The waitress smiled at John, then winked. "Dressing?" The waitress asked.

"Ranch, thanks." The waitress looked at him funny. *Did I grow another head? Guess they don't have*

ranch dressing down here. "Ah, thousand island?" That's better.

"House," Jim responded. "Thanks." He gathered the menus and handed them to the waitress, smiling at her as he did.

"So . . ." John fiddled with his silverware. "How long have you and my dad known each other, Peggy?"

Peggy laughed. "About a year?" She looked to Jim briefly, then turned back to John. "We met at church. We talked and became friends." She reached over and squeezed Jim's hand. "We have a lot in common."

It shouldn't bother me. I shouldn't let it. John picked up his water glass and took a sip.

"How do you like living in L.A., John?" Peggy let go of Jim's hand. "I lived there years ago with my late husband. I used to love going to places like Musso and Frank's or the Brown Derby to spot celebrities." She laughed. "I never had the nerve to ask any of them for their autographs."

John chuckled. "I don't pay much attention to stuff like that," he admitted. "We got a call to a party once where a director was having a heart attack. My partner recognized him, but I didn't." He shrugged. "Then there was a stunt man that broke his leg. That was a pretty hairy rescue. The guy was in a wagon that was s'posed to go over a water fall. Half the wagon was over the edge and the other half was on its way. We got him out right before the wagon went over."

"I can imagine." Peggy smiled. "Your dad told me that you'd always wanted to be a fireman. And you were in the second paramedic class."

John nodded, then laughed, feeling his ears burn. "Yeah, I went into the rescue program right after I left the Academy. And then on to the paramedic program from there."

"Is that different from being a fireman?" Lucy returned and set Peggy's tea on the table. "Thanks." She added sugar to the glass and stirred.

"The rescue squads handle extricating victims from car accidents, search and rescue in structure fires . . . you name it, we did it." John paused and laughed. "I worked on the engine for about two months, then my captain sent me back for rescue training. And I worked the rescue squad for about three years after that."

"So, as a paramedic, you still handle rescues and administer first aid?" Peggy took a sip from her glass.

"It's more than first aid." John leaned toward her. "Every fireman . . . every police officer is trained in basic first aid. As paramedics, what we do is administer treatment in the field, with doctors at the hospital." He paused, then blushed. "I don't wanna bore you with that."

Peggy smiled. "No, please, go on."

"Peggy works for Panama City, John. She can probably call this whole dinner research and put it on

her expense account."

Peggy laughed, reached over and playfully pinched Jim. "I'm curious." She looked over at John. "I've been reading about paramedic programs in California and New York. We're looking into starting something similar in the city."

"It's a great program." John smiled. "We can't save everybody, but we can give a lot of victims a chance they didn't have before."

After dinner, Jim and John walked Peggy to her car in the rear parking lot of the restaurant. When they stopped at her car, Jim unlocked the driver's door.

Peggy turned to John and hugged him, then kissed his cheek. "I hope we'll get a chance to get together again before you go home." She wiped lipstick from John's cheek.

John smiled, feeling the blush creep along his ear lobes. "Yeah." *Part of me doesn't wanna like her, but I do.* He paused. "Call Dick Friend in the Public Information Office. He can give you details about getting that paramedic program started."

Peggy nodded. "First thing tomorrow afternoon." She turned to Jim. "You boys have fun in Clewiston. But not too much." She hugged him, then kissed his cheek.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Jim promised, waiting as Peggy got into the car, then gently closing the door.

Father and son stepped back as Peggy started the car and backed out of the parking spot. They remained there as she straightened the car and headed out of the lot.

John turned to Jim as Peggy pulled out of the lot. "So, Dad."

Jim looked over at John.

"Should I be calling her `mom'?" John grinned at his father.

Jim laughed and cuffed John on the ear. "Smart aleck." He rubbed his hands together. "You wanna stand here all night?"

John laughed. "Sure, why not?"

Jim playfully cuffed him again. "Get in the truck."

Still laughing, John followed Jim to the truck, waiting as Jim climbed in and leaned over to unlock the door. Jim turned the key in the ignition, then looked over at John.

"Something wrong, Dad?" John asked as Jim shut the engine off.

Jim turned to the window, then rolled it down. He took a deep breath, then another. Finally, he turned

to John. "I want you to know that this isn't any kind of reflection on your mother."

What's that supposed to mean? I don't think I wanna do this right now. John looked down at his lap, then rolled his own window down. "I didn't think that."

"Johnny, I loved your mom from the first day I met her." Jim paused, taking another deep breath. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about her. I . . ." He trailed off briefly. "I always saw your mom as a person, who happened to be a Seminole." He looked out the window, then back to John, who was staring out his own window. "I know that was hard on you growing up . . . if I'd known how hard . . ."

"Dad, it's not your fault." John cleared his throat, feeling tears sting his eyes. *I really don't wanna do this. It's ancient history anyway.*

Jim chuckled and shook his head. "I was always the black sheep." He rubbed his forehead. "I used to say 'please' and 'thank you' to the people who worked for the family. Drove my mother crazy."

John hesitantly reached over and squeezed his father's shoulder. "That's not what I'd call a black sheep, Dad."

Jim smiled, then reached over and tousled John's hair. "I loved your mom for who she was." He took a deep breath. "And I care about Peggy for who she is. But if you're uncomfortable with that . . ."

"I . . . it's not that, Dad." *I'm not sure what it is.* John's brow furrowed. Then he turned to Jim. "I think it's just that there are certain things kids never want to know about their parents." He laughed nervously.

Jim chuckled quietly, then broke into laughter. "You've got a point there."

"I was just joking about calling her mom." John began. "But if you're happy, then I'm happy."

Jim smiled. "I'm happy." His eyebrows went up. "What about you? Have you found a nice girl to settle down with?"

John laughed, then shook his head. "Nope." He turned to Jim and grinned. "But I keep looking."

They left for the Big Cypress Reservation at eight o'clock the next morning. For most of the drive, John kept up a running commentary on the growth he saw along the panhandle and as they moved into South Central Florida. He was running out of things to comment on now that they'd moved to a state road on flat terrain, with trees lining both sides of the road.

"Man, I miss the mountains." John's tone was wistful. "You've gotta come out to L.A. some time. There're hills, mountains, canyons." He paused. "Spots where you can go up and look down on the whole city."

"Through the smog." Jim chuckled.

John rubbed his left eye. "It's not that bad," he snapped, then paused, looking out the window. He took

a deep breath. "Well, not all the time anyway. And at night . . . man, the lights are amazing." He turned back to the window. "If you don't believe me, ask Peggy. She used to live there, too."

Jim didn't respond. He signaled a right turn, then pulled into a truck stop. "Lunch time." He parked the truck, turned the ignition off and pulled the key out.

John got out. "I'm starving." He shook his legs, then stretched and bent, working out the kinks in his back and shoulders.

Jim waited, watching with a bemused smile. "You don't sit much, do you?"

John laughed. "Not in a truck."

They went into the restaurant and a waitress led them to a booth by the large window. The waitress left two menus, then walked away.

"Think she'll card me if I order a beer?" John's face fell when Jim frowned. "Joking. Sorry." He turned his attention to his menu. *He's treating me like he did when I was 16 and hanging out at the roadhouses with Kenny.* "I'm 28, Dad."

"I'm 50," Jim returned.

A second waitress came to the table, took their orders, then returned to the table after a few minutes with Jim's tea and John's coffee.

John picked up his cup and sipped his coffee, staring out the window. *Geez, why do I feel like I have to defend myself?* He turned to Jim. "Dad, I have a beer once in a while. I was making a joke."

Jim fiddled with the placemat.

"I work 24 hour shifts every other day, or every two days. I don't go out drinking every night," John continued. "I don't even go out every week."

Jim took a deep breath. "I'll take your word for it," he said quietly.

The waitress returned to the table, set their plates down, pulled the check off her pad and laid it on the table.

I'll take your word for it. John took a deep breath, picking up the salt and shaking salt over his french fries. He added salt to his hamburger, then slapped it together. "That was ten years ago, Dad." He took a bite of his burger. "What else was I s'posed to do?"

Jim sighed. "Johnny, I don't wanna fight with you." He looked down at the table. "Look, you're my kid. I worry about you. It's my job." He smiled, then frowned when John didn't return the smile.

They ate in silence for several minutes. John finally set his burger down and looked across the table at Jim. "What happened to the boat, Dad?"

Jim chewed, swallowed, then picked up his napkin, wiping each finger, then his mouth. "She sank," he said quietly.

"Yeah, and you moved to Panama City. Why didn't Aunt Helen tell me about it?" John demanded.

"I asked her not to." Jim took a deep breath. "There wasn't anything to tell you, Son. An offshore crewboat clipped our stern, opened up the hull and we went down."

"Somebody died, Dad," John said sharply, then took a deep breath. "I tried to find you through the Coast Guard."

Jim blinked several times. "Mike was working the nets." He lifted the napkin and blew his nose.

Mike was an okay guy. "Is that why you're not running a boat?" John blinked away tears of his own.

"I was tired of it, anyway," Jim muttered.

"Why didn't you let Aunt Helen tell me?" John repeated. "I would've called you sooner."

Jim shook his head. "There wasn't anything to tell you."

"Like the day mom died?" John asked, teeth clenched. "I didn't wanna go to that meet. But you told me I'd be letting the team down."

"Don't do this, Johnny," Jim said quietly.

"Why not, Dad?" John spat, dark eyes narrowing. "You were trying to protect me then. I was a kid."

"I didn't want to talk to you then." Jim sighed, then sat back and crossed his arms. "My life was upside down."

"I could've helped you," John returned. "I'm not a kid anymore, Dad."

"You'd just gotten out of the hospital after breaking your leg, Johnny." Jim shook his head. "I thought you wouldn't want to talk to me."

John blinked. "You thought wrong." He stood, pulled his wallet out and set a 20 dollar bill on the table. He turned and walked toward the door, then stopped and came back to the table. "I had a head injury a few months ago. And I thought I was gonna lose my job . . . everything. You know what I thought about? Calling you." He paused, his voice breaking. "But I had to find you first. So, maybe I'm the one who's wrong." He turned and stormed out of the restaurant.

John got as far as the truck, then lost the battle to maintain control of his emotions. He leaned against the truck, keeping his head down and swiping furiously at the hot tears spilling from his eyes. *Man, this is just like the day I left. Why did I come here?*

"Johnny." Jim leaned against the truck bed, staring out across to the horizon. "I did to you what my family did to me."

John remained silent.

"I tried to force you to make a choice." Jim paused. "I told myself I was trying to protect you." He took a deep breath. "The day you were born, I promised your mother that we'd raise you in her world. When she was gone . . ." His voice broke.

John straightened. "What about me, Dad? Why didn't you ever ask me what I wanted?"

"I was trying to keep that promise." Jim's voice was so quiet, John had to strain to hear him. "I promised your mom that I wouldn't let anybody take you away from me, or the reservation."

John swiped at his eyes and nose. "I remember how that used to scare her."

Jim pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "Child Welfare did it to her parents." He looked over at John. "Looking back, I know you were unhappy. But back then, I thought it was just a teenaged thing."

"It wasn't all bad." John paused. "I wouldn't trade Mom's family for anything. But there were people on the rez outside the family . . ." He trailed off, then looked over at Jim. "Like that man in Indiantown. People like him saw me as evil because I was mixed-blood."

Jim turned and stared at John. "You can't possibly remember that," he whispered. "You were barely 3."

John chuckled. "Head injuries do funny things." He examined his hands, then turned and leaned against the truck. "I had some good times. And some bad ones." He looked over at Jim. "I wasn't leaving you, Dad. I wasn't leaving mom's world. I was trying to find my own place."

"You could've been a fireman in Naples, or Miami," Jim said quietly. "If I remember correctly, your choice of cities was made by sticking a pin in a map."

John chuckled. "Well, I read up on L.A. after that." He looked into the restaurant. "I have a friend in the Sheriff's Office. His name's Vince and he's black." He looked back at Jim. "If he were here, the three of us wouldn't be able to walk into that truck stop and eat together."

Jim sighed. "No, we couldn't."

"There're places in Florida where you and I couldn't eat together." John straightened. "L.A. wasn't like that. Even before the Civil Rights movement."

"If I'd known . . ."

John held up a hand, then reached out and squeezed Jim's arm. "I wouldn't be who I am if you and Mom had married other people." He half-grinned. "I wouldn't trade that, either."

Jim smiled. "We'd better get back on the road." He looked at John. "You know how your aunt worries."

"We don't want her calling out the search party." John chuckled, then briefly squeezed Jim's arm before walking around the truck and climbing in.

They reached the reservation as the sun started its journey toward the western horizon. John stared in amazement at the buildings and conditions.

"Did they strike oil out here?" John turned in the seat. "That's the Tribal Council building?" The two story brick building disappeared behind them.

Jim chuckled. "The Chairman's managed to get some financial control away from the Bureau of Indian Affairs." He paused. "They've started running tours through the 'Glades. They're starting up a few other businesses. They're doing pretty well."

John smiled. "Yeah." He turned back around. "I knew things were going well at the ranch, but Aunt Helen never told me about this stuff."

Jim smiled. "When things go well for the members, things go well for the Tribe."

John snorted. "Aunt Helen and I're gonna have a serious talk."

Jim laughed. They pulled off the main road onto the ranch owned by John's aunt and uncle, Howard and Helen Billie.

When Jim stopped the truck, John opened the door. Before he could get out of the truck, the screen door clattered open and Helen Billie burst out of the house.

"JOHNNY!" Helen ran across the yard and pulled John into a hug. "You're finally here. I can't believe you're finally here." She sobbed, kissing her nephew's cheeks.

"Aunt Helen." John laughed. "Aunt Helen, your gonna hug the stuffin' outta me," he teased, kissing the top of her head. "I'm here and I'm staying for a while." He grinned at her.

Laughing and crying at the same time, Helen stepped back, but didn't release her hold on John. She looked up at her nephew, cupping his face in her hands. "You need a haircut."

John laughed. "I don't."

"Oh, Johnny." Helen paused and brushed the hair off John's forehead. "You look so much better with short hair."

John snickered. "I look like Mr. Spock."

"Mr. Who?" Helen laughed and linked her arm through his. "We'll talk about that later." She led him toward the house. "I hope you're hungry. I've been cooking all day."

"I'll just get the bags." Jim laughed and opened the box in the bed of the truck.

Helen stopped. "Oh, Jim." She laughed, let go of John's arm and walked over to her brother-in-law. "I'm sorry. Johnny's finally home." She beamed, hugging him and kissing his cheek. "I'm so glad you two patched things up," she whispered in his ear, then pulled away and linked her right arm through his left. "We'll get your bags later." She linked her arm with Jim's, then led him back to John.

Howard Billie stood on the porch. "Jimmy." He nodded, shaking hands with Jim. "Johnny." Instead of just shaking hands, Howard pulled his nephew into a brief hug. "Good to have you both home."

John smiled. "It's good to be home."

Howard held the screen door open, letting John and Jim enter the house first. John had expected the same familiar wall paper and the same familiar furnishings in his aunt and uncle's house. Like the reservation, the house had been transformed to reflect the prosperity of its owners.

The pictures on the mantle were the only constant. John walked over, brushing his fingers over his mother's face, then lifting a second picture. He turned to Helen, grinning. "That's Mr. Spock." He held out his Academy graduation picture.

Helen laughed, took the picture and set it back on the mantle. "Are you hungry, Sweetie?" She gently rubbed his back.

John laughed. "I'm always hungry." He paused. "Would it be okay if I cleaned up first?"

Helen smiled, reached up and brushed the hair from John's forehead. "Of course." She turned to her husband. "Dear, would you get the bags?"

"I'll get them," John volunteered.

"Howard doesn't mind. Do you, Howard?"

Howard turned and stepped out the front door, leaving John and Jim in the living room.

"Howard's still a regular chatterbox." Jim chuckled as he dropped onto the couch.

"The Billies are all quiet people." Helen snickered. "Unlike the Jumpers."

"Or the Gages." Jim stretched, then looked around the living room. "Where's young Howard?"

"On his way. The crewboat docked in Venice at four o'clock. His flight's due in Naples at nine."

Howard returned with John and Jim's bags. John met him at the stairs.

"Thanks, Uncle Howard." John took the bags, then disappeared up the stairs.

Helen sat next to Jim on the couch. "How was the drive?"

Howard sat in an easy chair and picked up a newspaper from a basket next to the chair.

"Long." Jim leaned his head back. "We had a close call at a truck stop about half way." He looked

over at Helen. "What do you see when you look at young Howard?"

Helen smiled. "My son. Why?"

Jim shook his head, focusing on the mantle. "Nothing."

A clatter and groan reverberated through the living room, causing Jim to jump and look around. "The house comin' down?"

Helen laughed. "Johnny just got into the shower," she informed. "We haven't redone the plumbing, yet."

Jim chuckled, then stood. "I'm gonna go get cleaned up, too."

"Johnny's probably claimed the guest room." Helen laughed. "So you'll be in Howard, Jr.'s old room."

Jim stood. "We'll be down in a few minutes," he promised, crossing to the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, Jim went to his nephew's room and was surprised to find John's bag on the bed. He smiled and shook his head, then crossed the hall to the guest room.

Jim was unpacking when the clatter and groan stopped. He continued unpacking, waiting for John to come out of the bathroom. When he finished and John hadn't come out, he changed his clothes, then went to the bathroom door.

Jim knocked once. "You okay in there, Johnny?"

The door opened and John peered out, half his face covered with shaving cream. "I'll be done in a minute." He grinned. "If I shave tonight, I won't have to shave in the morning." He disappeared back into the bathroom, but left the door open.

Jim rubbed a hand along his own jaw. "That doesn't sound like a bad idea." He chuckled. "I'll still have to shave in the morning."

John swiped the razor under his chin, rinsing the blade in the sink. "Hey, at least you can grow a decent beard."

Jim laughed. "No, I can't. It comes in red."

John winced as he nicked himself. "Red?" His voice was incredulous.

Jim laughed again. "I was a red head. You can't tell in the black and white pictures. Thank God." He leaned against the door frame, crossing his arms. "That's where you get all the freckles." He grinned.

John laughed as he rinsed the razor. "Gee, thanks, Dad." He made a final pass over his face, then rinsed the razor and drained the sink. After cleaning it out, he grabbed a second towel and propped his right leg up on a stool to dry it.

Jim's eyes widened at the long scar that ran down the inside of John's shin. "My God, what happened to your leg?"

John looked down at the scar. "That? They had to open up my leg when I broke it." He put his leg down and lifted his right arm, displaying another blotchy patch on the underside of his forearm. "Got that on some gravel on a rooftop tryin' to rescue an overdose." He turned, displaying a scar on the outside of his wrist. "I got this one chasing a purse snatcher. Tangled with a fence nail." He chuckled. "All those years runnin' track sure paid off. Too bad I didn't do the field events, too."

Jim swallowed. "Catch the guy?"

"Well, no. I got distracted by a guard dog." John grinned. "But I got the lady's purse back. Had her life savings in it, too." He lifted his left leg, tracing a short scar on his shin. "Got that one from a beam in an abandoned warehouse. That was a scary one. Some nut planted a bomb that was gonna go off in less than five minutes. We had to rescue him and a kid before it did."

Jim cleared his throat. "Helen's probably waitin' on us for dinner." He turned and went to the stairs.

"You're not gonna shave?" John called after him, then shrugged and went back to drying off.

Helen had indeed been cooking all day and she'd made enough food to feed an entire army. John was doing his best to make a dent in the food. Which wasn't easy without help from Jim, who spent the first half hour pushing his first helping around on his plate.

Johnny sopped up gravy from his second helping. "This is great, Aunt Helen." The gravy soaked biscuit disappeared and he refilled his plate. "Man, it's great to be able to sit down and finish a meal."

Helen laughed. "Did you feed him yesterday, Jim?"

"Lunch, dinner and a midnight snack," Jim muttered.

"Light lunch," John muttered, not looking up from his plate.

"Hollow leg," Howard chimed in.

"Howard," Helen began, then laughed.

John finished filling his plate, then reached over and picked up a bottle of green sauce. "What's this?"

"Habanero pepper sauce," Helen informed.

John removed the cap and liberally sprinkled sauce onto his food.

"Careful, Johnny. It's hotter than Tabasco," Helen warned.

"The hotter the better." John continued sprinkling sauce, then closed the bottle and set it back on the table. He scooped up a bite and devoured it. His face turned red as he chewed and swallowed. "Hot . . ."

." A fine sheen of sweat broke out on his face as he grabbed his glass of water.

"Not water!" Helen warned.

Howard stood and disappeared into the kitchen.

John downed the water, then his eyes widened. He coughed and fanned his hands in front of his mouth.

Howard returned with a glass of milk and placed it in John's hand. John downed it, sighing with relief as he set the glass down.

"Man! That was good!" John ladled more food onto his plate, mixing it in with the over-spiced portions. "Can I take some of that home with me?"

Helen reached over and smoothed John's hair. "Of course you can, Sweetie."

"When'd you quit using Tabasco?" John asked, taking a bite of food. "Mmmmm, that's good."

"Stomach couldn't take it," Howard drawled.

John stopped chewing, his head coming up. "Did you see a doctor? There might be something else going on."

"Doctor said `Quit using so much Tabasco sauce'." Howard returned.

"My church started a `pen pal' program. I started writing to a lady in Ecuador." Helen took up the explanation. "She sent me some pepper seeds and a recipe for the sauce." She smiled at Howard and patted his arm. "Howard can use less sauce, but still enjoy burning his tongue off."

John laughed. "Well, I thought my taste buds were about shot from too much smoke," he muttered between bites. "They still work."

"Maybe it's time to move on to something else," Jim said quietly.

John's head snapped up and his eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I know you've wanted to be a fireman since you were a kid, Johnny." Jim paused, glancing at Helen and Howard, then turning back to John. "But now that you've seen what it's like, hasn't the novelty worn off?"

"Novelty?" John repeated. "I save people's lives, Dad."

"By going into burning buildings and buildings with bombs," Jim pointed out.

"That's not all it's about, Dad." John was obviously fighting to keep his voice even. "Some rescues are at fires, but not all of them."

"Sometimes you run into burning buildings." Jim looked over at his son, his own eyes narrowed.

"That's the opposite of what any sane person would do."

"James!" Helen scolded. "He didn't mean that, Johnny."

John ignored his aunt's attempt to diffuse the situation. "Now, I'm crazy?" His voice rose. "Is that what happened with you, Dad? Did the novelty wear off, or did you find sanity again?"

"John," Helen began.

"No, Aunt Helen. Workin' like a dog and never havin' any money was okay for 20 years. But when the boat sank . . ." John's eyes narrowed further, his jaw clenched and his face flushed.

"You don't know what you're talkin' about," Jim warned. "I'd suggest you shut up."

"And you don't know what you're talkin' about." John threw his napkin on the table, then turned to Helen and Howard. "Scuse me." He stood and walked out of the dining room.

Helen flinched when the front door slammed.

Howard looked from Jim to Helen, then stood. "I'm gonna make my rounds, get the animals in." He left the dining room.

"What was that about?" Helen demanded. "Johnny's happy in the fire service. It's his career. And he's very good at it."

"Have you seen the scars, Helen?" Jim responded. "Christ, he almost died from some virus that he caught from one of his patients."

"Don't swear in my house, James." Helen scolded. "And that virus was a fluke. I told you that." She pushed her plate away. "That woman never should've smuggled a monkey into the country."

"He's gonna get himself killed," Jim said quietly.

"Are you trying to make sure he doesn't speak to you for another eight years?" Helen paused, stood and walked around the table to sit next to Jim. "Johnny saves people's lives. He's very proud of that. And you should be, too."

Jim rubbed his face with both hands. "Do you know what I see when I look at him?" He shook his head. "I see the same sad, scared kid I saw when his mother died."

Helen rubbed Jim's back. "Oh, Jim," she said quietly. "Johnny's grown so much since then." She paused. "He's got confidence in himself." She smiled. "He's outgoing. He speaks his mind." She chuckled. "He doesn't give two shakes for what people think about him." Her eyes misted. "Do you remember when Johnny charmed the Council?"

Jim smiled sadly. "I thought Betty was crazy to try that." His eyes misted. "I was willing to live somewhere else, but she wouldn't have it."

"And she put Johnny in a little suit, took him to the meeting and told those men to explain to him why his daddy couldn't live with the family." Helen wiped a tear from her cheek. "Johnny walked right up to those men and said, 'My name's John Roderick Gage and I'm three years old'."

Jim swiped at his eyes, then laughed. "He told 'em he'd be four the next week."

"And it was January!" Helen exclaimed, laughing. She rubbed Jim's back again. "When he went back to school in town, he changed. He got too quiet. Too . . . hesitant."

"Then he found track and the paper," Jim said wistfully. "He's so smart. Smarter than I ever was." He paused. "I just wanna see him use that."

"He does, Jimmy. Every day." Helen smiled. "I don't think he even realizes this, but he's a paramedic because of Betty." She took a deep breath. "He helps people the way he couldn't help her."

"That was never Johnny's fault." Jim sighed. "If it was anybody's fault, it was mine."

"And mine," Helen admitted quiet. "I should've dragged Betty to the Clinic in Dania. She was my only sister. But I didn't." Her eyes misted again. "God help me." She wiped her eyes. "We all tried to believe for her." She rubbed Jim's arm. "Johnny never wanted to be anything but a fireman. And he did it."

Jim smiled. "He gets that from his mother." He took a deep breath, then reached over and squeezed Helen's hand. "I'd better find him and apologize."

Helen squeezed back. "You'd better wait." She winked. "He gets that temper from his mother, too."

"And me." Jim grinned.

"Johnny's a grown man, Jimmy. I know how hard it is to see that." Helen paused. "You have to let him make his own decisions. And you have to support them, even if they aren't the same ones you'd make."

"What about when he gets hurt?" Jim asked quietly.

Helen smiled sadly. "He bends over backwards not to worry you."

"He gets that from his mother," Jim said sadly.

John helped Howard put away the chickens and horses and secure the barn, chicken house, pig pen and sheds. But he couldn't go back into the house when he and his uncle finished. Instead, he went back to the road and walked down to the house where he'd grown up. The distance across the field separating the two properties was shorter, but there were sure to be snakes and other critters lurking in the ankle high grass.

The house was dark when he reached it. His cousin Howard had moved in after Jim left the reservation. *He's not back, so it won't bother anybody if I go up to the roof for a few minutes.*

John went to the side of the house, expecting to find the ladder he'd used to climb to the roof during the years he'd lived there. Like everything else, the house had changed and the ladder was gone.

"Figures," John muttered. He walked around the house and found a central air condition unit at the back. Without a thought, he carefully climbed up on the compressor and hoisted himself to the roof.

As he stared out at the new structures dotting the once barren landscape, John regretted leaving. *Dad was right. Things did get better. If only I'd had the patience to wait.* He kicked at a loose shingle, then frowned and tried to put it back in place. *Maybe it'd make him happy if I moved back to the rez and contributed something here.* He fiddled with the shingle. *That's what my mom would've wanted me to do.*

The thought of leaving the L.A. County Fire Department wasn't so bad. He might not be able to work as a paramedic in Florida, but he could still fight fires. Maybe advance fire fighting on the reservation. *Not to mention getting paramedic programs started in Florida.*

It was the thought of leaving Station 51 that made him choke up. Not to mention leaving Roy and his family behind. He looked forward to spending time with Roy, Joanne and the kids as much as he looked forward to hiking, camping and fishing on his own. It gave him something he hadn't had since his mother got sick.

Headlights approached the house and a car pulled into the yard and stopped. A tall man with long, dark hair got out of the car and peered up at the roof. "Johnny?"

John grinned. "That's my name. Don't wear it out."

Howard Billie, Jr. shook his head and laughed. "What're you doin' on my roof?"

"It used to be my roof," John called back.

Howard, Jr. closed the car door and walked toward the back of the house. "How'd you get up there?"

"I flew!" John turned and watched Howard walk over to a shed, open the door and pull out an extension ladder.

"The shed door wasn't locked." Howard, Jr. placed the ladder against the side of the house and climbed up. "You're still a pain in my ass." He laughed as he sat down next to his cousin.

"I'm gonna tell your mom. Then laugh when she washes your mouth out with soap," John teased.

"Why do you think I moved over here?" Howard, Jr. reached over and pinned John's head under his arm. "How long's it been since you had a decent noogie?" He ground his knuckles into the top of John's head.

"Cut it out!" John exclaimed, extricating himself and scooting out of Howard, Jr.'s reach. "Nobody's done that since the last time I saw you. And I haven't missed it, either."

"So, what happened?" Howard, Jr. pulled his legs up and rested his arms on his knees.

John shrugged. "Nothin' happened. I just came up here for old time's sake."

"Who taught you to climb up here?" Howard, Jr. challenged. "Me, that's who. And you never came up here unless something was wrong."

"Why did you move over here?" John tried to change the subject.

"Cause when a man reaches a certain age, people look at him funny if he still lives with his parents." Howard, Jr. laughed. "And I'd passed that age about ten years ago."

John grinned. "So, technically, you owe me."

Howard, Jr. looked at his cousin and frowned. "And just how do you figure that, Weasel?"

"Don't call me that!" John exclaimed. "If I hadn't left home, my dad would've stayed and you'd still be living with Aunt Helen and Uncle Howard." He grinned. "You owe me."

"You're still the only person I know who could come up with somethin' like that." Howard, Jr. chuckled. "There's gotta be a long history of insanity on your dad's side of the family."

John reached over and patted Howard, Jr.'s back. "Aww, How, you were my role model."

Howard, Jr. put an arm around John's shoulders and pulled him over. "So, tell your role model what's buggin' you or I'll noogie it outta ya."

John gently shoved Howard, Jr. away. "Get away from me." He laughed, then sobered. "Just a fight with my dad. Some things never change." He looked over at his cousin. "You're workin' offshore, painting rigging . . . doing high work, right?"

Howard, Jr. nodded. "Yeah, so?"

"Did your mom call you crazy when you went into that?"

"Not to my face." Howard, Jr. laughed. "I know she doesn't like it. And she had kittens when one of the rigs had a blowout. I wasn't even there when it happened." He looked over at John. "He's your father. You're all he's got left."

"That's not true. He's always welcome here," John argued.

"But we're in-laws. You're blood," Howard, Jr. pointed out. "Big difference."

John laid back on the roof and stared up at the stars. "Maybe he should call his family. Patch things up with them."

"Take it from somebody who was around before you were born," Howard, Jr. began. "It ain't gonna happen."

"He patched things up with me," John reasoned.

"That was different, Johnny." He took a deep breath. "When your dad's family first came down on him, Aunt Betty left and came to stay with us." He paused. "Your dad showed up two days later. He made a choice. Your mom, over his family."

"I know that."

"I'm gettin' to the stuff you don't know. So shut up," Howard, Jr. snapped. "When you were born, your dad sent your grandmother a letter telling her she had her first grandson. He'd even named you Roderick after his father." He paused. "She sent him a letter back." He shrugged. "Basically telling him he was welcome back. Alone."

"Roderick was my first name?" John frowned.

"As always, you're missing the point," Howard, Jr. growled.

"I get the point." John sighed.

"That's why your birth certificate was issued in December. Your dad changed your first name to John. Your mom made him keep your grandfather's name." Howard, Jr. looked out over the field at his parents' house.

"Please tell me you're making this up," John pleaded. "Dad told me his family didn't approve of my mom, but he didn't tell me they were so . . . so cruel about it."

"I wish I was, kid," Howard, Jr. responded. "It tore your mom up, especially after what happened with her and my mom and Uncle Clyde. Family was so important to her." He shrugged. "But your dad's mind was set. If his mother had made the first step, he might've been able to forgive her."

So, why didn't he take the first step with me? Why'd he wait for me to do it?

"I think he realized after his mother died that he should've been the one to take the first step," Howard, Jr. continued. "He felt terrible about what he did to you. So, he waited and hoped you'd forgive him. Always afraid you never would."

"How'd you deal with it when your mom had kittens about that blow-out?" John looked over at Howard, Jr.

"I kept my mouth shut and waited for it to blow over."

"Ooops." John sighed and sat up.

"Johnny, you gotta remember that parents are gonna worry no matter how old you get." Howard, Jr. laughed. "When I'm 80, my mom's still gonna worry about whether I'm eatin' right and takin' care of myself." He shrugged. "Heck, my dad worries. He just keeps it to himself." He paused. "And you've gotta admit that what you do is more dangerous than your average office job. Heck, it's more dangerous than my job."

"But I don't wanna do anything else, How," John complained. "Even if I left L.A. and came back

home, I'd still wanna work with the fire department . . . any department."

"And your dad'll accept that. Eventually."

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better," John returned sarcastically.

"Johnny, your dad's spent the last 8 years worrying about you and he's had to keep it all inside," Howard, Jr. informed.

"What, he didn't commiserate with Aunt Helen when I got hurt and told her after the fact?"

Howard, Jr. laughed. "No, he defended you. He puffed his chest out and bragged about his fireman son to anybody that'd listen whenever he visited us. Bragged about you bein' a paramedic, 'cause that proved how smart you are."

John smiled sadly. "I've had my share of scrapes in the last year."

"More than your share," Howard, Jr. commented. "You've just gotta give your dad a chance to get over worryin' about your job." He shrugged. "It doesn't mean he's not proud of you. He just doesn't understand what you do."

John nodded, then smiled. "Thanks, How." He patted his cousin's shoulder, then stood. "I'd better get back before Aunt Helen gets worried about me."

Howard, Jr. stood. "Wanna go bowlin' tomorrow?"

"I'll have to see what your mom's got planned for us, but maybe." John descended the ladder, then waited at the bottom for his cousin.

"Well, you see, that's why I'm askin'." Howard, Jr. climbed down, stopping next to John. "Mom and Dad have work to do. And your dad promised to take a look at the mower. It's been actin' up lately."

John frowned. "I can help with the mower."

Howard, Jr. laughed. "And insult my mother? Not a wise decision, Johnny."

"It's a working ranch. I came out expecting to earn my keep."

"Your dad's doing that. My mom doesn't want you to break a sweat, or lift a finger." Howard, Jr. shrugged. "Like she didn't spoil you enough when you were a kid."

John laughed, then shrugged. "Okay, we'll go bowlin'. What time?"

"I'll call you when I get up." Howard, Jr. clapped John's shoulder. "Wanna ride?"

"I can walk." John smiled and punched Howard, Jr. in the arm. "Thanks, How."

"Watch out for snakes!" Howard, Jr. called as John headed down the driveway.

"I'm stickin' to the road!" John called back.

"There, too." Howard, Jr.'s laughter drifted across the yard.

John turned, still walking backwards. "Can you see me, How?" He yelled.

"Yeah!"

John flipped him off, then turned and continued walking to the road.

Howard, Jr. finished tallying their scores, then looked up at his cousin. "197, you're slippin'."

"I didn't have my own ball," John muttered, pulling off the rented shoes.

Howard, Jr. chuckled. "I'm not touchin' that one." He looked back and frowned. "Come on, Johnny, one more game."

John rolled his eyes. "You said that the last game." He sighed and looked at the two empty lanes on either side of them. The men that had been bowling there when they arrived picked up and vacated the lanes before John bowled the first frame. *Did they do it because of Howard, Jr. or because I was bowling with Howard, Jr.? That's what threw off my game.* "Man, my arm's about to fall off."

"Okay, look, my mom's got some people coming over. It's supposed to be a surprise," Howard, Jr. admitted.

John grinned. "Let's surprise her and get back early."

"One more game." Howard, Jr. folded his hands. "Please."

John pulled the bowling shoes back on. "I should'a known this was a set-up," he muttered. "You take the first frame." He leaned over and re-tied the laces.

"The way you're bowlin', I'll take all ten," Howard, Jr. taunted, standing and lifting his ball from the return. He studied the pins, took three steps to the line, pulled his arm back, then followed through, releasing the ball. Before the ball was half-way down the lane, he turned and walked back toward the desk. "Strike."

The ball hit the pins and John laughed. "Seven-ten split."

Howard, Jr. turned, blinking at the two pins still standing at the end of the lane. "Damn!" He waited as his ball clattered through the return.

Five men approached them, four of them splitting off and taking the two lanes on either side of John and Howard, Jr.'s. The fifth man dropped his ball on the ball return, then hit the reset button.

"Hey!" Howard, Jr. exclaimed. "We're still using this lane, man."

"Talk to the desk." The man didn't even bother to look at Howard, Jr..

"You talk to the desk." Howard, Jr. grabbed the man's arm, drawing the attention of his four friends.

John stood and pulled Howard, Jr. away, putting himself between his cousin and the larger man. "Hey, guys, we don't want any trouble." He turned to Howard, Jr.. "Come on, man, just get your ball and we'll get out of here."

Howard, Jr. glared at John, then turned his glare on the four rednecks who'd gathered with their friend.

"Which is more important? Saving face? Or saving your face?" John asked quietly.

"They're not worth the effort," Howard, Jr. stated, picking his ball up and grabbing his bag from the chair.

John grabbed their street shoes, ignoring the laughter of the five men as he followed Howard, Jr. to the desk.

"Want me to call the Sheriff and get the lane back?" The girl behind the desk offered. "I didn't send 'em over there."

"No," Howard, Jr. snapped, then took a deep breath and blew it out. "No, thanks." He smiled at the girl. He pulled out his wallet and handed her several bills, then he and John removed their rented shoes and set them on the counter.

The girl rang the total up on a cash register, pulled coins from the drawer and handed Howard, Jr. his change. She then handed him a coupon. "That's good for a free game next time you come in." She smiled. "Some people are just plain stupid." She winked at Howard, Jr., then went down the counter to tend to other customers.

Howard, Jr. grinned at John, who was tying the laces his street shoes. Instead of returning the grin, John walked out the front door. When Howard, Jr. caught up to John, he was kicking the front right tire of Howard, Jr.'s car.

"Hey!" Howard, Jr. pointed. "Take it out on that guy's truck, not my car."

"Which truck?" John growled.

"I don't care, pick one."

John shook his head, then laughed.

"Look, don't take it personally," Howard, Jr. began. "Things aren't goin' as well for the townies. Some of 'em are a little bitter."

"It just pisses me off!" John exclaimed, waving his arms. "It's happenin' in L.A., too. I've been pulled over 'cause I've got dark skin and dark hair more times than I wanna count."

"Are you sure your lead foot doesn't have somethin' to do with it?" Howard, Jr. teased, frowning when John glared at him. "Hey, you're preachin' to the choir here, Johnny." He smiled. "Like the girl said, some people are just plain stupid."

John snorted. "Too bad that's not against the law."

"There aren't enough jails," Howard, Jr. grinned. "Did you see the way that girl smiled at me?"

"She's barely 18!" John laughed. "You're too old for her."

"I'm only 36," Howard, Jr. said indignantly. He opened the driver's door and set his bag on the back seat.

"That's an 18 year age difference." John laughed. "Your mom would probably have another litter of kittens."

Howard, Jr. winced, then shivered. "Ewww, not a pretty picture." He laughed. "You've got me there." He got into the driver's seat, starting the car as John got into the passenger seat. "She was nice, though, wasn't she?"

"Well, yeah," John agreed as Howard, Jr. pulled out of the parking space. "Trust me, though, 18 year olds are nothin' but trouble. Even I wouldn't date an 18 year old."

"I don't even wanna know," Howard, Jr. muttered, pulling out onto the highway.

"You think we're gonna be too early?" John looked out the window as they passed back through town.

"We can stop some place on the rez and kill a half hour. Have you seen the new Council building?"

"From the outside."

Howard, Jr. turned onto the highway that would take them back to the reservation. "I'll show you around."

John nodded. "Good deal."

They rode in silence for the next fifteen minutes. Red lights behind them and a police siren broke the silence.

"Now, who's got a lead foot?" John teased, grinning.

Howard, Jr. lifted his arm. "Not me," he muttered, signaling and pulling the car over to the shoulder. He grabbed the registration from the visor, glancing in the rearview mirror as the police car stopped behind them. "Put your hands on the dash." He put his hands on the steering wheel. "No matter what happens, just say `yes, sir' and `no, sir'."

"Oh, great," John sighed, placing his hands on the dash.

"Driver, outta the car," A male voice ordered. "Slow and easy."

Howard, Jr. slowly extended his left arm out the open window, opening the door from the outside. He kept both hands out as he climbed from the car.

"Jesus," John breathed.

"Passenger, outta the car."

John glanced up at Howard, Jr., who was by the left front fender. "This is nuts," he breathed. He slowly extended his right arm out of the car, opening his door as his cousin had. After getting out of the car, he took a position by the right front fender.

"Come around the car," the voice ordered.

John made his way around the car, leaning next to Howard, Jr. on the left fender. He looked over at the cop, who had remained behind the rear of Howard, Jr.'s car.

The cop holstered his weapon and swaggered toward them. John recognized the swagger. The bully that had practically terrorized him throughout grade school and high school was now a Florida State Trooper. Robert Hamilton hitched up his gun belt, then stopped behind Howard, Jr.. "License and registration."

John dropped his head. "Shit," he whispered. "Shit, shit, shit."

"You gotta problem, boy?"

John gritted his teeth. "No, sir."

"The registration's on the hood. My license is in my back pocket. I'm gonna reach in and get it." Howard, Jr. slowly straightened, reached into his back pocket and pulled his wallet out. "Now I'm gonna open the wallet and get my license out," he informed, slowly opening the wallet and pulling out his license, which he laid on the hood of the car.

The trooper reached for the documents, giving Howard, Jr. a shove into John as he did. "You, too."

John straightened and with exaggerated slowness pulled his wallet out and removed his license. He didn't give Hamilton the satisfaction of informing him before hand of every move as Howard, Jr. had done. He tossed the license onto the middle of the hood.

Howard, Jr. nudged him.

"Sorry, sir." John made no move to retrieve the driver's license.

Hamilton's eyes narrowed and he walked to the front of the car, picking up the license. "John Roderick Gage," he read out loud. "You're some big shot from California, now."

John pasted on a smile. "Yep, that's me."

Hamilton looked at John. "I'll bet you don't remember me, Johnny."

"Oh, I recognized you, Robert." The smile never left John's face. "The first thing I thought when I saw you was that the State Troopers must be pretty hard up to hire you on."

Hamilton backhanded John, who would've fallen if Howard, Jr. hadn't caught him. John blinked, then turned his head and spat.

"You still hit like a girl, Robert." John growled.

Howard, Jr. grabbed John, turning him and pushing him against the car. "We'll wait right here while you call that in, sir."

Hamilton examined the registration and Howard, Jr.'s license. "You Howard Billie, Jr.?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who're you to him?" Hamilton nodded at John, who was leaning against the hood with his head down.

"Cousin, sir."

"Gotta be on his mother's side." Hamilton laughed.

Before he could finish, a second patrol unit made a U-turn across the median, pulling to a stop in front of Howard, Jr.'s car. The trooper behind the wheel got out.

"What've you got, Hamilton?" He walked back and stopped next to Hamilton.

"Possible stolen vehicle. I was about to run the plates, Sgt." Hamilton answered.

"The license and registration match?" The Sgt. took the two licenses and registration slip from Hamilton's hands. He examined them, then held them out to Howard, Jr. and John. "You headed back to the reservation?"

"Yes, sir." Howard, Jr. took the licenses and registration slip from the Sgt.

"What happened to your lip, Son?" The Sgt. asked when John lifted his head.

"He lost his footing on the ditch and bit his lip, sir," Howard, Jr. lied.

"Yeah, I'm like that," John muttered.

"You're both free to go," the Sgt. informed.

"Yes, sir." Howard, Jr. propelled John toward the back of the car, making him get to the passenger side by a route that would keep him out of Hamilton's reach. Once his cousin was in the car, he got behind the wheel and turned the key.

Hamilton and the Sgt. were still standing by the side of the road when Howard, Jr. pulled away.

John leaned over and pulled on the rear view mirror. "Man, he split my lip." He fingered the cut, wincing as he did. "You got a first aid kit in here?"

Howard, Jr. ignored John, gripping the wheel and fighting the urge to add a black eye to John's split lip.

When he didn't get an answer, John pushed the mirror back and sat back in the seat. "I'm sure your mom has one," he muttered, looking out the window.

Howard, Jr. continued ignoring John for the next fifteen minutes until he'd pulled onto the reservation. Once on his own territory, he pulled the car over, turned it off, ripped the keys from the ignition and got out, pacing to the back of the car. There he opened the trunk and pulled something out.

"Get out of the car," Howard, Jr. ordered.

John opened his door and stepped out. "How, I'm sorry . . ."

Howard, Jr. tossed the first aid kit onto the roof. "There's your first aid kit. You're gonna need it when I get through with you."

John took a step back, holding up his hands. "If you'd just let me explain."

"Explain what, Johnny?" Howard, Jr.'s voice rose. "You do the Mr. Conscientious Objector act in the bowling alley, then you come up on a nutcase with a gun and you mouth off to him." He laughed bitterly. "Makes perfect sense to me." He turned and paced to the back of the car, then turned back. "What you might not understand is that a stunt like that could'a got us both shot. It would have if that Sgt. hadn't spotted the stop and come to check it out."

John closed his eyes. "I know." He took a deep breath. "It was stupid. And I'm sorry." He held up his hands. "Kick my ass. I won't even fight back."

"Why didn't you just do what I told you?" Howard, Jr. demanded. "Is that what you do when you get pulled over back in L.A.?"

"Hell, no!" John exclaimed. "I know the drill." He sighed. "That trooper was the bully that made my life a living hell for 8 years." He looked down at his feet, then back at his cousin. "When I saw him . . . I couldn't help myself." He looked down again. "Why didn't you let me tell the Sgt. what really happened?"

Howard, Jr. shrugged. "He seemed like he might be out to get the guy." He paused. "But, you never know around here." Another shrug. "You just never know."

John leaned against the car as his legs started shaking. *Man, I almost got us both shot.* "Shit, Howard. I'm sorry."

Howard, Jr. walked over, opened the first aid kit and pulled out gauze and antiseptic. "Here, Mr.

Paramedic. Get yourself cleaned up."

John's hands shook as he took the items from Howard, Jr.

"You know my mom's gonna think I did that to you." Howard, Jr. chuckled.

John smiled weakly. *Man, I feel like I'm gonna throw up.* He swallowed, then ducked back into the car to clean his lip. The churning in his stomach got worse as he dabbed at his lip, wincing at the sting of antiseptic on the open cut. He gagged suddenly. *Now, I'm gonna throw up.* He dropped the pad and bottle, then scrambled from the car. He dropped to his hands and knees and lost his stomach in a ditch at the side of the road.

He felt Howard, Jr.'s hand on his forehead when the heaving finally stopped. John batted his cousin's hand away, shakily sitting back on his heels and spitting into the dirt. The sun didn't help, so he carefully rose and tottered back to the car, ignoring the stares of the bystanders who had watched him puke into the ditch.

Howard, Jr. got into the driver's seat. "We'll go by my place so you can clean up."

John closed his eyes and leaned his head against the post behind the window, letting the wind blow on his face as Howard, Jr. pulled back onto the road. "Sorry about that." He kept his eyes closed.

"Hey, if family can't hold your head while you puke, who can?" Howard, Jr. joked. He reached over and squeezed John's arm. "It's over and done. Now we move on."

"Things change," John whispered. "And they don't."

"But life goes on anyway." Howard, Jr. squeezed John's arm again.

John walked out of the house and across the yard to the bench swing, where he examined his wrinkled fingers as he sat down. *I sure didn't know what I was gettin' into when I volunteered to do the dishes. It's a good thing the guys couldn't see me up to my elbows in soapy water for the last hour.* He smiled and lay back on the swing, crossing his ankles and looking up at the stars. *After that party, it was the least I could do. Wonder if I should stash some money somewhere to help them pay for everything?*

The few people he'd expected when he and Howard returned to the ranch turned out to be half the populations of the three Seminole reservations. Most of them were Jumpers, or Billies. The rest were members of the Bear Clan, which was the clan his mother, uncle and aunt belonged to. The fuss everybody made over him was a little embarrassing. He'd smiled and suffered through it because, in a strange way, even the embarrassment felt good.

John heard footsteps approach and peered up at his aunt, who from his vantage point was walking upside down. He smiled and sat up.

"You don't have to get up, Johnny." Helen laughed and pulled a lawn chair over.

John patted the swing. "You can sit next to me. I had a shower today."

Helen laughed and sat on the swing next to her nephew.

"I thought you were in watching t.v. with dad and Uncle Howard."

"I hate that Archie Bunker," Helen returned. She laughed, then reached up and pushed the hair off John's forehead. "Did you have a good time today?"

John put his arm around her, squeezed her shoulder. "Yes. Thanks, again." He kissed her cheek. "You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble, though."

Helen turned on the swing and pulled her legs up, then reached over and smoothed John's hair. "It wasn't any trouble." She smiled. "You deserved a better homecoming than your silly aunt and uncle."

"Did I meet them today?" John grinned at her, then winked. "I've been meaning to ask you about Aunt Gladys. I've been trying to remember her, but I can't. And she seemed like she knew us. Did she move away or something when I was a kid?"

Helen chuckled. "She's not related to any of us. She's not even part of our clan or your uncle's." She laughed. "She used to live here, until her health started failing and she moved over to Dania with her granddaughter and grand-son-in-law."

"Well, that's why I don't remember her." John chuckled.

"She just shows up at these gatherings. And she's such a nice lady, nobody has the heart to send her away." Helen smiled. "Whenever a baby's born, or a couple gets married, Aunt Gladys always makes sure the family of the baby, or the couple gets some small gift. When someone passes, Aunt Gladys is the first one to offer comfort to the family." She reached over and patted his arm. "It was sweet of you to sit and talk with her so long."

"If she'd been a cheek pincher, I would've run," John teased.

"That's the arthritis, Sweetie." Helen reached up and gave John's cheeks a pinch. "That's from your Aunt Gladys."

John laughed. "She told me some interesting stories about my parents. I remember them going to meetings and things. But I never knew how involved they were." He grew silent for a minute. "Both of them."

Helen smoothed John's hair again. "Things were rough the first year after y'all moved here." She paused. "It didn't take long before your father was accepted."

"By some people." John snorted. "But life goes on, right?"

"Have you and your dad talked, Johnny?"

John looked over at Helen, his right eyebrow raised. "You don't waste much time, do you?"

Helen smiled sweetly. "Life's too short." She grew serious. "It seemed like you were avoiding each

other today. And you came out here the minute you finished the dishes."

"I don't know what to say to him, Aunt Helen," John said sadly. "He doesn't approve of where I live, or what I do."

"That's not true, Johnny."

"Yes, it is." John sighed. "He made fun of L.A. on the trip yesterday. And then there was that scene at dinner last night."

"He misses you, Johnny." Helen squeezed his arm. "We all do. If I told you I didn't want you to leave California and move back here, I'd be lying through my teeth."

"But you don't make fun of it, Aunt Helen." John's voice was quiet. "The one time you and Uncle Howard came out to visit me, you had a good time, didn't you?"

Helen smiled. "Of course we did. The mountains and canyons were beautiful. We'd never seen anything like them in our lives." She chuckled. "They practically made Pennsylvania look as flat as Florida."

"Then why can't my father wait until he comes out and sees it for himself?"

"Sweetie, I'm sure Jim didn't mean to make fun of L.A.," Helen began. "He probably just said the first thing that came to mind without thinking."

I've been accused of that a few times. John smiled. "Maybe you're right."

"As for what happened last night, you've been through so much in the last year. Your dad's been worried about you."

"That's what How thought," John admitted quietly. "Which reminds me." He looked over at Helen. "Why didn't you tell me about the boat?"

If Helen had been just a shade fairer, John would've seen her blush. "Your father made me promise not to." She held up her hand. "Now, just let me finish." She dropped her hand when John closed his mouth. "Right or wrong, he didn't want you to contact him because of it. I didn't agree and I tried to make him see reason." She sighed. "He wasn't ready. Any more than you would've been ready after that virus. Or after you broke your leg."

Wish I could tell her why I wanted to call him after the head injury. But that'd just upset her. John leaned over and kissed Helen's cheek.

Helen smiled. "What was that for?"

"For puttin' up with us for so long."

"You're both worth it." Helen patted John's leg. "Just give your dad some time." A breeze ruffled their hair and she crossed her arms to ward off the chill. "It's startin' to get a mite chilly. If you're gonna

stay out here, come in and get a jacket."

John stood, then helped Helen up from the swing. "If I stay out here, you won't sleep 'til I come in." He put his arm around her shoulders as they walked toward the house. "I think I'm gonna turn in early."

"So am I. It's been a long day." Helen looked up. "But, before I do, I wanna know what happened to your lip."

John frowned. "You noticed that, huh?" He stepped away from Helen and opened the screen door, holding it for her. "I was hopin' that'd slip by."

Helen laughed quietly. "I'm a mother, Johnny. Nothin' gets by me."

John followed her into the house. "Yeah, but I thought that only worked for your own kids."

Helen stopped, turned and reached up to touch his cheek. "You're my sister's only child." She winked and pinched his cheek. "You're doomed."

John grinned. "I could do worse."

"All right then, into the kitchen. I'll fix you a piece of pie and you can tell me the whole story."

"Is there any cake left?" John followed Helen back to the kitchen.

"Which one?"

"Doesn't matter."

On the fifth day of John's trip to Florida, Jim and his son had to return to Panama City. Jim had used his only week of vacation to spend time with John and was scheduled to work the following day. Lewis had offered to cover for Jim, even though that would've meant canceling a day with his own children, but Jim declined the offer.

They'd loaded their bags into the truck and were saying good-bye to Helen and Howard when Howard, Jr.'s car pulled into the driveway.

"Glad I caught you." Howard, Jr. jumped out of the car and pulled a bag from the rear seat. "I've got a present for you, Johnny."

John smiled and took the bag. "You didn't have to do that." He opened the bag and pulled out a yellow hard hat. The name "Weasel" was painted on the front. He laughed. "Gee, thanks, How," he drawled sarcastically.

Helen looked over at the hard hat. "Howard!" Her eyes were red and puffy and she was obviously not in the mood for her son's antics.

John was still laughing. "That's okay, Aunt Helen." He looked over at Howard. "I'll proudly keep this buried in the back of a closet."

Howard, Jr. laughed, then held his hand out. "It was good seein' you again, Johnny."

John shook Howard, Jr.'s hand, his eyes widening in surprise when Howard, Jr. pulled him into a hug. "It was good seein' you again, too, How." He pulled away. "You're gonna have to come out to California for a visit."

"You betcha." Howard, Jr. grinned, then turned to Jim. "Take it easy, Uncle Jim."

"You, too. And you watch yourself offshore." Jim shook hands with his nephew.

Howard, Sr. stepped over, shook hands with Jim, then briefly hugged John. "Y'all be careful on the road."

"Will do." Jim nodded.

Helen stepped over to John and hugged him. "I wish you didn't have to go."

John returned the hug. "I know, Aunt Helen." He kissed the top of her head. "Now, don't cry. I'll be back. I promise."

Helen stepped back, pulled a tissue from her sleeve and wiped her eyes. "I just can't help it." She took several deep breaths. "Today came too soon." She kissed his cheek. "I love you, Johnny."

"Love you, too." John hugged her again. He pulled away and kissed her forehead. "We'll call you when we get back to dad's. And I'll call you the minute I land at LAX." He put a hand on her cheek. "Now, promise me you'll stop crying."

Helen covered his hand with hers. "Oh, you know me. I was never one to take to my bed." She squeezed his hand. "Don't worry about me." She squeezed his hand again, then released it. She turned to Jim and hugged him. "Thank you for bringing Johnny home to us. I know this was supposed to be your time with him."

Jim smiled down at her. "I brought him to see his family." He kissed her forehead. "And you would've hunted me down if I hadn't." He grinned.

Helen laughed. "You're right about that." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Jim pulled away. "We'd better get on the road. We've got a ten hour drive ahead of us."

"Take care of yourself, Cuz." Howard, Jr. patted John's back, then quickly pulled him into a head lock. "How about a noogie for the road?"

"Howard Billie, Jr., don't you dare!"

"Awww, Ma, I was kidding." Howard, Jr. released John.

John smirked at Howard, Jr., then kissed Helen a final time. "Thanks, Aunt Helen." He shot a final smirk at his cousin, then opened the passenger door of the truck.

"Reverse the charges when you call us, Johnny," Helen reminded as Jim got in the driver's side of the truck.

John laughed. "I don't need to do that any more, Aunt Helen." He turned the handle and rolled the window down, then closed the door as Jim started the truck.

"I don't want you running your bill up," Helen responded.

John laughed. "What about your bill?"

"You don't worry about that. Just reverse the charges."

"There's no arguing with her, Johnny." Howard, Sr. informed.

John winked at Howard, Sr. "You're right about that." He held his hand out and Helen took it. He gently squeezed her hand. "Y'all take care of each other."

Helen let go of John's hand. "Go on, Jim," she called. "Before I pull Johnny out of the truck and never let him leave."

Jim saluted her, then put the truck in reverse, slowly backing to the driveway.

John waved as the truck turned, then straightened and headed down the driveway. When they reached the road, he looked back through the rear window and waved a final time. He turned forward when his aunt, uncle and cousin had disappeared from view.

Three hours later, the rhythm of the truck's tires on the highway and the passing trees had nearly lulled John back to sleep. He shifted in the seat, turning toward the door and leaning his head against the back of the seat. *If I could just get comfortable.* He turned again and rested his head on his hand.

"What time did you and Howard, Jr. get in?"

"Bout four," John muttered. "Los' track o'time."

Jim laughed quietly. "Sounds like it." He paused. "Do you wanna take 19 up the coast?"

John sat up and looked over at Jim. "Ummm, not if it takes longer." He sighed. "I mean, you've gotta work tomorrow. We're not gonna get back until after seven o'clock takin' 27."

"Doesn't matter to me."

"It's up to you, Dad. I'm probably gonna sleep most of the way, anyway." John rested his head on his hand and closed his eyes. *Or pretend to sleep.*

Father and son had spent time together during the remainder of their visit with the Billies. They'd fixed the mower, changed the points, plugs and belts in the truck Howard used to transport cattle and done a tune-up and oil change on Helen's car. They discussed how to fix the mower and what needed to be done with the truck and Helen's car. After that, they limited communication to requests for parts or tools. Neither of them brought up California or firefighting.

Well, the trip wasn't a total loss. I got to see How and Uncle Howard again. I got to spend a lot of time with Aunt Helen. John shifted again in the seat. *I'll just have to play it cool and keep things with Dad simple until I leave.* He yawned. *Maybe when we talk on the phone we'll be able to work things out.* He frowned. *If we talk on the phone after I go back to California.*

Jim's stomach growled. *Must be lunch time.* A billboard advertised a truck stop two miles ahead. *I can make it two miles. Wonder if Johnny can?* "Are you gettin' hungry?"

John didn't stir.

He must really be asleep. Jim felt his face flush. He'd suspected that John was playing possum to avoid talking to him. At first, he'd been angry. Then resigned. *After that fight the other night, he's probably afraid to talk to me. I'm afraid to talk to him.*

Jim pulled into the truckstop, parked the truck and turned it off. "Johnny, we're stoppin' for lunch," he announced. He waited several seconds, then reached over and gently shook his son's shoulder.

On the third shake, John jumped, stared wildly around the truck, then let out his breath and wiped his face. "I fell asleep," he muttered.

"So I noticed." Jim chuckled. "I thought firemen were supposed to wake up quicker than that."

"Yeah, well, if you had somethin' that sounded like the station tones, I probably would've jumped through the windshield," John returned, opening the door and getting out of the truck. He headed for the front door of the restaurant with his head down.

Damn it! I wasn't tryin' to make fun of him. Jim got out of the truck and followed John into the restaurant.

A waitress was leading John to a table when Jim stepped through the door. Jim followed, sitting across the booth from his son. John kept his head down, examining the menu.

Jim started to do the same. *Maybe I am tryin' to get him to quit talkin' to me. I sure as hell don't know what to say to him.* He put his menu down. "Johnny, I'm sorry."

John's head snapped up and his brows drew inward. "For what?"

"That dumb joke about you wakin' up for starters." Jim took a deep breath. "And startin' the fight with you the other night. And the joke about smog." He fiddled with the menu. "Sometimes my mouth is in gear, but my brain's in neutral."

John shrugged. "No big deal." He looked down at his menu again. After a minute, he looked back up, grinning. "I, ah," he trailed off, chuckling. "I have the same problem sometimes." He winked. "Least I know I came by it honestly."

Jim chuckled. "That you did, my boy."

"What can I get you?" A second waitress stood next to the table, pen poised over her pad.

Jim smiled up at her. "I'd like a glass of iced tea, please." He looked over at John.

"A glass of milk, thanks." John looked back down at his menu.

"How're your specials today?" Jim asked, still smiling at the waitress.

The waitress smiled back. "My cookin's much better." She winked at Jim. "The meatloaf's pretty good. And the catfish's fresh. Just came in this mornin'."

"The catfish comes with tartar sauce?"

"Unless you want somethin' else, darlin'." The waitress winked again.

"Cocktail sauce, if you have it." Jim handed her the menu. "Thanks."

The waitress took the menu, expertly tucking it between her elbow and her side. "How about you?"

"I think I'll just have the club sandwich." John handed over his menu. "Thanks."

"I'll be right back with your tea," the waitress promised, winking at Jim again.

Once she was gone, John grinned at his father. "Looks like Peggy's got some competition." He laughed. "The Gage Charm strikes again."

Jim felt his ears grow hot. "Is that what you call it?" He laughed. "Hey, I thought you hadn't settled down, yet." He grinned.

It was John's turn to blush. "I'm still lookin'." He looked down at the table.

Jim laughed as the waitress returned with their drinks. "Thanks."

John looked up at the waitress. "Could I get a cup of coffee with my sandwich?"

"No problem, Sweetie." The waitress smiled, then turned and left the booth.

"The Gage Charm," Jim said proudly.

John shook his head. "Nope, she called me `Sweetie'. Aunt Helen calls me `Sweetie'." He laughed. "She's callin' you `darlin'". There's a difference."

"The women around here call everybody `darlin'," Jim countered.

John grinned. "If that makes you feel better, Dad."

Jim laughed. "You know, Johnny, there are just some things parents don't want their kids to know about." He winked. "This is one of 'em."

"You just watch yourself." John pointed his index finger at Jim. "She's probably gonna slip you her phone number with the check."

"Then I'll let you get the check this time." Jim laughed.

CONTINUE