

*Author's Note: This story continues the events of Going Home: The Road Back and takes place somewhere between the episodes Virus and Snakebite. Loosely. Enjoy!*

## **GOING HOME: The Past Revisited**

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

The light was so bright, John couldn't see. He heard a bell ring and squinted, trying to figure out where he was as the light faded away. *This looks a lot like the General Store in Indiantown.* John looked around at the wooden shelves, stocked with boxes of cereal and canned goods. The high shelves behind the counter filled with staples like flour and sugar and coffee. A young man stood at the opposite end of the counter, holding the hand of a small boy.

"Sorry about that, Jimmy," a woman walked out of the back room.

*Mrs. Hollis! This is the General Store.*

John's attention was drawn to the man she addressed. He moved closer, his jaw dropping as he recognized his father. This man was in his 20s, the stress of a hard life not yet showing in his face, or his thick brown hair.

"Dad," John whispered, approaching his father for the first time in nine years.

"Betty's all right, I hope," Mrs. Hollis commented as she climbed one of the ladders and pulled something down from a shelf.

*They can't see me. Am I dead?*

His father's quiet chuckle sent chills up his spine, "She's fine," he responded, "I needed to pick up some parts for the boat, so I offered to fill the grocery list while I was at it."

Mrs. Hollis stepped down from the ladder, "Now, aren't you the sweet one?" she chuckled, "My husband wouldn't know how to find the list, let alone fill it."

"I couldn't find it either, Mrs. Hollis," James Gage laughed in response, "Betty had to put it in my hand."

"Where's that boy of yours?" Mrs. Hollis asked, "I thought I saw him come in with you."

Jim looked around, "He was right next to me a minute ago," he commented, "John?" he called.

"He couldn't have gone far, Jim," Mrs. Hollis informed, stepping into the back room, then returning, "He didn't sneak in back."

"John?" Jim repeated, walking toward the front of the store, "He's discovered Hide and Seek," he

rambled, "He's too good at hiding."

"I'm good at finding," Mrs. Hollis chuckled.

John looked around and found the object of the adults' concern crouched in one of the narrow aisles. *It's me.* The child he used to be stifled giggles behind one small hand.

"John Gage," Jim called, "Game's over, son."

The bell over the door rang, announcing the arrival of an old man who walked with a stooped and shuffling gait.

"Good morning, Mr. Huff," Mrs. Hollis called, "I'll be right with you," she promised.

Huff acknowledged Mrs. Hollis, stepping over to the aisle where John had hidden from his father and Mrs. Hollis. When the old man spotted the child, he hissed, then grabbed the child by his right arm. He roughly pulled the little boy to his feet.

"Evil child!" the old man hissed, shaking the child, "Your kind were sent to destroy us!"

"DADDY!" young John screamed in terror.

*I remember that old man. He's the reason we moved to Clewiston when I was three. That weathered brown face and those dead black eyes were my first glimpse of hatred.*

Jim Gage stepped between Mr. Huff and his son, "Let him go, old man," he ordered through clenched teeth.

The old man let go of young John's arm and Mrs. Hollis quickly scooped the frightened child up, balancing him on her hip as he sobbed.

"You," the old man poked Jim in the center of the chest with a gnarled index finger, "Take him back to your people. We don't want mixed-bloods."

Jim grabbed the gnarled hand, "Touch me or my son again and I'll kill you, old man," he hissed, tossing the hand aside. He turned to Mrs. Hollis and took the sobbing child from her arms, "It's okay, now, John. Shhhh," he said quietly, gently stroking the short dark hair, "Shhhh."

"He is evil," Mr. Huff declared.

"That's enough, Mr. Huff," Mrs. Hollis said, her tone brooking no argument, "Why don't you leave your list and come back later?" she suggested.

"Evil," Mr. Huff repeated, then spat on the floor at Jim's feet. He threw another malice-filled glare at the still sobbing child, then turned and hobbled from the store.

"I'll fill your list for you," Mrs. Hollis said quietly, stepping behind the counter to give Jim and his son some privacy.

"Daddy?" young John sniffled.

"Yes, son?"

"Why dat man don't like me?"

Jim smiled, "Why doesn't he like me?" he corrected gently, setting the child on an empty shelf and gently brushing the tears from the child's cheeks, "I guess that's my fault," he began, "I'm not a Seminole, like your mamma. Some of the older people believe that's wrong."

"Cause mamma's brown and you're white?" the child sniffled.

Jim nodded, "Not everybody feels that way, John," he added, "I know it's an awful lot for a little guy like you to understand."

*I never understood it, Dad. That's why I had to leave and make my own life. That's why I had to find people who didn't care that my dad was white and my mother wasn't.*

"If I'd known what I know now, I would've let your mom go and marry one of her own people," Jim confessed quietly, "But I loved her so much, I didn't care what people would think of us," he paused and gently kissed his son's forehead, "And I love you, too, son," he said quietly.

"Love you, too, Daddy," young John responded.

Father and son disappeared in a flash of bright, white light.

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When the light faded, adult John found himself in the room where he'd spent the first three years of his life. *It was so small. Guess it just seemed bigger 'cause I was small.*

Young John lay quietly in bed, as the sound of his parents' voices drifted in from the adjoining room.

"This isn't the first time, Betty," his father's voice, calm and measured.

"Things will change, Jim," his mother's voice, strong and healthy, "When they do, John stands more chance of being accepted here, than out there," a pause, "We can't even send him to their schools."

"There are places where it won't matter, Betty," his father's voice took on a pleading tone, "I want John to have a fair chance. And a better life than we had."

"Do you think I don't?" his mother responded, "I want him to have a chance to be part of his own culture. Not be forced to accept someone else's the way I had to."

"I didn't ship you off to a missionary school, Betty," his father responded.

"You agreed to raise John as a Seminole when you married me," his mother said quietly.

"I didn't know people would think he was evil," his father argued, "That old man and people like him believe kids like John will destroy the Tribe. What happens if that doesn't change?" a pause, "I'm afraid for Johnny."

*I thought you weren't afraid of anything, Dad.*

"I am, too," his mother's voice softened, "We can go to Big Cypress. My father and uncle wouldn't let anyone hurt John. They love him," she paused, "I'm afraid of what would happen in your world, Jim," another pause, "Your mother's never seen her own grandson."

"Her loss. I made my choice when I married you. She made hers," his father's voice was close to his mother's now, "I hope she'll change her mind, but I'm not counting on it. She's pretty stubborn.

"Unlike her son," his mother teased, laughing quietly.

"I want to leave this place," his father continued, "Being near your family's as good a place as any."

"What about your job?" his mother's voice asked, "That's something else to worry about."

"I've heard there are fish in the Atlantic, too," his father's voice chuckled, "If I can't get a spot, I'll keep fishing the Gulf."

*Which is what happened. You wore yourself out for me. And I never knew it.*

"Things will change, Jim," his mother's voice promised, "My father and my uncle are working for that. John's life will be good."

The voices grew quiet, then a dark shape appeared in the open door. The adult John's heart ached as his mother stepped into the room. She was young, healthy and so alive. *I'd forgotten how you looked. I missed you so much, Mom.*

Betty Gage knelt next to her son's small bed, "Have you been eavesdropping?"

"Uh-uh," the child shook his head, his eyes wide and innocent.

"Time to sleep," she whispered, holding her long, dark hair back and kissing the child's forehead, "Close your eyes, John."

John moved closer to the bed as his mother brushed back the child's dark hair, speaking softly to him. As his fingers neared Betty's shoulder, the room disappeared in a bright flash.

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When the light faded, John was on a dirt road. A few feet away, young John struggled with the rear wheel of an aged bicycle. *That thing had seen its better days long before Dad bought it. How old was I? Seven? Yeah, they closed the rez schools the year before. My mom and Aunt Helen home schooled me.*

A small, dark skinned boy approached, stepping up and stopping next to young John, "That your bike?" the boy asked.

Young John looked up, tensing, "Yeah," he said cautiously.

The boy knelt next to young John, "What's wrong with it?"

Young John stood, throwing the bike over, "It's a piece of junk," he returned.

"Hey, don't do that," the boy said, then chuckled, "You'll make it worse."

"It can't get any worse," young John complained, "Every two feet, the wheel starts wobbling."

The boy bent and examined the screw holding the rear wheel, "The screw's stripped," he diagnosed, "We replace it and we fix the problem."

Smiling, young John knelt next to his companion, "You mean, you'll help me?" he asked in astonishment.

The boy laughed, "Course I will," he returned, "That's why I said we, isn't it?"

Young John laughed, "Yeah, I guess," he began, "I thought you were gonna hit me and take the bike."

The boy nodded in understanding, "Your mom, or your dad?" he asked.

"Dad," young John replied.

"Mom," the boy informed, holding his hand out, "Kenny Tiger," he introduced.

*Kenny Tiger. Man, I wonder what happened to him. I haven't seen him since right after graduation.*

"John Gage," young John shook his new friend's hand, "My dad's got some tools and stuff back at the house. Want to come with me?"

"One condition," Kenny bargained.

"What?" young John asked cautiously.

"If I help you fix this thing, I get to ride it," Kenny offered.

Young John laughed, "Sure," he agreed.

Both boys stood, John taking the handlebars of the bike from Kenny.

"We can fix this thing up," Kenny began as they walked, "My dad's got some paint. We can paint it," he paused, "How does fire engine red sound?"

"Fire engine red," young John repeated the words, "I like it."

The light flashed.

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The light faded and John found himself in the small garage behind the house on the Big Cypress Reservation. The two boys were tinkering with the rear wheel of young John's bike, seemingly oblivious to the heat in the small room.

"Be careful," Kenny advised, "That's the last screw. Don't strip the threads."

Young John stopped tinkering and lifted the screwdriver, "I thought you were gonna help me," he squinted at Kenny through the spokes.

Kenny grinned, "You didn't know what to do, did you?" he asked.

Young John blinked and shook his head, then shrugged and went back to work.

"Do you think they'll let us into the school in Clewiston?" Kenny asked as young John worked.

Young John shrugged.

"Do you think they'll re-open the school on the rez?" Kenny asked.

Young John shrugged again, "Doesn't matter to me," he began, "My mom and my aunt are teaching me reading and math and stuff."

"Yeah, my mom's doin' the same thing," Kenny agreed, "I liked school in Ohio. I kind'a miss it."

"I sure don't," young John declared, "I hated school."

"It's better than spendin' the whole day with your mom like a baby," Kenny declared, "Besides, you and me'll stick together now."

Young John paused and looked up, "Yeah, I guess that wouldn't be so bad," he allowed, then went back to work. A few minutes later, he sat back and admired his work, "Done," he announced.

Kenny's grin widened, "Let's test it."

"I'm first," John declared, standing and grasping the handle bars, "I did all the real work," he added.

The two boys walked out of the small garage into the yard behind the house.

"Man, it's hot," Kenny observed, "Do you think we could get something to drink before we test the bike?"

"Sure," young John gently laid the bike down, "My mom's probably got lemonade. Wanna come in?"

"Nah, I'll stay out here," Kenny responded.

Young John disappeared into the house, returning a few minutes later with two glasses of lemonade. He handed one to Kenny, then the two boys sat on the back steps.

"That your dog?" Kenny asked.

Young John finished gulping his lemonade, swiping his mouth with his right arm, "Yeah, that's Shadow."

Adult John looked over at the big, black dog, lying quietly under the yard's only tree. *Oh, no! My entire family remembers this.* He felt the blush heat up his neck, then his face.

"What kind of dog is he?" Kenny asked.

"A big dumb one, my dad says," young John informed with a laugh.

"He looks hot," Kenny declared.

Young John observed the dog for a minute, "He probably is," he agreed, then whistled, "C'mere, Shadow!" he called.

The dog rolled over, stood and lumbered over to the porch. The thick black fur was shaggy and matted with dirt and leaves.

"Are you hot, Shadow?" John asked.

Shadow wagged his tail and licked John's arm.

"It must be all that fur," Kenny declared.

"Don't do it, John," the adult warned aloud, "You'll never live it down."

Shadow stopped licking young John's arm and looked up, cocking his head to the right.

"Finally, somebody can see me," adult John laughed, "Well, almost somebody," he corrected, "Run, Shadow," he ordered, "Run. Now!"

Shadow made a noise, then went back to licking young John.

"You were a big, dumb dog," adult John declared.

Shadow stopped and looked back up at adult John.

"Stupid dog," adult John muttered.

"I've got an idea," young John announced, grabbing Kenny's arm.

Adult John laughed at the expression on the boy's face. *Hey, wait a second. Do I make that face?*

"Wait right here," young John ordered, standing and disappearing into the house.

Light flashed before the boy returned.

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When the light faded, young John was at the kitchen table. *Waiting for Dad to get home. Mom didn't see Shadow until Kenny and I finished shaving him. She didn't say a word to me. Just sat me at the table while she walked Kenny home. Then we waited for Dad.*

Adult John turned to the back door as his father's heavy footsteps sounded on the porch.

"Betty, what the heck happened to Shadow?" Jim asked as he stepped through the back door.

"John thought he looked hot, so he and his friend shaved him," Betty informed him.

"John?" Jim asked, looking at his son.

"Well . . ." young John began helplessly, "He really looked hot, Dad," he declared, "If he had any brains he would'a run when we wet him down."

Adult John heard his mother inhale, "John, why don't you go to your room?" she suggested, "Your dad and I need to talk."

"Okay," young John said quietly, "I'm really sorry. I'll never do it again."

Adult John remained as the boy disappeared from the kitchen.

"He's bad, Betty," Jim chuckled, "But he's kind'a grown on me. Can't we keep him?"

His mother laughed, "You're as bad as he is," she returned, "We can't discipline him if he knows he can say something cute and make both of us laugh."

"We're in trouble, then," Jim laughed.

*That's why they always sent me to my room. I just thought I was in big trouble. Then again, sometimes, there wasn't any punishment.*



"What're we going to do?" his mother asked.

"My uncle shaves his collies every summer," his father informed, "It doesn't seem to hurt them."

"Shadow isn't a collie," Betty said.

"True," Jim allowed, "But John's right, if the dog had any sense, he would've run before the kids got near him with the razor," he laughed, "I'd feel like a creep spanking John for something this silly," he began, "The humiliation of being reminded of it for years to come seems like punishment enough to me."

Betty smiled, "I ran into Helen on the way back from the Tigers'," she informed, "Half the rez has probably heard about it by now," she concluded with a grin.

*Thank you, Aunt Helen. You were right, Dad. The humiliation was punishment. I had to move 3,000 miles from home to get away from it.*

The kitchen disappeared in a flash of light.

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For the first time, John was alone with his younger self when the white light faded. *The 4<sup>th</sup> grade class room in Clewiston.* Young John sat alone in the room, eyes on the clock. *Counting the minutes since the lunch bell.* The adult looked up. *Four minutes.* The second hand swept past the twelve, propelling the minute hand to the five. The child quickly gathered his books and lunch. He crept from the room, cutting behind the building in the direction opposite the school yard.

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Adult John followed, watching as the boy settled down in a small alley behind the building. He opened his paper sack and pulled out a sandwich. *Cheese. Dad made cheese sandwiches every day for two months after Mom got sick.*

Young John opened his History book and nibbled at the sandwich. Adult John heard footsteps approach. *Robert Hamilton. The biggest bully in school. From the richest family in the county.* Adult John stood helplessly as Robert's foot kicked the book from Young John's lap, knocking the barely eaten sandwich from his hand.

"Tryin' to kiss up to your girlfriend, Gage?" Robert taunted, "She doesn't give a shit about a worthless little half-breed like you."

*The words hurt. No matter how many times I heard them. But I always counted to ten. Just like Dad*

*said.*

Robert pulled young John to his feet, "Aww, poor wittle Johnny dwopped his sammich," he taunted, pinning the smaller boy against the rough bricks and reaching down, "Here's your sammich, Johnny."

"That's sand-wich," young John corrected, emphasizing the two syllables, "Guess you are as dumb as you look."

"Eat your sand-wich," Robert mocked, shoving the dirt covered bread and cheese into young John's face.

Helpless, adult John watched as his counterpart clamped his mouth shut and twisted his head, evading Robert's hand and the sandwich.

"I'll make you eat it," Robert growled.

Young John kicked out, connecting with Robert's shin. "All right!" Adult John thought as the bully howled in pain. "Duck!" he shouted as the bully lashed out with his right hand. Adult John felt sympathy pain in his nose as the hand connected. Robert's fist to the stomach doubled his counterpart over.

"Robert Hamilton!" a woman's voice shouted.

Adult John knew what his counterpart was thinking. *Why Miss DeShong? Even old Mrs. Walters would've been better..* As he watched, young John clutched his stomach and bent his head. *Hiding the tears.*

"I didn't do anything!" Robert protested, "He kicked me first."

"What'd you do to him?" Margaret DeShong, his 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, asked.

"Nuthin'!" Robert protested.

"I'll bet," Miss DeShong returned, then knelt next to young John, "John, are you all right?"

*No!* Adult John watched as his younger self nodded without lifting his head.

Miss DeShong put a hand under the child's chin and gently lifted the head, "You're going to the nurse's office," she declared.

"m fine," young John mumbled, swiping at his nose. His sleeve came back bloody.

*I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me when Miss DeShong had to help me into the building.*

"You, to the principal's office. Now," Miss DeShong ordered Robert.

*If I hadn't been so embarrassed, that might've felt good.* Adult John watched as the battered child kept his head down. *So Miss DeShong wouldn't see my face. She was my first crush.*

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"I've got a patient for you, Mrs. Boyle," Miss DeShong announced as they stepped into the nurse's office.

"She's down the street," a young girl informed, "One of the middle school kids has a nail in his foot."

Miss DeShong looked at the girl on the room's second exam table, "Another math test, Rachel?"

"How'd you know?" Rachel asked guiltily.

"Because you're always better by the time the 6<sup>th</sup> period bell rings," Miss DeShong responded, looking down at her young charge, "Do you need help getting on the table?"

Young John shook his head and climbed up to the second table.

"You have to tell my folks, don't you?" Rachel asked as Miss DeShong crossed to the sink.

"No, but I will have to find you a math tutor," Miss DeShong informed, running the water and wetting two cloths.

"What happened to him?" Rachel asked, nodding toward young John.

"Nothing you need to worry about, Rachel Duncan," Miss DeShong replied, returning to the table, "Don't tilt your head back too far," she said, gently placing the cloth on the back of young John's neck, then adjusting the angle of his head.

The bell rang.

"Rachel, if you're not really sick, would you go to the office and have Mrs. Walters go to my classroom?" Miss DeShong asked.

"And then go to math class?" Rachel returned petulantly.

"I'll have a talk with Mrs. Thompson," Miss DeShong replied, "Thank you, Rachel."

When Rachel was gone, she turned her attention to young John, "How're you feeling, John?" she asked.

"Kay, I guess," John mumbled in reply.

*No wonder I had a crush on Miss DeShong. The rez kids didn't accept me. The non-rez kids didn't accept me. Half the teachers ignored me. It was okay when Kenny was around. But when he wasn't, Robert Hamilton always found me. Even before I was in her class, she was nice to me.*

Miss DeShong gently placed young John's hand over the towel at the back of his neck. Then she cleaned the blood from his face with the second towel.

"Oww, oww, oww," young John protested.

"Sorry, John," the woman said sincerely, "I'll leave the rest of that for Mrs. Boyle," she added, tossing the towel across to the sink.

"C'n I put my head down, now?" John asked.

"Let's see," Miss DeShong replied, removing the now warm towel. She pulled a stool over and sat down, looking up at young John, "Are you dizzy? Do you feel sick?"

"No?" John answered.

The door opened and a man in his forties stepped into the office, "John Gage, in my office," he ordered, gesturing with his right index finger to the hall outside.

"We're waiting for Mrs. Boyle," Miss DeShong informed him, "I'll bring John to the office when we're done, Mr. Pastorek."

"He can see Mrs. Boyle later," Mr. Pastorek said.

Miss DeShong stood, "Be right back, John," she winked, motioning the principal into the hall, then stepping out behind him.

Adult John followed before the door closed. *No use taking any chances.*

"Why do you need to see John?" Miss DeShong asked quietly.

"He kicked Robert Hamilton," Mr. Pastorek informed, "Miss Wyllie is trying to reach his parents."

"She won't," Miss DeShong informed, "They don't have a phone and his father's somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico right now."

"I'll send someone to their house, then," Mr. Pastorek returned, "Two boys got into a fight. I intend to speak with both sets of parents."

Miss DeShong took a deep breath, "So Robert says," she began, "Mr. Pastorek, if John did kick Robert, I'm sure it was in self-defense."

"That's not the story Robert told me," Mr. Pastorek argued, "I know Robert Hamilton's a bully, Meg. Unfortunately, his parents don't believe that."

"You've stood up to Gene Hamilton before, Richard," Miss DeShong said, "If both John's parents were white, you'd stand up to him again."

"How dare you," Mr. Pastorek spat, "I expressed an opinion about desegregating the schools. That was

two years ago."

"The truth hurts, Richard," Miss DeShong returned, "Prove me wrong," she challenged, "At least get John's side of the story."

Mr. Pastorek nodded, "Fine," he said quietly. He opened the door and waited for Miss DeShong to re-enter the nurse's office before stepping in behind her.

"I'm in trouble, huh?" young John asked quietly.

"Did you kick Robert, John?" Mr. Pastorek asked.

"Yes, sir," the boy responded, "He was trying to shove my sandwich into my mouth."

"All right," Mr. Pastorek said quietly, "The next time something like that happens, find a teacher," he concluded, then turned and left the nurses office.

Miss DeShong walked over to the stool and sat.

"I'm not in trouble?" young John asked.

Miss DeShong smiled, "No, you're not," she answered, "How're you feeling?"

Young John shrugged, "Fine," he answered, "How'd you know Robert was picking on me?"

"I saw him go behind the building and knew he was up to no good," Miss DeShong answered honestly.

Young John smiled, then winced, "That hurts my nose," he declared.

"I'm sure Mrs. Boyle will be back soon," Miss DeShong said, brushing a lock of hair from the child's forehead, "Do you eat behind the building every day?"

Young John nodded.

"What about Kenny?" Miss DeShong asked.

"His dad works in town," young John informed, "He got permission to go over there at lunch."

"Are things okay at home?" Miss DeShong asked.

"Sure," the child shrugged.

*I had to lie. I didn't want to disappoint my Dad. And I didn't want them to take me away.*

*FLASH*

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*There's gotta be a pattern here. I'm just not seeing it.* The bright light faded and John found himself in another classroom. This one at the high school. *I was one of the few kids who didn't go back to the reservation school when they reopened in '57.*

"Pssst . . . John," a boy's voice called.

Adult John grinned. *Kenny Tiger. We were still gettin' in trouble in high school. Man, I wish I knew what happened to him.*

"What?" John's teenaged self stage whispered.

*Chet thinks I'm skinny now. He should've seen me then. I was all arms and legs.*

"Are you goin' out for track, or not?" Kenny stage whispered.

"No. It's a waste of time." Adult John winced at the dispirited tone in the teenaged voice.

"Mr. Gage, Mr. Tiger, is there something you'd like to share with the rest of the class?" their 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher asked.

*What was her name?*

"No, ma'am," teenaged John answered, shooting a glare at Kenny.

"No, Miss Patterson," Kenny chimed in. "After class," he mouthed.

Teenaged John nodded once, then dropped his head to look down at the History book open on his desk. As Miss Patterson went back to her lecture, John knelt next to his counterpart's desk, watching as a serious expression settled over the youthful features.

*I wonder if I still do that. I'll have to ask Roy. Well, if I'm not dead, I'll ask him.*

Adult John jumped when the bell rang. Kenny and young John quickly gathered their books and stood, following the rest of the class into the hall.

"You gotta go out for track, Johnny," Kenny resumed, as though Miss Patterson had never interrupted him. "You're faster than anybody I've ever seen."

Young John shook his head. "Coach isn't gonna pick me. No matter how fast I am."

"Why not?" Kenny asked.

Young John raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, that." Kenny waved his hand. "I don't care. I'm trying out," he announced. "You gotta try out with me."

"You're wasting your time and energy," Young John advised. "No, thanks."

*Was I really that cynical? Boy, I've changed.*

"Try out for what?" a girl's voice asked from behind John.

Young John turned quickly. Too quickly. He lost his balance and almost collided with the owner of the voice. "Hi, Kaylee." His voice cracked. "Hi, Kate."

*Kaylee and Kate Petty. My first double crush. And the subject of daydreams I didn't understand until after they moved to Atlanta.*

"Hi, John." The twins had an eerie habit of speaking in unison. "Hi, Kenny."

"What are you trying out for, John?" Kaylee asked.

"Nothing, Kaylee," Kenny informed. "He's chicken."

Young John elbowed his friend in the ribs. "Track," he informed the girls.

"When?" Kate asked, exchanging a look with her sister. "Kay and I don't wanna miss it."

Young John looked to his friend for help, but Kenny just grinned back at him.

A poster on the wall answered the question. *Look up and to your left. Up and to your left.*

"Well, I . . . ah . . ." Young John scratched his head, eyes searching, then lighting up. "Thursday, after school."

Kaylee smiled. "Kat and I will be there." She winked at John, then the twins walked past him, continuing down the hall.

*Two years of track and the twins moved to Atlanta before I had the nerve to ask either one out. Before I figured out which one I wanted to ask out.*

"They want you, Johnny." Kenny grinned.

Young John grimaced. "Have you seen Mr. Petty lately?" He sighed sadly. "He makes Mighty Joe Young look like a cute, little chimpanzee."

"You're too hard on yourself, Johnny." Kenny shook his head.

"I just don't wanna end up snapped like a twig by Mr. Petty." Young John sighed again. "I've gotta go to my locker and get home."

"Your mom still sick?"

"Yeah," Johnny responded. "She won't go to a doctor. Says my uncle's medicine is all she needs."

"Yeah, my old man's the same way." Kenny shook his head.

Like John, Kenny was of mixed-blood. Seminole tradition didn't consider Kenny a member of the tribe, because his Seminole blood came from the paternal side. *Kenny had it worse than I did. Wonder why he didn't let it get him down?*

Adult John followed the boys to their lockers, then out into the Florida sunshine.

"I'll try out with you Kenny, but I can't join the track team, even if the Coach picks me." Young John stepped onto the bus that would take them back to the reservation.

"Why not?" Kenny asked, taking the empty seat in front of his friend and stretching his legs out.

"I've gotta be there for my mom after school," Young John informed.

"Oh, yeah . . . I didn't think of that." Kenny shrugged. "Talk to your dad. Maybe your aunt can help out."

John shook his head. "He's not gonna go for that."

*But he did! He talked to Aunt Helen himself.* Before Adult John could finish his next thought, the light flashed and he was yanked back from the bus and the two boys.

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John was in the yard of his family home when the light faded. *Okay. What's this gonna be?* His uncle's battered pick-up truck was parked in the yard, with his cousin behind the wheel and his teenaged self sitting in the passenger seat. A couple stepped out of the house. John recognized them as cousins of his mother. The woman was crying and the man was consoling her.

*No. I remember this just fine. I don't wanna see it again.* John waited, but the light didn't rescue him. Unable to leave and sensing that he couldn't change anything, he resigned himself to reliving the worst day of his life. *I was at a track meet in Naples. Howard came to get me, but he wouldn't tell me anything.*

His father stepped out onto the porch as Howard, Jr. turned off the engine of the truck. Adult John watched as his cousin put a comforting hand on the teenager's shoulder. The boy opened the door and stepped out of the truck, but clung to the door as though it was the only thing anchoring him to the ground beneath his feet.

*I knew Mom was dead before he told me.* The years hadn't lessened the sudden hollow feeling that came with any thought of his mother's death. John's throat tightened as he watched his teenaged self.

"Mom . . ." The young voice was barely a whisper.

His father stepped down from the porch and crossed the yard. His son let go of the truck and took several steps back. "Why did you let me go, Dad?" The boy's voice broke. "Why?"



"I didn't know. I thought . . ." For the first time, Adult John heard the catch in his father's voice and saw the tears welling in his eyes.

*You were hurting as much as I was. Why didn't I see it? Would things have been different if I hadn't thought I was alone? John's throat tightened and tears burned his own eyes. I feel like somebody's opened me up and scooped me out from my neck to my hips.*

The teenager took two unsteady steps forward. He stopped, took a deep breath and let it out. The narrow shoulders lifted and squared, then the dark head looked up from the ground.

"Where is Mom?"

"Johnny, why don't you come over to my Mom and Dad's for a little while?" Howard, Jr. suggested.

"I want to see my mother." This time, the boy's voice shook.

"Okay, Johnny." Jim motioned to the teenager. "C'mon." He walked to the porch, opened the door, then stopped and turned to wait for Johnny. He put out an arm, ready to place it around the youth's shoulders.

The dark head went down and the boy made his way to the porch. He stopped when he reached Jim, waiting with one foot on the first riser of the stairs. Jim stood there, with his arm out, but his son just out of reach. A look of confusion clouded the sunburned face. John saw understanding dawn on his father's face, the look of confusion was replaced by one of surprise, then disappointment. Jim dropped his arm, turned and stepped into the house.

"I should've just slapped him. It would've hurt him less." Adult John spoke aloud, even though he couldn't be heard. "How could I do that to my own father?"

John followed father and son, treading the well-worn carpet that led to the room his parents had once shared. The smell of food cooking wafted through to him. The pleasant smell clashed with the mustiness that carried over to the reservation from the nearby swamp country. The two smells made his stomach turn.

His Aunt Helen had intercepted young John in the hall, wrapping him in her arms. "I'm so sorry, Johnny. Whatever you need, your uncle and Howard and I'll be there for you."

"I'm okay, Aunt Helen. I just wanna see my mom." The voice was flat.

*Like the ones I've heard at accident scenes.*

"Johnny, I don't . . ."

"I'm not a little kid!" The boy's voice rose to near hysteria.

"Oh, sweetie." Helen pulled Johnny close. "I know you aren't." She smiled up at him. "You're bigger than I am."

"Please . . ." The hysteria had been replaced by the sound of emotional strain.

Helen kissed the boy's cheek, then nodded silently. "All right."

John followed Helen and the boy to the small bedroom at the back of the house. They stopped at the door.

The boy turned to his aunt. His eyes brimmed with unshed tears and his bottom lip quivered. "I . . . I want . . . I have to do this . . . alone."

Helen smiled sadly and cupped his cheek. Then she nodded silently, turned and went back to the living room.

John watched as the boy hesitated, his hand on the partially open door. *Should I stay out here? Or go in? That's what I was thinking, then. It hasn't changed.* When the boy stepped forward, John followed. As his younger self hesitantly approached the still form on the bed, John stepped into the far corner of the room.

Johnny knelt next to the bed and John saw that the boy's hands shook as he reached for his mother's hand.

"Mama? Please . . ." Johnny's voice broke. "Please don't leave me, Mama. Please come back." A sob broke from his chest. "I need you, Mama. Please don't leave me here alone." He dropped to the floor, burying his face in the bed. The narrow shoulders shook with sobs that seemed to come from the very bottom of the boy's soul.

Adult John walked over to the bed and crouched between his counterpart and his mother's body. "It's gonna be okay." His own voice shook with emotion. "You're not alone. You've got your dad." He waited for the boy's head to come up. "Please hear me. Please." He reached for one of the shaking shoulders, then stopped. *If I try to touch him, the light'll come back.* "It's gonna be okay, Johnny. Everything's gonna be okay."

John felt a spark of hope as the shoulders stopped shaking and the quiet sobs silenced. The boy's dark head lifted from the bed. The sad, dark eyes were vacant.

"I love you, Mama," the boy whispered, then leaned forward and kissed his mother's forehead. He straightened and swiped at his nose and eyes with an arm. Then he released his mother's hand and stood, walking slowly and purposefully to the door.

*I can't change anything. So why the hell am I here?* John remained in the room, returning to the corner, where he slid down the wall. The smell of the herbs and poultices his mother had relied on to cure her illness lingered in the room. He pulled his knees up and rested his head on his arms as the tears he'd fought to hold back spilled down his cheeks and the sobs broke free from his chest.

When there wasn't anything left, John looked up, swiping his eyes and nose with his forearm. He rose on shaky legs and walked to the door. He stopped in the door and looked back at the small, frail woman on the bed. He was thankful that he'd gotten to see her youthful and healthy again. And that

he'd been spared seeing her waste away.

"I love you, Mama," John whispered, then turned and stepped into the hall, which filled with light, pulling him away from another memory.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was on the roof of the small house when the light faded. That didn't help him figure out what this memory would show, since he'd gone up to that roof to work out his problems, or to think for as long as he could remember. Young John was stretched out a few feet away, staring up at the stars.

A creak sounded behind them and the boy sat up quickly, brushing at his clothes.

"I'll come in right now," the boy mumbled. "I couldn't sleep."

"No, it's okay." Jim Gage made his way over and sat down next to his son. "You know, you've always loved being up here." He looked up at the stars. "You would've slept out here, I think."

"I guess." The boy picked at something invisible on a shoelace.

"I remember the first time you came up on this roof. I was helping your Uncle Howard get the stock onto the trailer to go to market." He paused. "You're too young to remember the market days." Another pause. "Your mother was out hanging laundry. You were in the yard playing. She turned her back for a second and the next thing she knew, you were up on the roof, walking along the peak right up there." He gestured behind them. "I heard her yell 'James!' clear across to Uncle Howard's and Aunt Helen's." He paused and chuckled.

*I don't remember this. The story or the conversation with my dad.*

"I knew if your mom was yelling like that, it had to be bad, so I tore off. Your uncle and aunt came over right behind me." Jim paused again. "I climbed up and brought you down. Boy! You were mad at me for that, too." Another quiet chuckle.

The boy remained silent.

"For weeks your mom watched you like a hawk. She followed you around, trying to figure out how you got up here in the first place." Jim laughed. "The first time she turned her back, you were up here again."

"I don't remember," the boy muttered.

Jim chuckled again. "You weren't much more than 4 at the time," he informed. "We tried everything. We fussed at you. We put you in your room. We sent you to bed without supper. But you kept climbing up here." He paused. "Your mom even threatened to whip you all the way to the hospital when you fell and broke your neck." He stopped, laughing quietly for a minute.

"One day, your mom was watching somebody's baby. She left you in your room to feed the little guy . . ." He trailed off. "Or maybe it was a girl." He waved his hand. "Doesn't matter. Your mom was feeding this baby when she heard footsteps on the back porch. She looked up and in you walked." This time, the laugh came from deep down and it took Jim several minutes to get it under control.

"What happened?" *Finally showing some interest.*

Jim took a deep breath, then turned to his son. "You looked your mom right in the eye and you said, 'I fell off the roof, Mama. And, see? I didn't even break my neck.'"

John saw the boy's face crack into a wavery grin.

"I did not," the boy declared petulantly.

Jim laughed again. "Oh, yes, you did, Johnny." He reached over and tousled the dark hair. "Then you walked past your mom and that baby and went back to your room."

"What'd Mama do?"

"She gave up. Had me and your uncle put that ladder up on the side of the house so you could get up and down without risking your neck." Jim paused. "She said you had the spirit of an adventurer and that trying to tame you would kill that spirit."

"I miss her, Dad." The boy's voice broke and his shoulders trembled.

"So do I, son. So do I." Jim reached over and pulled the boy into a hug. After kissing the top of his son's head, he pulled away. "We've got a long day tomorrow."

"Wait." The boy looked up at the stars, then back at his father. "What's gonna happen? Will they take me away from you now that Mom's . . . gone?"

"Who, son?" Jim frowned.

"Them . . . the ones who took Mom and Aunt Helen."

*That was why Mom was afraid of me getting hurt falling off the roof. That's why I didn't say anything when Mom got sick. We were both afraid they'd take me away.*

Jim cupped his son's chin. "I'd like to see 'em try," he said firmly. "Things have changed since your mom and Aunt Helen were little girls, though." He smiled. "I won't let that happen. So, don't you worry about it. Okay?"

The boy nodded, then slowly rose and carefully crossed the roof. Jim looked up at the stars for a minute, then rose and followed Johnny.

John watched them disappear down the ladder on the side of the house. *Why don't I remember this? Then the answer came to him. This must've been the night Mom died. I remember that. Too well. Then the next thing I really remember was going back to school. But that was weeks later.*

John looked up at the stars. *God, how could I have forgotten Dad coming up on the roof with me?* Again he found his eyes burning and tears coursing down his cheeks. *Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I've been wrong all this time.*

The sky brightened and John hoped that when it faded he would be back in California and it wouldn't be too late to rebuild the bridges they'd both let burn to ashes.

\*\*\*\*\*

Adult John found himself in a small cemetery when the light faded. Johnny sat on the ground a few feet of way, absently picking at blades of grass as he addressed a headstone.

***Elizabeth Jumper Gage***

***1926-1960***

". . . running the 440 this year. The coach says I'm a natural." The boy paused. "I'm gonna be on the school paper, too. The advisor was my English teacher last year and he asked me to sign up for it. Can you believe that, Mom? He wanted me to be on the paper." He chuckled quietly. "Of course you believe it. You always told me I could do anything I set my mind to."

*I'm glad I eventually listened to that! I never would've survived Chet and the Phantom if I'd been that unsure of myself.*

Johnny stood. "I came over on the bus, so I'd better go." He kissed the tips of his fingers and touched the top of the headstone. "I know you'd tell me Happy Birthday if you were here, Mom," he said quietly. "I love you." He turned, put his hands in his pockets and walked away.

John knelt and reached out to trace the letters on the headstone. The sky brightened and he was whisked away.

\*\*\*\*\*

The light returned John to the kitchen of his childhood home. Johnny was at the table, picking at a hamburger sandwiched between two pieces of grease soaked bread. *Hamburgers and hotdogs.* Adult John smiled. *If only the guys knew where I got it from.*

The adult watched as the boy picked at the bread for a minute, then shoved the plate away and looked up at the clock hanging over the icebox. John's eyes followed. *After 9 and dad's not home.*

The boy huffed out a sigh and pushed away from the table. At the sound of steps on the back porch,

he scooted forward and pulled the plate over. Instead of opening, there was a knock on the door.

Johnny stood and went to the door. He pulled it open to find Kenny standing on the porch, his usual grin plastered on his face. "Come on in." He stepped back.

"Hey! Happy Birthday, Johnny!" Kenny slapped him on the shoulder as he passed. He looked around. "Where's your dad?"

Johnny snorted. "Your guess is as good as mine."

*Okay, I hated the chores. I hated having to keep the house straight and fix dinner. But he had to work.*

"Well, leave a note. We're goin' to the Lake," Kenny announced.

"How're we gettin' to the Lake?" Johnny asked. "It's a long walk."

Kenny grin broadened and he held up a set of keys. "Old man's car."

Johnny shook his head. "Let's just go." He stepped out of the still open back door.

*This is gonna be tricky.*

The light flashed as Kenny followed.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was in the back seat of the Tigers' Bel Aire when the light faded. *It didn't bother us that neither one of us had a license, yet. It probably would've bothered us if the cops had pulled us over.*

Kenny reached under the seat and the car veered toward the ditch to the right of the road. "Whoa!" He righted the car, then reached beneath the seat again, this time without looking down. He pulled something out and handed it to Johnny. "This'll raise your spirits."

Johnny took the bottle of whiskey and looked down at it. "Do I wanna know how you got this?"

Kenny laughed. "Same place I got the keys," he informed. "The old man keeps a stash in his office." He turned briefly and John saw him wink in the glow from the dash. "Same place he keeps the spare keys."

"You're gonna miss the turn," Johnny advised, breaking the seal on the bottle, then twisting the cap. He stared at the bottle.

"Not a good idea, Johnny," the adult advised. "For you either, Kenny." *They still can't hear me, but I've gotta keep trying.*

The boy lifted the bottle to his lips and took a long pull. He grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Man! That's terrible!"

Kenny laughed. "You get used to it." He reached for the bottle, which Johnny passed to him. He kept his eyes on the road while he took a long pull, then handed the bottle back.

Johnny took another pull, then a third before handing the bottle back to Kenny.

"I came over this afternoon, but you weren't there." Kenny kept his eyes on the road as he took a pull from the bottle.

"I went over to Indiantown." Johnny looked out the window. "I haven't been since the funeral. "

"Well, forget about that, my friend." Kenny handed the bottle back. "We're gonna have some fun tonight."

Bright light that John mistook for headlights filled the car.

\*\*\*\*\*

The graying sky of an overcast day had replaced the stars when the light faded. John looked back toward the house and spotted Jim Gage pacing back and forth through the living room window. At the sound of a car, John turned to look toward the road, watching as the Bel Aire weaved across the yard, barely stopping before it struck Jim Gage's pick-up.

John looked back to the window, where Jim stopped pacing, then disappeared from view. The door opened and Jim came out onto the porch, then crossed the yard. The passenger door opened, nearly hitting him.

"Where the hell have you been, Johnny?" Jim demanded angrily. He peered into the car at the passenger. "Kenny?" He looked over to the driver's seat.

"Hiya, Mr. Gage." Kenny and Johnny exchanged a look, both laughing.

Jim Gage took a deep breath. "1-2-3-4 . . ."

*He counted to ten!*

"All right, boys." The tone was no longer angry. "Come on in the house. Both of you can sleep it off." Jim helped Kenny out of the passenger seat and propped him up against the car.

"I gotta git home," Kenny slurred.

"Not in this shape," Jim returned patiently. "I'll let your parents know where you are." He placed the boy's hands on the roof of the car. "Just hang on there."

"Sure thing." Kenny giggled.

Jim walked around the car as the driver's side door opened. Johnny stumbled out of the car, clinging to the door.

"We los' track of time," John muttered.

"I'll bet you did." Jim reached out to steady his swaying son.

"I kin make it!" Johnny exclaimed petulantly. He let go of the door and took two stumbling steps back, then fell over. "Lookit the stars." He laughed.

Jim reached in and pulled the keys from the ignition. After dropping them into his pocket, he leaned over. "C'mon, son." He gently lifted Johnny to his feet. "I'll be right back for you, Kenny."

John remained in the yard, watching Kenny. "Is this what happened to you, Kenny?"

Oblivious, Kenny turned and slid down the car, landing hard on his rump.

John walked over, kneeling to observe the now semi-conscious boy. "You had everything going for you. You were smart. You were funny. People liked you." He paused. "You didn't let the crap get you down. Hell, you didn't give two shits for what people thought about you." He sighed. "You never seemed to anyway." *I became you when I left home. Or tried to, anyway. You never were as gullible as I was.*

Jim's footsteps crunched on the dry grass behind him. "All right, Kenny." He lifted the boy to his feet and carefully made his way back to the house.

John followed, remaining in the open door as Jim deposited Kenny on the couch and covered him with a sheet. Jim disappeared into the kitchen and returned with two empty buckets. He set one of the floor next to Kenny's head.

John followed his father to Johnny's room. Jim set the bucket down on the floor, then knelt next to the bed.

Johnny's eyes opened halfway. "Dad?" The voice sounded thick and confused.

"Right here, Johnny." Jim patted Johnny's shoulder.

"Dad . . . room'spinning." Johnny moaned. "Make it stop."

Jim smoothed the dark hair from the boy's brow. "Close your eyes and take deep breaths."

The boy complied, lifting his left arm and draping it over his eyes. In a few minutes, his breathing evened out and a soft snore announced that he was asleep. Jim gently removed the boy's tennis shoes, then stood, wincing and arcing his back. A loud pop sounded and Jim's face relaxed.

"That's only the beginning," Jim said sadly. He crept across the room and stepped out into the hall.

The room brightened and disappeared.



\*\*\*\*\*

The all too familiar sound of vomiting reverberated through the hallway. John didn't need to look into the nearby bathroom to know who was making all the noise. His stomach cramped in sympathy for the boy suffering the effects of his first hangover. The front door opened behind him and he turned.

A pain filled groan brought Jim rushing down the hall to the door of the bathroom.

"Go away," Johnny moaned. "Please."

John heard water running and followed it.

Jim turned from the sink and placed a washcloth on the back of Johnny's neck. "You'll feel better in a minute."

Johnny moaned again and reached a shaky hand toward the toilet's handle. When he fell short, Jim leaned past him and flushed, consigning the mess to the septic tank.

"Oh, God." Johnny moaned and hung his head over the bowl. More groans followed as dry heaves rolled through his torso.

"Just take it easy, son," Jim said quietly, supporting the boy's head with one hand and rubbing his back with the other.

When it stopped, Johnny moaned and dropped his head onto his left arm. Jim silently flushed the toilet, then removed the cloth, wet it and rung it out, placing it back on his son's neck.

"M sorry, Dad," Johnny said quietly.

"We'll talk about that later," Jim advised. "Do you think you can get up, now?"

"Think so," Johnny mumbled.

Jim helped the teenager stand, then guided him out of the bathroom and across the hall. He deposited the boy on the bed, then left the room.

*I swore to myself, I'd never do that again. So, why did I?*

Jim returned several minutes later with a small plate and a bottle. "Johnny, let's put something in your stomach before you go back to sleep."

"No," Johnny moaned and turned away.

Jim sat down on the bed, setting the bottle on the nightstand. He patted Johnny's shoulder with his free hand. "It's just toast and ginger ale. It'll settle your stomach." He patted the boy's shoulder again. "C'mon."

The boy let out a pained sigh, then turned over and sat up, wincing and grabbing his head as he did.

"Ohhhh." He moaned again.

Jim waited until Johnny took the plate, wrinkling his nose at the sight of food. The boy picked up a slice, sniffed it, then nibbled at the crust.

"I am sorry." Johnny muttered, taking a bite of toast and chewing it.

Jim smiled. "I'll bet."

The boy rolled his eyes, then turned his attention to the toast. After finishing the first slice, he reached over, picked up the bottle of ginger ale and took a long drink.

"Not too much at once," Jim advised.

John saw a defiant look flash across the teenager's face. It passed and the boy lowered the bottle and set it back on the nightstand. "Is Kenny okay?"

"I went over to Helen's and called his parents last night." Jim paused. "I just took him home."

"Good," Johnny said around a mouthful of toast. He turned his attention to the remaining half of the second slice, absently brushing at the crumbs that had fallen into his lap.

"I'll check on you later." Jim stood and left the room.

Bright light filled the room as the teenager set the empty plate on the nightstand.

\*\*\*\*\*

When the light dimmed, John was in the kitchen with Jim and Johnny. The teenager looked tired and still a little green. Jim was hungrily devouring beef, potatoes and vegetables, while Johnny listlessly stirred his spoon in a bowl of soup.

"Don't worry, your appetite'll come back tomorrow," Jim advised.

John laughed out loud. *Mom would've never let him get away with talking with his mouth full! And the way he's eating, you'd think he hadn't eaten all day. He frowned. That's how Roy says I eat. And he's always saying I talk with my mouth full. The laughter returned. I eat like every meal it's my last and talk with my mouth full. Just like my dad.* That made John laugh even harder.

Johnny pushed the bowl away. "Can I be excused? I'm not hungry."

Jim put his fork down, swallowed, then wiped his mouth with a napkin. "First, we need to have a talk."

Johnny stood and picked up his bowl. "I've gotta wash the dishes."

"I'll take care of it later." Jim stood. "Let's go into the living room."

Johnny set the bowl down, then followed Jim into the living room. John followed, watching as the boy went to the worn couch and sat down. Jim sat in a chair at the end of the couch.

Jim rubbed his hands together and cleared his throat.

*He's nervous.*

"Johnny, I know things have been tough since your mom died." Jim paused. "Maybe I'm not around as much as I oughta be." He looked across at the boy. "I'm hopin' last night was the first time you and Kenny went out drinking. Was it?"

Johnny looked away from Jim, his jaw was set, a muscle twitching as he fought the anger.

*If only I'd won.*

"Yes," the boy finally answered. "So?"

"So?" Jim repeated. "Was it fun being sick as a dog this morning?"

"I said I was sorry," Johnny said angrily, then stood and walked across the small room to a side window.

"That was this morning. Are you sorry? Really?"

"I said I was!" Johnny's voice rose. "I'm goin' back to bed."

"Not until we finish this." Jim stood and motioned to the couch.

Johnny glared at his father. "What else do you want from me?"

"I want you to sit down and talk to me, Johnny." Jim motioned to the couch again.

Johnny crossed his arms. "I don't wanna sit down."

"Drinking isn't gonna solve anything, son," Jim said gently. "It might make you forget for a while, but it isn't gonna change anything."

"How would you know, Dad?" Johnny challenged. "We never even have beer in the house."

Jim smiled sadly. "If I hadn't met your mother, I would've ended up at the bottom of a bottle." He paused. "At first, you've got control. But it doesn't take long before the bottle has control. A lot of people don't realize that until they've climbed inside the bottle and gotten stuck."

"You know how us Injuns love our firewater," Johnny said sarcastically.

Jim was across the room and towering over his son in two steps. "I'm gonna pretend you didn't say that." His jaw clenched and unclenched. "Don't ever let me hear you say anything like it again."

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "I'm half Indian and half Irish. It was bound to happen."

The sound of the slap echoed through the small house. Johnny raised a hand to his cheek, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"I'm sorry, Johnny." Jim reached for Johnny, who pulled away.

"IT WAS MY BIRTHDAY YESTERDAY!" Johnny shouted. "You didn't even tell me Happy Birthday. Then you didn't come home." He paused. "Have you got a girlfriend over on the Gulf coast? Is she more important than your own son's birthday?"

Before Jim could answer, Johnny turned and bolted to the door, throwing it open and clattering across the porch.

Jim followed him out, running down the stairs and into the yard. "JOHNNY!"

John followed to the door. Jim stopped at a tree in the yard, angrily kicking it, then pounding his fist into the wide trunk.

The sky brightened as the boy's dim figure disappeared into the shimmering night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two boxes were in the middle of the kitchen table when the light faded. Each box was wrapped with brightly colored paper. *Dad must've gone all the way to Naples to get 'em wrapped.*

The front door opened and footsteps echoed through the house. Johnny entered the kitchen a few seconds later. He pulled a glass from the dish drainer, filled it with water and drank it down without pausing for air. He finished a second glass, then set the glass on the counter and held his head under the sink. After a minute of dousing himself with cool water, the boy pushed the water out of his hair and into the sink. Then grabbed the dishtowel and dried his face.

The boy's gaze settled on the table.

*He sees the boxes.* John waited, watching the teenager walk over to the table.

Johnny stood poised over the table for several minutes, looking at the boxes, but not touching them. When Jim's footsteps approached, both Johns looked up from the boxes on the table.

"You were still asleep when I left. It was your birthday, so I figured you'd wanna sleep in."

Johnny looked away from his father and down at the floor.

"Go ahead. Open them," Jim said quietly.

Johnny looked up from the floor, then turned to the table. He tossed the dishtowel down and picked up

the smaller of the two boxes. He pried the tape on the ends loose, then gingerly removed the box from its wrapping.

*My first watch. I'd never asked for one 'cause we couldn't afford it.*

"Thanks, Dad," Johnny whispered. He took the watch out, set the box on the table and put it on his left wrist. He picked up the second box, again removing the wrapping paper with care.

*My letter jacket.*

"That's not really a birthday present," Jim informed. "It came in a few days ago, so I had it wrapped with the watch."

Johnny examined the jacket, his eyes filling with unshed tears and his throat working as he swallowed convulsively.

"The boat's engine went out yesterday. The Coast Guard got us a tow to Hollywood, but I had to find my way to Indiantown for the truck. By the time I got home, you and Kenny were gone."

"I'm sorry I said those things, Dad." The boy's voice broke. He swallowed and took several deep breaths.

"I know you didn't mean them." Jim's voice shook. He tousled the dark hair.

*Why couldn't I do the same thing for you?* The light pulled John away as father and son embraced.

\*\*\*\*\*

The fading light brought John to the track at his high school. He looked around and spotted his teenaged counterpart rounding the far end of the track. The bleachers were empty, save for a lone girl on the front row behind Kenny, who was down on the track watching Johnny.

*Kenny didn't make the track team, but he worked out with me every day. It was his idea for me to work out year round, so I wouldn't get soft and lose my spot. And it worked.*

"Okay, Johnny, that's enough!" Kenny called as Johnny passed him, crossing an imaginary finish line.

Johnny's sprint gradually slowed and he leaned over with his hands on his knees. "One more . . . time . . . around," he panted.

"Man, you're gonna hurt yourself." Kenny returned. "You can't run any faster, Johnny. Now, cool down, then let's hit the showers and go home."

"All right, Coach." Johnny grinned, pacing around, shaking his legs and arms.

John saw the boy look up at the bleachers, then motion to Kenny.

"What?" Kenny asked, walking over to Johnny, who was in one of the center lanes.

"Who's that?" Johnny nodded his head toward the bleachers. "Don't look," he admonished as Kenny turned.

Kenny laughed. "How'm I s'posed to tell you who she is if I don't look?"

Johnny frowned. "Oh, yeah. Didn't think of that."

"I'll be cool," Kenny promised. He walked over to the infield, peered into the grass, then turned and walked back to Johnny. "The new girl. She started this year. She's a junior."

Johnny surreptitiously glanced at the girl, then went back to his cool down.

"Go talk to her," Kenny ordered, giving Johnny a nudge.

Johnny shook his head, staring down at the track beneath his feet. "Nah. I don't even know her name."

"Gayle Smith." Kenny grinned. "Go on. She's been watching you all afternoon."

Johnny looked at the girl again, then at Kenny. "She's out of my league."

"How will you know if you don't take a turn at bat?" Kenny asked smugly. "Okay, so if you don't ask, they can't tell you no. But that's kind of stupid, don't you think?"

Johnny grinned. "Now that you mention it . . ." He picked up a towel from his gym bag, liberally rubbed his face, hair, arms and legs, then tossed it onto the bag. "Here goes nothing."

Johnny walked over to the bleachers. "Hi." He pulled himself up from the track. "Gayle, right?"

Gayle smiled. "Right."

"I'm John . . . John Gage." Johnny returned the smile.

"Not . . . the John Gage." Gayle laughed. "Wow, a real track star."

Johnny blushed and ducked his head. "Small town."

"You looked really good out there today. I can't wait until track season starts." Gayle closed the book on her lap and set it next to her. "Would you like to sit down?" She motioned to the empty bench.

Johnny smiled. "Ah, I'd like to, but I've gotta get home. Dinner at my aunt and uncle's tonight." He paused, cleared his throat, then coughed. "Ah, well, I was wondering . . ." He paused again. "Would you like to go get a burger or something one day after school?"

"Sure."

"That's okay. . ." Johnny began, then blinked. "What'd you say?"

"I said, `sure'. Yes. Okay." Gayle smiled up at him. "I'd like to go get a burger or something after school."

Johnny grinned. "Oh, okay. Great!" He laughed, then looked at his watch. "I've gotta go." He jumped down to the track and jogged toward Kenny, then stopped, turned and jogged back to the bleachers. "Is tomorrow too soon?"

Gayle laughed. "Not at all."

"After school?"

"I'll meet you out front," Gayle promised.

"Out front," Johnny repeated. "Great!" He laughed, then turned and jogged over to where Kenny waited for him. "We're going for a burger tomorrow after school."

"I'm happy for you both," Kenny said sarcastically, tossing Johnny's gym bag at him.

Johnny caught the bag, still grinning from ear to ear.

*Gayle. Something else I'd change if I could.* The light pulled John away as the boys stepped into the gym.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come on, Johnny! Get up on 'im!" John heard his cousin's voice before he could see the corral at the ranch his aunt and uncle owned.

"I know what I'm doin', Howard!" Johnny shouted back. "You're spookin' him!"

Johnny kneed his horse, tracking the dodging calf. He threw the lasso, roping the calf's head. He tightened the lasso a second after the calf ducked out of the loop.

"Good ropin', Johnny! Try it again!" Howard shouted encouragement.

"I'm gettin' ready to!" Johnny trotted the horse around the corral, circling the calf.

*Man, that was so easy when I was a kid. What changed?*

John saw his father's truck pull in on the other side of the corral. Jim got out and walked around the corral, leaning on the fence next to Howard.

"Hey, Uncle Jim." Howard grinned and nodded his head toward the corral. "Johnny's lookin' good."

Jim smiled. "He sure is."

Johnny closed in on the calf, throwing the lasso and tightening the loop before the bovine could escape a second time. In one fluid motion, the boy stopped the horse, threw his right leg over and slid down, landing nimbly on his feet.

"Is he gonna be ready for that rodeo in Tulsa you wanna take him to?" Jim asked as the boy roped the calf's legs and popped up with both hands in the air.

"You're lettin' him go?" Howard grinned.

Jim reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out several folded bills. "There's his entry fee."

*That was why he took so long to give me an answer. I thought he just didn't trust me to go to Tulsa with Howard.*

"Uncle Jim, my dad'll cover it. The purse is more than enough." Howard held the bills out to his uncle.

Jim shook his head. "I appreciate it, but I can't let your dad do that." He closed Howard's hand over the bills. Then he smiled. "You're takin' him out in one piece, I expect him back the same way."

Howard chuckled. "You got it." He winked and placed the bills in his front shirt pocket.

Johnny had released the calf's legs and led him to the fence. "Hey, Dad. You're home early."

"Storm movin' into the Gulf. Coast Guard beached marine traffic until it blows over or moves on." Jim moved away from the fence as the calf nudged its snout toward him.

Johnny laughed. "He likes you, Dad," he teased.

"I like him, too." Jim grinned. "On a dinner plate."

Johnny laughed, then looked hopefully at his cousin. "Do we have time for another run?"

"I think that little guy's had enough for one day." Howard reached over and tousled Johnny's hair. "Go take him back to his mama, then put your horse up."

"C'mon, little guy." Johnny led the calf across the corral, pausing to grab the horse's reins. He led both animals through the fence and disappeared.

"Johnny's really goin' all out this year," Howard commented. "Track, school paper, girlfriend, good grades."

"He's always had more energy than any two people put together." Jim chuckled. "I'm glad to see it."

"Yeah, me, too. He's a good kid." Howard paused. "Aunt Betty'd be proud."

"Betty gave him a good start," Jim said quietly. He looked over at Howard. "He comes from good stock." He paused and grinned. "Except for one of his cousins."

"On his father's side," Howard deadpanned.

Jim's deep laughter echoed across the corral. When he got himself under control again, he grinned mischievously at his nephew. "You know, Howard, I was thinkin' it'd be a good idea for your mom to go with you and Johnny to Tulsa."



"Oh, no, Uncle Jim, don't do that to me," Howard said plaintively.

Jim clapped the younger man on the shoulder. "Okay, as long as you promise not to lock my boy in any more root cellars."

Howard laughed. "He was followin' me around and drivin' me crazy!"

Jim laughed. "For some strange reason, he liked you."

Johnny returned to the corral and pulled a gray jacket from one of the fence posts. "Ready, Dad?"

Jim clapped Howard on the shoulder again. "Talk to you later."

The sky brightened as Johnny and Jim reached the opposite side of the corral.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was in the darkened living room when the light faded. The door opened and Johnny crept into the house.

"You're 2 hours late." Jim's voice came from behind John. The click of the switch on the lamp next to Jim was the only sound in the house.

John looked over at the teenager still standing in front of the closed front door.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Johnny ducked his head. "I lost track of time. It won't happen again."

*That happened a lot with Gayle. Thank God Dad never asked too many questions. He must'a remembered bein' young more than I gave him credit for.*

Jim frowned. "What're you wearing that thing for?"

Johnny looked down at the jacket. The sleeves were an inch too short for his arms. "I lost my letter jacket a couple of weeks ago." He shrugged. "This was all I had."

"You lost it?" Jim repeated. "How?"

Johnny shrugged again. "I took it off at the bowling alley and I forgot about it."

"Johnny . . ."

"I know, Dad. How could I be so irresponsible?" Johnny interrupted. "I just am."

*That wasn't what happened. Robert Hamilton and three of his redneck friends caught me at the bowling alley with Kenny. Hamilton took it behind the building and used it to make a bonfire. Why*

*didn't I just tell him the truth? Oh, yeah. 'Cause we were outnumbered, so we just let 'em do it.*

Jim stood. "You've got school tomorrow. Go on and get to bed." He switched off the light and walked toward the hall. "But don't make any plans for tomorrow night."

The living room brightened as the teenager rolled his eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was in Johnny's bedroom when the light faded. Two trophies and a white ribbon were displayed on the dresser. *I placed third in that rodeo. Howard said that wasn't bad for my first time out.* The door opened and Jim stepped into the room, banging a spoon on a pot.

"C'mon, Johnny, rise and shine," Jim announced.

"Dad!" The teenager grumbled and put the pillow over his head.

Jim stopped banging on the pot and walked over to the bed. "C'mon, son. Time to get up."

Johnny pulled his head out from under the pillow and squinted at his father. "Dad, it's still dark."

"You're goin' out on the boat with me today," Jim informed. He pulled the covers off his son. "You've got fifteen minutes."

"Dad!" Johnny exclaimed. "You're punishing me for losing my jacket by taking me out on the boat?"

"No, I'm taking you out on the boat so you can see what it took me to earn the money to buy that letter jacket for you," Jim said reasonably. "I'll pay you and the money's yours to spend any way you want."

The teenager sat up, throwing his feet onto the floor. He scrubbed his face with his hands, then stretched.

"Get dressed. Breakfast'll be waiting on the table." Jim turned and disappeared into the hall.

"Taking you out to show you what it took me . . ." Johnny muttered as he stood and went to the dresser. He threw open a drawer, pulled out socks, jeans and an undershirt, slamming each of the drawers as he finished with them. "Spending my Saturday out in the Gulf. Oh, yeah, that's gonna be lots of fun," he continued, angrily putting his socks on. He pulled the tee-shirt on. "I know what it took to buy the darn jacket. Fish, fish and more fish." He stood and stepped into the jeans, quickly buttoning the fly.

Johnny went to the closet, yanked a flannel shirt from a hanger and jammed his feet into a pair of workboots.

John followed the teenager out of the room, continuing to the kitchen as the boy stepped into the bathroom. Jim was at the stove, scrambling eggs and frying bacon. He paused, opened the oven door and reached in to turn over several pieces of bread under the broiler.

*Wait a minute. I never went out on the boat with my dad. Maybe this has all just been a dream.*

The teenager shuffled into the kitchen, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Breakfast is just about ready," Jim informed.

"It's too early to eat," Johnny muttered.

Jim chuckled and turned from the stove. "Johnny, this isn't punishment," he repeated. "You're gonna have a long day, son. You need to eat." He lifted the frying pan and poured the contents onto two plates. He dropped the empty pan into the sink and picked up the plates. "Have a seat."

Johnny went to the table and sat down across from his father. He pulled one of the plates over and picked at the eggs. "Toast's burning."

"Darn it! I always forget about the toast." Jim rose, went to the oven and reached in, pulling out the bread and tossing the hot slices onto a third plate. He picked that up, pulled a stick of butter from the refrigerator and returned to the table. He set the plate and butter down, then sat.

Johnny reached over and picked up a slice of toast. "Yikes!" He dropped the slice onto his plate, hissing and shaking his hand.

"Careful, it's hot," Jim deadpanned, digging into his eggs.

"You don't say," Johnny returned dryly. He picked up his knife and buttered the slice of toast without touching it. He ended up with as much butter on the plate as he got onto the slice of toast. With a shrug, he picked up his fork and stirred the butter into the scrambled eggs, then shoveled several bites into his mouth.

The light pulled John away from the kitchen.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was at the dock where his father's boat had moored for as long as he could remember. Jim Gage had bought the boat when his former boss retired. It was called the KAREN G., after the first owner's wife. *Dad said renaming her would be bad luck.* John looked over at the boat, which had been fishing the Gulf since the early 40s. *I wonder if he still has her?*

Jim strode down the dock, his son trudging along behind him. John followed them, carefully negotiating the rickety gangway leading to the bow of the vessel. The man who had served as the boat's Mate and Assistant Engineer was already in the wheelhouse. He called down to Jim and Johnny. The sole deckhand was at the stern, checking the net.

"You're gonna work with Mike," Jim informed. "He'll show you the ropes."

Johnny nodded silently. He swallowed and crossed his arms.

Jim frowned. "You okay, son?"

Johnny nodded again. "I ate too much." He turned and made his way aft.

Jim shook his head and climbed the stairs to the wheelhouse.

Another fishing boat heading out to the Gulf chugged past them. John's stomach rolled as the vessel lifted and dropped in its wake. *Uh-oh*. He looked aft at the teenager, who clutched his stomach with one hand and clung to the rail with the other.

"You okay, kid?"

Johnny took several deep breaths, then nodded.

The deckhand shrugged and went back to checking the net. The boat's engine coughed, sputtered and wheezed, then came to life, churning up a froth of foam at the boat's stern. Mike left the nets and headed to the lines securing the vessel to the dock. "Get the bow line."

Johnny swallowed again, then made his way along the narrow deck at the side of the boat to the bow. He struggled for several minutes with the large, unwieldy rope, finally freeing it from the spar on the dock. He turned and signaled to his father in the wheelhouse, then made his way back toward the stern.

The engines reversed and the boat drifted away from the dock. The teenager froze amidships as the engine paused, then kicked into half speed forward. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, a greenish cast settling over his pale face. He lost his battle with nausea and leaned over the rail.

"Johnny?" Mike's voice called from the stern.

Johnny spat, wiped his sleeve across his forehead and straightened. He stumbled back to the stern.

"You don't look good, kid," Mike commented.

"M okay," Johnny muttered, his voice barely carrying over the hum of the boat's engine.

"You ain't got yer sealegs," Mike informed. "Keep your eyes on the horizon 'til your stomach settles down."

Johnny nodded, turning and staring over the stern at the vanishing shoreline.

*I must'a gotten pretty sick to forget this.* John's stomach rolled as the teenager groaned and leaned over the rail a second time.

"Hey!" Mike grabbed the teenager as he pitched forward, nearly falling overboard. "I'll get your dad to turn back."

"No!" The teenager shouted, but not solely to be heard over the engine.

"Okay. Okay." Mike stepped back. "Just keep your eyes on the horizon."

The boy nodded, weakly lifting his head.

With his own stomach rolling, probably in sympathy, John turned to the horizon. The sky brightened as the shoreline disappeared from view.

\*\*\*\*\*

Johnny was curled on a tarp in the bow of the boat when the light faded. John looked up to the wheelhouse as Jim clattered down the stairs.

"How long has he been sick?" Jim knelt next to his son.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Johnny whispered, moaning and clutching his stomach.

"It's okay, son." Jim turned back to Mike, who stood behind him. "When did he get sick?"

"Right after we pulled away from the dock." Mike put his hands in his pockets. "I wanted to tell you, but he didn't want me to."

"Get the nets up," Jim ordered, leaning down and lifting Johnny from the tarp. "C'mon, son, I'm gonna take you down to the galley."

"You think you ought'a do that?" Mike asked. "He's liable to jes git sick again." He paused and chuckled. "It ain't like he's gonna git sunburnt."

Jim turned, glaring daggers at the man behind him. "What did you just say?" He gently laid Johnny back on the tarp.

Mike blinked. "I was jes kiddin', Jim."

"You think my son's a joke?" Jim stood, towering over the shorter man. "Get the nets up and keep your mouth shut." His teeth ground together. "I hear another word out of you before we make port and I'm gonna be hard pressed choosing between kicking your ass, or just firing you."

"Now, Jim . . ." Mike began, then stopped. He turned and made his way to the stern of the vessel.

Jim turned and knelt.

"Thanks, Dad," Johnny whispered as Jim gently lifted him up.

Jim helped the boy out of the bow, stopping next to the stairs leading to the wheelhouse. Supporting the lanky teenager, he climbed the stairs to the wheelhouse.

"He okay?" The man at the wheel asked as Jim led Johnny into the wheelhouse.

"I hope so, Tom." Jim lowered Johnny to a bunk at the back of the cabin. "I'll take the wheel. Can you help Mike with the nets, then bring up some water from the galley?"

"Sure thing." Tom turned to the bunk. "You hang in there, Johnny."

The boy tried to smile, but it wasn't very convincing. He groaned and closed his eyes, wrapping his arms around his stomach.

"Johnny, I'm gonna put you on your side," Jim said, gently turning the boy. "I'll be right over at the wheel if you need me."

Johnny nodded silently, closing his eyes as Jim stood and turned to the wheel. He took over for Tom, who went out the door and clattered down the stairs.

"Let's get those nets up!" Tom voice rose from the stern.

Jim held the wheel, keeping the boat steady, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder at the boy on the bunk behind him.

John's gaze followed his father's. *Instead of disappointing him, I scared the hell out of him. Way to go, Gage.* Light filled the wheelhouse.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was at the lake when the light faded. Johnny and Gayle were alone on the levee. Gayle's car and Jim's truck were parked down the slope. *The guys would never believe I dated one girl all through high school. We were supposed to go to college together. Then there wasn't enough money for me to get to Tallahassee, or live on once I got there.*

"You've been awful quiet tonight." Johnny playfully nudged the girl next to him. "Cheer up."

Gayle looked at the boy. "I've got a lot on my mind."

Johnny put his arms around her and pulled her close. He kissed the top of her head. "It can't be that bad."

"I'm going back to Tallahassee tomorrow," Gayle said quietly.

"Why?"

"This isn't working for me anymore, Johnny." Gayle turned to him, her eyes welling with tears. "I want to go forward. I don't want to stay in one place."

*Tell her you want the same thing, Johnny. Tell her how scared you are. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, but I was afraid I'd lose her if I said it out loud.*

"I don't understand." Johnny's voice shook. "I'll find another job and save up enough money for college." He looked out at the lake. "Things are just really slow around here."

Gayle shook her head. "This isn't about school, Johnny. It's about us." She wiped her eyes.

"Gayle . . ." Johnny stopped and looked back out at the lake. "You do what you have to do."

"Dammit, Johnny, quit being stupid! Talk to her," John said out loud. "It's your last chance."

Johnny's gaze remained focused on the lake.

"I'm sorry, Johnny." Gayle stood and ran down the levee to her car.

John looked up at the stars. *I could've changed my whole life.*

The sky brightened as Johnny stood and ran to Jim's truck.

\*\*\*\*\*

Johnny was riding a horse across the field toward the corral at his aunt and uncle's ranch when the light faded. John looked around and saw his father angrily pacing along the fence. He turned back as the young man slid down from the horse and opened the gate. He led the horse into the corral, freezing when he noticed Jim.

"I stopped at the market on my way home." Jim leaned on the fence. "Mr. Peterson said you quit your job today."

Johnny led the horse over to the fence, tied the reins to a post, then removed the saddle and blanket. "Not here, Dad. Please." He pulled a sponge out of a bucket and wiped the horse's flanks down, starting at the neck and working his way back.

"Well, if you'd come home instead of going out drinking, we wouldn't have to do it here," Jim said angrily. He sighed. "Johnny, I don't wanna fight with you."

"Then don't." Johnny dropped the sponge into the bucket, picked up a brush and brushed the horse's neck. "I made a decision, Dad. My bus leaves tomorrow." He stopped and looked over at Jim, his eyes sad. "I was hoping you'd give me a ride into town."

"You're really going to California?" Jim's voice was surprised.

*I couldn't tell him the money I'd saved would only get me as far as Mobile.*

"Johnny, you don't know anybody out there. You don't have any family. It's . . ." Jim threw his hands up. "It's just plain crazy."

"Sorry you feel that way, Dad." Johnny went back to brushing the horse.

"You can't run away from your problems, son." Jim's voice was quiet and sad. "You face them and deal with them."

*Dad thought I was leaving because I'd spent a night in the drunk tank. Man, was that ever stupid. I went out by myself and picked a fight with a redneck. Glad I didn't get to relive that one.*

*That episode was just the last straw. There wasn't any future for me in Florida. I should've told him that.*

"I'm not running away, Dad. I'm going forward." Johnny dropped the brush and removed the bridle, leaving the horse free to roam in the corral.

"No, son, you're running away," Jim repeated. He turned from the fence and walked to his truck, leaving his son standing in the corral.

The light pulled John away as the young man picked up the saddle and blanket and carried them into the barn.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two small suitcases sat by the door of the house when the light faded. Johnny emerged from the bedroom, a canvas duffel bag slung over his shoulder. John followed the young man to the kitchen, where Jim sat at the table.

"Well, I guess this is it, Dad." John stood in the doorway.

"Don't go through with this, Johnny." Jim's voice was quiet. "You don't know anybody. You don't have anywhere to live . . ."

"Dad, I'm going." Johnny sighed. "I'll be okay."

"You're throwing your life away!" Jim said angrily, his voice rising.

"What life, Dad?" Johnny shouted back. "I've had 5 jobs in the last 2 years and I've gotten laid-off from every one of them. It took me 2 months to get the job at the market. I only got that one 'cause Mr. Peterson felt sorry for me."

"Things'll get better! You just have to have a little patience." Jim returned angrily. "Let your Uncle Clyde find something for you on the reservation."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't want that," he said quietly. "I've gotta go. I promised Aunt Helen I'd come by before I left." He took a deep breath. "I'll keep in touch, Dad. I promise." He turned and walked into the living room.

Jim stood and followed. "Don't go, Johnny." He stopped as Johnny opened the door, then picked up the two suitcases. "Don't try running back here when things don't work out."



Hurt warred with anger in Johnny's dark eyes. "You'd turn away your own son?"

"If you walk out that door right now, I'm not sure you'd still be my son." Jim's voice was ominously quiet.

They stared at each other in the charged silence of the living room, the soft ticking of the mantel clock the only sound. Finally, Johnny tore his gaze away and shoved through the porch door, letting the screen door's violent slam be his only farewell.

"Go tell him you didn't mean it," John ordered, his eyes welling. "Don't let him leave like that."

Jim ran a hand through his thick, dark hair, his eyes still focused on the open door.

"Please, Dad." John's voice shook. "Tell me you didn't mean it."

Jim walked to the door, looking through the screen for several minutes.

The living room brightened as Jim angrily slammed the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was in an operating room when the light faded. *What's going on now?* He couldn't see around the doctors and nurses, but had a feeling he didn't want to. One of the doctor's was up on the table, doing chest compressions, pausing as another doctor injected something into the patient's chest.

"C'mon, John, don't give up." *That's Morton. And he's talking to me!*

"Epi's in." The second doctor called.

Morton resumed chest compressions. "C'mon, John."

John anxiously watched the heart monitor. *It can't end now. I want to see my dad again. I need to set things right with him.*

The operating room filled with light.

\*\*\*\*\*

The light faded, leaving John in complete darkness. *Oh, man, my chest hurts. My head hurts. This didn't happen before.* He could hear the beep of a heart monitor.

"We've got him back," a voice announced.

The voices and the pain faded as fog swirled around him.

To be continued in Part 3

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*Happy Birthday, Mom. I love you.*

*May, 1999 - October 3, 1999*