
After lunch, they ordered pie and coffee. The tension that had lingered between father and son since their trip south was still there. For the first time in days, it remained in the background, allowing them to make it through lunch without another confrontation.

John was watching the highway when a vehicle caught his eye. "Man, look at that."

Jim turned and looked out the window as a vehicle drove into the parking lot and pulled up to the gas pumps. It was roughly the size of a pick-up truck, with a spare tire mounted on the hood and a gas can strapped to the rear door. "That's one of those English four wheel drive things." He paused. "A Rover something . . ."

"I'll be right back. I'm gonna go ask that guy a couple of questions." John stood and walked out of the restaurant.

The waitress drew Jim's attention away from the window. "More coffee?"

Jim smiled and set the mug he'd been holding on the table. "Thanks."

"Is that your little brother?" She refilled his cup, then John's.

Maybe she is flirting with me. It's been so long, I didn't recognize it. Jim blushed. "He's my son."

"Your son. You're not old enough to have a boy that age." The waitress smiled, then frowned. "Isn't your wife travelling with you?"

Good, I can let her down without hurting her feelings. "She's back home. She hates camping."

The waitress laughed. "Smart woman. My idea of `roughing it' is a motel without room service." She winked, then went to the next booth.

John returned to the restaurant. "It's a Land Rover. Four wheel drive, overdrive." He sat down and stared at the Rover as it's driver pulled away from the pump and turned back onto the highway.

"They're expensive, but it's just what I need."

"You put a lot of time and effort into fixing up your Mustang. It'd be a shame for you to let it go." Jim sipped his coffee.

"Yeah, but it's not the kind of car to take on a camping trip." John sighed. "I've been lookin' around, but I don't want a pick-up truck and I don't want anything as big as those Suburbans. Have you seen those?"

Jim laughed. "Monsters," he agreed. *I don't like that Rover any better, but I don't have to tell Johnny that.* "Well, I've got a friend that might be able to help you out. What year's that Mustang?"

"65 and a half. I rebuilt the engine myself."

"I've got a buddy who finds cars for the folks down in Palm Beach and Miami. They tell him they want a specific car and he goes from there," Jim explained. "When you get back home, send me a picture of it and the details and I'll pass it on to my friend. He'll find a buyer, then send somebody to pick it up when he's got the cash."

John smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

I finally did something right. "Just doin' what I can to help you out." Jim shrugged. "I can't promise he'll find anybody, or how long it'll take. But Mustangs are pretty popular." He grinned. "It'll be a classic in a few more years. You sure you wanna part with it?"

John frowned. "Well . . . no . . ."

The waitress came back to the table. "Are you boys headed north or south?"

Jim turned to her. "North. Panama City."

"Well, you might wanna settle in here for a while. Radio just announced there's a big accident on 27. It's got traffic shut down in both directions." The waitress topped off Jim's coffee.

John shook his head when she motioned toward his mug. "Did the radio say what happened?"

"Smoke from a wildfire drifted across the highway. There's about 20 cars so far and they haven't finished counting." The waitress smiled at Jim. "Y'all are welcome to wait here until it clears. They're hopin' to re-open the road in about three hours."

John watched the waitress walk away. "Whoa, sounds like a bad one." He took a sip of coffee. When he put the cup on the table, he turned it around several times, then drummed his fingers on the table. He finally looked over at Jim, opened his mouth, closed it and shook his head.

Wonder what he's up to? Jim sipped his coffee, watching John as he fidgeted.

After several minutes, John stood, went to the cash register and returned with a road map. He sat across from Jim and spread the map between them on the table. "If you go back south, you can pick up 60 and go across to 19. That'll take you all the way north." He traced the route with his index finger.

"You mean we, don't you?" Jim frowned.

"Dad, this is a big accident. They can use all the help they can get." John tapped the map. "There's bound to be a volunteer fire department in Loughman or one of the town's before 60. If they haven't been called in yet, they will. You can drop me off and I'll hitch a ride with them."

"How're you plannin' to get back to Panama City?"

John shrugged. "I'll take a bus." He sat back. "They might not even want my help. But I've gotta try."

He's certainly dedicated. I'll give him that. Jim smiled. *I shouldn't have expected anything less from*

him. "They might not want our help." Jim signaled to their waitress. "Could we get the check, please?"

"Dad, I don't wanna pull you into this," John said quietly.

"You're not. It's my decision." Jim smiled. "I was a medical corpsman for four years in the Navy. The basics can't have changed that much."

John's eyes widened and he started to speak when the waitress set the check on the table. He intercepted it, then stood and pulled his wallet out of his jeans. "A corpsman. Imagine that," he muttered as he walked to the cash register.

Jim stood and followed John to the cash register.

"I didn't know you were a corpsman, Dad." John walked out of the restaurant, holding the door open for Jim.

"I was. Plus, I had to have first aid certification to keep my master's license and Coastal sent me for CPR training when I hired on." Jim unlocked the truck and climbed in.

"Where were you stationed?" John asked as he climbed into the truck.

"The NEW YORK for about a week. I spent more time in the head than sick bay." Jim chuckled. "Seasick." He turned north on 27.

John's eyes widened again. "What?"

"Basic didn't involve setting foot on a vessel. I reported to the NEW YORK and ten minutes later, I was in the head." Jim laughed. "I ended up in sick bay on the third day. When we docked, the Navy transferred me to a base hospital in the Pacific. As a corpsman, not a patient."

"How'd you work on the boats, then?"

"Well, I'd done my time in the Navy. I was discharged right after your mom and I got married. I had to do something." Jim paused, slowing the truck as traffic began to slow. "One of my buddies was running a fishing boat in the Gulf and he gave me a job." He paused again. "I was busy from the minute I set foot on the boat. The nets had to be changed, then put out and checked. Then brought up. Then gettin' the catch into the hold." He shrugged. "Guess I didn't have time to be seasick. Once I moved up to the wheelhouse, I didn't even get queasy." He looked over at John. "Do you remember the first time you went out on my boat?"

John wrinkled his nose. "Unfortunately."

Jim chuckled. "I never told you this, but I was kinda glad." He looked over at John again. "I didn't want you to follow in my footsteps."

John frowned. "What I said the other night . . . I was out of line. You did what you had to do."

Jim looked over at John. "Thanks, Son."

Up ahead of them, two patrol cars from the Florida State Troopers blocked the north and southbound lanes. A State Trooper was directing traffic off 27 onto a side road. Cars that had been ahead of them began streaming past from the opposite direction. As they neared the roadblock, John pulled his badge from his back pocket.

When Jim reached the two patrol cars, he opened his window and leaned his head out.

A second Trooper approached them from his position next to the patrol cars. "Sir, the road's closed. You'll have to turn here, turn around and head back south."

John leaned over and displayed his badge. "My name's John Gage. I'm a fireman/paramedic in Los Angeles County. This is my dad, Jim Gage. We've both got first aid training. We wanted to see if we could help."

The Trooper motioned to the northbound shoulder. "Pull over there. Lemme check with Dispatch."

Jim pulled the truck onto the shoulder and shut it off. John rolled down his window.

"Smell that?"

Jim nodded grimly. "I'll bet that accident is the least of their worries."

"Thanks for doin' this, Dad." John watched the second trooper, who sat in the passenger seat of the car in the southbound lane, calling their offer of help in on the car's radio. "I know you're not crazy about my job."

Jim took a deep breath. "It's not that, Johnny. Those scars really . . ." He trailed off, searching for the right word.

"Freaked you out," John finished for him. "I guess showing 'em off was a mistake, huh?"

The Trooper walked back to the truck before Jim could respond. "I'm gonna pull my car back. The triage area's set-up about a mile north of here. Dr. Loomis is in charge. Report to him."

"Thanks." Jim waited as the Trooper jogged up to the patrol car, got behind the wheel and backed it up, angling around the second car to clear the outside southbound lane.

Jim pulled forward and around the patrol car's nose, moving back to the inside northbound lane as soon as he was clear. A quarter mile ahead, the road widened so that the north and southbound lanes were separated by a wide median. "I can see 'em from here." He nodded his chin toward the revolving lights of several ambulances, fire trucks and police cars parked on the shoulders and median.

John leaned forward in the seat. "This is a bad one."

Ahead of them, cars and trucks of all colors, makes, models and sizes were scattered on the north and southbound lanes. On the median just ahead of them, a pick-up truck was canted atop a passenger car,

which was barely recognizable.

"Stay clear of the fire trucks and the ambulances," John warned.

Jim blinked, then nodded and pulled over to the shoulder, well behind a waiting ambulance. *Oh, God. I can't believe I'm doing this. I haven't seen anything like this in 30 years.* When he looked over, John was looking at him.

"Dad, you don't have to do this. It's gonna be pretty rough."

Jim took a deep breath. "I can do this." He smiled wanly. "But thanks."

John returned the smile, reached over and squeezed Jim's arm. "You're gonna do just fine."

They got out of the truck and walked the rest of the way to the triage area, which had been set-up on a long, clear strip of median. Attendants passed them with victims on gurneys. Jim counted four, then stopped. His attention strayed to the north and southbound lanes, where mangled vehicles were scattered along the asphalt. In some places, the wrecks were five and six deep. He knew better than to try counting them.

"That must be Loomis." John touched Jim's shoulder, then pointed toward a man in a blood-stained, soot-spattered white coat at the center of the chaos.

Jim looked up at the man, then silently followed John.

". . . transport him on the next available ambulance." Dr. Loomis sent a nurse off, then turned to John and Jim. "Are you the volunteers?"

"John and Jim Gage." John scanned the triage area.

Dr. Loomis didn't waste time with formalities. "Which one of you is the paramedic?"

"Me." John pulled his badge out.

"What about you?" Dr. Loomis looked to Jim.

"First Aid training, CPR, corpsman in the Navy."

Dr. Loomis nodded. "Good." He gestured. "This is Triage #1. We've got Triage #2 set-up down the road. You'll each work with a nurse, who'll report to me." He looked back to John. "Wish we could let you treat these people. The paramedic program in California's a wonderful thing, but we don't have authority in Florida, yet. You'll have to settle for administering first aid." He looked around. "Now, let's put you gentlemen to work."

Dr. Loomis led them through the triage area. "Carla, this is John Gage."

Carla looked up from the unconscious woman she was treating. "Nice to meet ya, John. This lady's got a fractured ulna and fractured tibia. Grab some splints."

As John knelt and grabbed the required splints, Jim followed Dr. Loomis for another ten feet, where another nurse knelt next to one of the many accident victims, this one an unconscious man on a backboard.

"Mary, this is Jim Gage."

"Great," Mary flashed a tired smile at Jim. "More volunteers." She turned her attention to Dr. Loomis. "Dr. Loomis, this man's got head trauma and possible internal injuries. B.P.'s 90/60 and dropping, pulse is 110 and thready, respiration's 28."

"Start two I.V.s, Ringers, wide open and transport him on the next available ambulance."

"Dr. Loomis!" a voice shouted.

Jim knelt. "Just point me in the right direction."

Mary smiled. "You know how to immobilize a head injury?"

"I've done it in first aid training," Jim answered honestly.

"All right, you get started on that while I set up the I.V.s." Mary leaned over to a black tackle box and pulled out two bags of solution and two needle set-ups.

Jim pulled a padded, u-shaped form from a second tackle box and carefully positioned it around the man's head. Straps secured to the backboard kept the patient's head immobilized.

"Transport!" Mary gestured to two attendants and a nurse approaching with an empty gurney.

While Jim and the attendants transferred the backboard to the gurney, Mary spoke with the nurse, advising her of the man's injuries and condition. The attendants secured the backboard, then wheeled the gurney away.

Mary whistled and waved to two fireman carrying another backboard. "Free!"

The next two hours passed in a blur for John. He'd worked major accidents before, but the triage system he was accustomed to was nothing like this one. John was used to moving from one victim to the next, with stops to treat critical injuries.

The system organized by Dr. Loomis kept him rooted to the spot as victim after victim was brought in from the accident scene. The victims who didn't require immediate transport were moved to a covered area off the center of the triage area, where they were kept comfortable and observed by a nurse and a third doctor, who'd been involved in the accident, but, thankfully, hadn't been injured.

Wonder how Dad's doin'? The thought was cut off as firemen deposited a stokes bearing a man, who was conscious and moaning in pain.

"Sir, can you tell me your name?" Carla asked as the firemen returned to the accident scene.

"George Hansen." The man moaned and squeezed his eyes shut. "You gotta do somethin' about my leg. It's killin' me."

"Don't worry, Mr. Hansen. I'm Carla and this is John. We'll take good care of you." Carla checked Hansen's pupils, took his pulse, then his blood pressure.

John had checked Hansen's left arm and leg for fractures, then checked the right arm. He could see that the right leg was fractured below the knee. He grabbed a splint and immobilized the leg.

Hansen gasped, then cried out.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Hansen." John finished securing the splint. "Now that it's done, you're gonna feel a whole lot better." He looked over at Carla. "Want me to check his abdomen?"

Carla removed her stethoscope. "Yeah, thanks." She put a hand on Hansen's shoulder. "Mr. Hansen, do you have any pain in your neck, back, or hips?"

"No, just my leg." Hansen moaned again.

"We're gonna take care of that," Carla promised. "I've gotta ask you some questions, first. Did you lose consciousness?"

"I don't know."

"Have you had any dizziness, or nausea?"

"Ah . . . yeah, my head's spinnin'."

"No tenderness or distension," John informed.

"What've you got, Carla?" Dr. Loomis practically materialized next to them.

"Fractured tibia and fibula. Possible head injury. No obvious trauma, but pupils are sluggish and he's experiencing dizziness." Carla paused. "Pulse is 120, B.P. 110/80, respiration's 25. Moderate to severe pain."

"We've got two ambulances en route from Clermont. Start an I.V., Ringers TKO and transport when they get back." Dr. Loomis was off again.

"Mr. Hansen, we're gonna get you to the hospital just as soon as we can." Carla rested a hand on Hansen's shoulder. "There're gonna take good care of you."

"I thought you were gonna give me something for the pain," Hansen argued.

"I wish I could, Mr. Hansen, but you might have a head injury. Pain medication could mask symptoms if your head injury got worse. We can't take that chance. There'll be another doctor and nurse looking after you while we wait for the ambulance to get back," Carla explained. "If the pain gets worse, you let them know." She gently squeezed the man's shoulder. "Now that your leg's splinted, you'll start to

feel a little better." She turned and pulled an I.V. set-up and bag of solution from the box.

"You're gonna feel a little stick. That's the I.V." Carla inserted the needle. Hansen took a deep breath, then slowly blew it out. "That's right, Mr. Hansen, you just relax." She attached the cannula, then the bag. "Good." She smiled down at Hansen, then put her hand on his shoulder again. "How's that leg feelin'?"

Hansen blinked. "Not so bad."

"You just keep doing those breathing exercises and you'll do fine." Carla patted Hansen's shoulder, then signaled to someone behind John.

"My wife said they didn't do squat for her," Hansen muttered.

Two men stepped over, knelt and picked up the stokes.

"Mr. Hansen's got a broken leg, so take it easy," Carla ordered. "He's got an I.V., Ringers TKO. Transport when we've got an ambulance. And ask Sheila to get new vitals and update Dr. May."

A man in a turnout coat and white helmet came over. "Are you the firefighter?"

John looked up. *Is he a Captain, or a Chief?* "Yes, sir."

"Carla, I got a man jammed his finger. The Clermont volunteers just got pulled over to the wildfire." The man looked over at John, then smiled. "Sorry, forgot my manners. Captain Ted Dunn, Loughman Volunteer Fire Department."

John nodded, "John Gage. I'm a firefighter/paramedic with the Los Angeles County Fire Department."

Captain Dunn grinned tiredly. "You're a ways from home."

"My dad and I were on our way back to Panama City."

"We 'preciate your help." Dunn turned to Carla. "Jerry Pepper jammed his finger. It's not broken, but he can't operate the Jaws. Mind if we trade?"

"Nine fingers are better than none, I guess." Carla shrugged and looked over at John. "It's up to you, John."

John stood. "Let's go." He smiled at Carla. "It was nice workin' with ya."

Carla returned the smile. "Same here, John. Good job."

"We've got spare gear over here." Captain Dunn gestured toward an unmanned Suburban on the southbound shoulder.

John started to follow Captain Dunn, then stopped. *Dad'll freak if I just disappear.* "I've gotta let my dad know what's goin' on. It'll only take a second."

"Sure." Captain Dunn stopped.

John jogged over to where Jim knelt next to a little girl, who was being examined by Mary. "Dad, I'm goin' with the captain over there to help out at the accident."

Jim looked up, then nodded. "Okay. I'll be here."

"He's not a little boy," the girl declared.

Jim looked back down at the girl. "No, Johnny's a grown man."

She's a cute little girl and he's not smiling. There's something in his voice, too. John smiled down at the girl. "Hi, I'm Johnny." The girl was strapped to a backboard and covered with a blanket. The only sign of injury he could see was a red welt on the left side of the her forehead.

"Johnny's gotta go to work, Alison. I'll make sure he stops by to talk to you later, though. Okay?"

"Okay," Alison agreed.

Jim smiled sadly at John. "Go on, Son. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, Dad. See ya later, Alison." John jogged over to Captain Dunn, then slowed and followed him toward the Suburban. As he got closer, he saw the seal on the front driver's door identifying the truck as belonging to the Loughman Volunteer Fire Department's Chief.

"We're a volunteer fire department, but the Chief's got some paperwork for you to sign. And he's probably gonna wanna swear you in. Just humor him." Captain Dunn went to the rear of the truck, opened the gate and pulled a turnout coat from the back.

John took the coat and slipped it on. The length was fine, but the coat could've fit two of him inside. *It'll have to do.* Captain Dunn handed him a yellow helmet with a Loughman Vol. Fire Dept. sticker above the brim. John put the helmet on and adjusted the chin strap. He flashed a grin at Dunn. "All right. Put me to work."

Three hours later, John was working to free a woman and her son from their car. Around him, troopers were still marking tires and points of impact, drawing diagrams and photographing the scene on the northbound lanes. Tow trucks and wreckers were standing by to clear the road when the Troopers and the rescue personnel finished their work.

The accident had been a chain reaction collision, an all too common occurrence whenever fog, smoke or other weather conditions reduce visibility. All it takes is one vehicle failing to slow with the flow of traffic to start a domino effect that extends ahead of and behind the first point of impact between vehicles.

John had heard snatches of conversations among the troopers. This accident started with a station wagon that slowed because of the decreased visibility and was clipped by a speeding tractor-trailer when its driver tried to swerve around the slower vehicle. The domino effect extended ahead of the

initial collision. Smaller fender benders occurred behind it.

John was soaked beneath the bulky turnout coat. The temperatures had been mild, but the effect of the sun and the heat still radiating from burned vehicles had served to raise the temperature on the stretch of highway into the high 80s. He would've opened the coat, but there was too much glass and jagged metal around to risk it. The victims still trapped in their cars didn't have time for him to take five minutes out of the turnout coat.

John was working at the center of the scene, where the worst damage to vehicles and human lives had been wrought. Behind him, the smoldering wreck of a semi and two passenger cars bore three red ribbons, signaling three fatalities in the vehicles. *I've never seen anything this bad. Not even when I was still working the rescue squad.* He finished cutting through the roof of the sedan, then he and another fireman, Andy, pulled on the roof to get to the woman and boy inside.

"Cap, I can't get in to her." John heard a male voice to his left and stopped, turning toward the conversation, then back to his work. Once they got the roof back, John looked across the open car at Andy. "Can you get this?"

Andy wiped sweat from his eyes, then nodded. "Yeah." He turned his head. "A.J.!"

John went to the overturned sedan, where a captain from another volunteer department was directing his crew. "What've you got, Cap?"

"Girl trapped in the sedan. We can't get in to assess her." The captain looked John up and down. "It's a pretty tight fit in there."

"Lemme see what I can do." John surveyed the car. The front passenger compartment was flattened. The rear compartment had been only slightly luckier. A pair of muscular legs trailed out from beneath the trunk.

"Rick, come on outta there," the captain ordered.

The muscular legs crabbed backwards and the man they belonged to stood once he'd cleared the car. Rick's shoulders, arms and torso were as muscular as his legs. He was also a head taller than John, who swallowed purely out of reflex. *Man, I hope this guy's in a good mood.* He glanced briefly at the carnage. *No way.*

Rick smiled tightly and looked down at John. "You probably won't have any better luck than I did," he informed. "I been tryin' to squeeze in there for the last minute."

John swallowed again, then pulled the turnout coat off and dropped it on the ground. He dropped to his knees and placed his coat over the frame of the broken rear window.

"Well, maybe he can," someone muttered as John crawled into the car.

Once he was inside the car, John pushed his helmet back, wiped his forehead, then pulled off his gloves, quickly surveying the situation. A teenaged girl with long blond hair and frightened eyes lay on the roof of the car, sobbing uncontrollably.

John smiled. "Hi, I'm John. We're gonna get you outta hear. Just relax." He quickly checked her arms and legs for fractures. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I don't know." The girl sobbed.

"Take it easy," John soothed. "You're gonna be okay. Help's here." He smiled again.

"I can't feel anything. My head hurts, but I can't feel anything."

"Okay, I'm gonna just scoot out for a second . . ."

"NO!" The girl wailed. "Please don't leave me. Please. Please. Don't leave me."

"Okay, I'm not leaving." John turned his torso as much as he could. "Rick!" He called.

"What've you got?" Rick's voice responded. All Johnny could see was a pair of large boots.

"I need a C-collar and a backboard." John paused. "We're not gonna be able to get her on the backboard in here. You think you can get under the other side to get her legs?"

"Yeah."

John turned back to the girl. "What's your name?"

"Theresa."

"Here ya go." A C-collar was handed in. The backboard was laid outside the window.

"Okay, Theresa, I'm gonna put this around your neck. It's gonna keep your neck still. Okay?"

"Okay."

John put the collar around the girl's neck, then secured it. "Now, I'm gonna have to scoot out to move you." He picked up the girl's hand. "I'm gonna hold onto your hand. I won't go any farther than that. Okay?"

Theresa sniffled. "Okay."

John crawled back out of the car and remained hunched over to position the backboard. He looked over at Rick, who was hunched beneath the trunk. John let go of Theresa's hand and leaned in to grab her shoulders. "We're gonna move you now, Theresa. You just relax and let us do the work." He looked over at Rick, who nodded once he'd gotten the girl's legs.

In unison, they lifted Theresa clear of the frame of the window, then brought her out and placed her on the backboard. Once she was secured, more hands reached in to slide the backboard out from beneath the trunk. John crawled back into the car to check the front seat.

A hand dangled just below the upside down bench seat. John swallowed as his stomach turned, then reached over to check for a pulse. When he found none, he let go of the wrist and leaned his head on

his arm for a minute. Then he scooted out of the car, grabbed his turnout and crawled out to the asphalt. Once he was able to stand up, he took several deep breaths and wiped sweat from his eyes.

"Another victim?" Rick asked.

"He's Code F," John said it automatically, then sighed. He shook his head grimly, not wanting to upset Theresa, who was still near the car. *She's upset enough, already.*

The captain came over. "How long've you been out here?"

John looked at his watch. "Three hours, I think." He put the turnout coat back on, but left it open.

"Go back in with the girl. Get yourself somethin' to eat and drink and then come back here." The captain patted John's shoulder, then moved on.

Rick held out a hand. "Good job in there."

John nodded and shook hands. "Thanks." He walked over to the backboard and knelt.

Theresa looked up at him. "I want you to go in with me," she sobbed.

John managed a smile. "You thought I was leavin' ya?" He winked. "You ready?"

Theresa tried to nod.

John and another fireman lifted the backboard and started the walk to the triage area.

John stayed with Theresa, helping to get her ready for transport to the hospital. As the backboard was placed on the gurney, Theresa again became agitated, begging John to go with her to the hospital. John was torn between leaving the accident scene to stay with the frightened girl, and staying at the scene, even though it meant turning Theresa over to strangers. The nurse assigned to Theresa's ambulance saved John from making the difficult choice. With a few quiet words, she established a rapport with the girl and calmed her.

John followed the gurney to the ambulance, then watched it pull away, heading north along the shoulder. He mopped his forehead and face with his gloves, then looked up at the sky. *What've I gotten us into?* He trudged back to the triage area. A lunch truck had been called in, providing the rescue personnel with food and drink. *They'll be lucky to reopen the highway in eight hours.*

The lunch truck was unattended when John reached it. Several bottled drinks were iced down in a large tub on the ground behind the truck. He grabbed the first bottle his hand touched, then scooped up a handful of ice, which he held against the back of his neck. The ice melted, dribbling down the back of his shirt.

John walked around to the front of the truck and found a small patch of shade on the grass. A breeze stirred the still air and John pulled off the turnout coat, spread it out on the ground, then sat down, leaning against the truck's bumper.

John opened the juice and drank greedily, instantly regretting his haste when the acidic juice reached his stomach. His stomach cramped and he swallowed several times. When his stomach settled down, he sipped at his juice.

"Mind if I share your shade?" Jim stood above him, carrying two bottles of water and a sandwich.

"Dad." John moved over, making room on the turnout coat.

Jim sat down and held a bottle of water out to his son. "How's it goin' out there?"

John opened the bottle and sipped. *This water's easier on my stomach than orange juice.* His eyes felt gritty and he blinked several times.

"Johnny?"

John looked up at his father. "Oh, sorry." *What did he just ask me? Oh, yeah, how it's goin' at the accident scene.* He looked down at the water bottle, then the lid in his left hand. "Pretty slow. I don't think . . . that is . . . it'll probably slow down here. I don't think there'll be too many more victims still alive."

Jim's eyes suddenly widened. "Johnny, you're beet red!"

John smiled weakly. "It's the turnout coat. It's hotter than the devil in there."

"Come on, let one of the nurses take a look at you."

John gave him a weak half-grin. "I feel fine, Dad."

Jim put the back of his hand against John's forehead. "You're burning up."

John leaned his head back and poured the remaining water over his face and head. He leaned forward, shook the excess water from his hair, then wiped his eyes. "There, that's all I needed." He leaned back against the truck and looked over at Jim. "Hey, how's that little girl? Alison?"

Jim's eyes misted. "She . . . didn't make it."

"Man, Dad, I'm sorry. Do you wanna talk about it?"

Jim shook his head. "Not right now."

John reached over and put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "When you do . . ." He squeezed gently, then dropped his hand. *Now what do we talk about?*

Jim picked at invisible lint on his pants for a minute, then looked over at his son. "Are you sure you're okay to keep workin' out there?"

John waved his hand. "I'm used to it, Dad." He fiddled with the bottle lid, then looked over toward the northern end of the triage area. "Any word on the wildfire?" He turned back to Jim.

Jim shook his head. "Not that I've heard. I can still smell it."

"Yeah." John pointed toward a column of gray smoke in the sky to the northwest. "It's not out, yet."

Rick and the captain walked toward the lunch truck. For the first time, John noticed their helmets, which identified both men as members of the Lake County Fire Department. *Guess I should'a cleared my break with Captain Dunn.* They stopped one of the other men from the Loughman crew. After a few minutes the man pointed toward John, then nodded and walked away.

John slowly stood. "I'll be right back, Dad."

Jim, who'd finished his sandwich, nodded, then sipped from his bottle of water.

Wonder what's up? John met Rick and the captain half-way.

"Is there a problem, Cap?"

"Gage, right? I'm Elmer Pepper. This is Rick Revel." He paused and lifted his helmet to mop his forehead. "I get so used to knowin' everybody in the county, I forget my manners."

John shook Pepper's hand, then Rick's. "Guess I should'a cleared this break with Captain Dunn."

"I saw him at the scene and let him know I'd sent you in." Pepper paused. "We're puttin' together a crew to evacuate Lake Louisa State Park. The wildfire's jumped the highway and headed into the northeast corner. We've got a crew trying to contain it, but they're spread too thin already to handle search and evacuation."

John nodded. "Anything I can do."

Pepper smiled. "I cleared it with Captain Dunn. We're takin' one or two men from the remaining crews workin' the accident. Try to keep from spreadin' ourselves too thin."

"I left my turnout by the lunch truck. Lemme get it and I'm ready to go." John turned and jogged back to the front of the truck. "Dad, the fire's moved into a state park. I'm goin' over to help evacuate."

Jim blinked several times, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose.

"Dad?" John knelt and put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "Look, if you need to get out of here, I understand. The road's still closed, but you can go to a motel, shower and change clothes and . . . well, just not do this any more." He pulled his wallet from his back pocket. "There's cash and a credit card in there. Take whatever you need."

Jim pushed the wallet away. "And leave you here?"

John smiled. "There're half a dozen hotels right before that truck stop. Go to one of those." He paused. "I'll find you."

"I'm okay, Johnny. Like you said, it's gonna slow down anyway."

John put the wallet back in his rear pocket, then pulled it out. "On second thought, maybe you ought'a hang onto this for me." When Jim pushed it away again, he grinned. "So I don't lose it in the park." He winked. "Like my letter jacket."

Jim managed a weak smile. "If I go, I'll tell Mary. She'll move to the wildfire first aid station when she's released here." He took the wallet and put it in his left back pocket, which was empty.

"More competition for Peggy?" John grinned.

"No, but she's only a couple years older than you." Jim winked. "Maybe that's what you need in a girl."

John laughed. "I've gotta go, Dad." He laughed again. "And I need that turnout coat you're sittin' on."

Jim chuckled quietly, then stood. John picked up the coat and pulled it on, leaving the clasps open.

John turned to leave, then turned back. "Are you sure you don't need to talk?" He gestured toward Rick and Pepper. "I can tell 'em no."

Jim waved. "You go on. I'm okay."

"Take it easy, Dad. And leave if you need to." John turned and walked toward Rick and Pepper.

"Be careful!" Jim called after him.

John turned briefly, saluted, then turned and jogged off. *First aid supplies.* "Do we have a minute to scrounge up some first aid supplies, Cap?"

"You wanna carry a kit?" Pepper returned.

"Just some basics." John pointed to the turnout coat. "You'd be surprised what you can get in these coats. We might run into minor injuries while we're evacuating people."

Pepper nodded. "Good thinkin'."

A truck transported five of the firemen to the park. Two searchers were dropped at the northwest and southwest corners. John and Rick were assigned to the southeast corner, which had more trails and a campground. The truck would then enter the park and wait in the center to transport the firemen and any campers or hikers evacuated out of the park.

Ten minutes into their search, they hadn't encountered any civilians. When they reached a fork in the trail, they split up. Each carried a radio to maintain contact with the other searchers and the fifth fireman.

John barely noticed the foliage lining the trail. His goal was to find any hikers or campers and get them to the truck at the center of the park before the fire spread. He was still alone when the trail reached a medium-sized pond filled with brown water, then continued around the side of the pond

before disappearing into the trees.

The radio in John's pocket crackled and he pulled it out, listening as each of the searchers checked in with the fireman waiting at the truck.

"Lake County 4, what's your status?"

John lifted the radio and keyed the mic to respond when a loud hiss sounded behind him. He turned toward the source of the sound, a large and angry-looking alligator less than three feet away from his feet.

"Ahhh!" John exclaimed, back-pedaling to get away from the reptile. He lost his balance and started to fall. The radio banged into a tree and flew out of his hand. He quickly grabbed hold of the tree to stop his fall.

"Lake County 1 to Lake County 4, come in."

The alligator hissed at the radio, which had landed on the trail in front of it. Then it turned its lifeless eyes on John.

Don't turn your back and run. That'll just make it chase ya. Or is that just cougars? John's heart raced as the alligator stared at him, it's jaws open and displaying nasty looking, sharp teeth. What do I know about gators? I grew up near a swamp, so I should know plenty. John frowned, searching his memory. An alligator can outrun a man in the first 30 feet. It's about 4 feet away, so I've only gotta keep ahead of it for 26 feet. I can do that. John frowned. I'd have to turn my back on it, though. I don't like that idea.

His ears started ringing as adrenaline threatened to overload his system. John reached a shaking hand beneath the turnout coat and pulled out his knife. *An alligator turned upside down goes unconscious when all the blood rushes to its brain. Then I can stab it and kill it. John frowned and put the knife away. Nope, I don't wanna get that close. Not if I can help it, anyway.*

The gator hissed again and took two steps forward. John took four steps back.

An alligator can't climb a tree. John looked up at the tree next to him. It was tall and sturdy. But snakes can. Some species of snakes live in trees. John turned his attention back to the alligator. I stay on the ground and the gator eats me. I climb the tree, a snake slithers up to me and I fall out. And the gator gets me anyway. Nope, I do not like these choices.

"Hey, Mr. Gator, you don't wanna eat me. I'm skinny and tough. Like Chet Kelly's fried chicken." John laughed nervously. "Oh, yeah, you don't know Chet Kelly. Well, he makes terrible fried chicken." Another nervous laugh. "He's got a lot of meat on him, though." *I can't believe I just said that! I can't believe I'm talkin' to a gator.*

The fire! "Hey, Mr. Gator, there's a fire comin' this way. You'd better get back in your pond before you get roasted." His stomach gurgled at the suggestion of food. *Man, I'm hungry. I didn't eat.* "I've heard you'd taste like chicken." He smiled. "I've never had gator meat, but that's what I've heard."

The gator hissed again.

"I'm not jerkin' you around about that fire." John opened the turnout coat. "That's why I'm wearin' this damn coat and roastin' myself." He opened the coat. "See? It makes me look bigger than I am."

"Lake County 5 to Lake County 4, come in." A pause. "Johnny, you all right?"

That's Rick. He's a big guy. He could wrestle this gator and kill it. Wish he was here.

The gator moved forward again and took an experimental bite on the radio.

"Hey! Don't do that! I need that radio!" John took a step forward and the gator hissed at him. "It's a radio! You can't eat it!" *Better it than you, Johnny.* John stepped back.

The gator grabbed the radio in its jaws, then headed for the pond.

If I wasn't so scared, the way that gator runs would be kinda funny. The gator reached the pond and slipped under the water.

"I hope you choke on it!" John shouted toward the pond.

The gator's eyes and nostrils surfaced.

Run, now! John turned and sprinted down the trail, crashing into the trees beyond the pond. After only a few steps along the trail back into the woods, he stumbled and fell flat on his face. *Man, that was too close.* He turned himself over and stared up at the gray sky beyond the treetops.

What if there's another gator around? John sat up quickly and pulled himself to his feet. He checked the trail and the brush around him for more reptiles, then leaned with his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. He pushed his helmet back and wiped sweat from his brow. *Man, it's hot! Wish I could take this damn coat off.*

His ears were still ringing as he made his way along the trail. John tried to ignore it by concentrating on the task at hand. An eighth of a mile into the woods, he thought he heard crying. He froze, looking around for any sign of a human in the park.

"Fire Department!" John stood, waiting for a voice to answer.

"Somebody! Anybody! Help me!"

Sounds like a kid. "Can you tell me where you are?"

"I don't know! Please! Help!"

John pinpointed the voice, moving off the trail and into the trees. The sobs grew louder and closer. He finally saw the child, a little girl with dark hair sitting against a tree and holding her left leg.

"Hey." John smiled as he approached the little girl. "My name's Johnny Gage. I'm with the Fire

Department. What's your name?" He knelt in front of her.

The girl looked up at him, her blue eyes filled with tears. She sniffled, then said something John didn't quite catch.

John smiled. "Erin. My friend Roy has a little girl named Erin. She's probably a little bit older than you. How old are you, Erin?"

"My name's not Erin," the little girl said indignantly. She sniffled again. "I said Lauren!"

John grinned. "Ooops, sorry. Guess it's time to have my ears cleaned out, huh?"

Lauren frowned. "I hate it when the doctor does that."

John looked around. "Where're your mom and dad, Lauren?"

Lauren started sobbing again. "I don't know. I followed a bunny and now I can't find them."

"Well, that's okay, Lauren. We'll find 'em." John pointed at Lauren's leg. "Did you hurt your leg?"

Lauren sniffled, then nodded. "I fell."

John quickly checked Lauren's right leg, then her left. The ankle was swollen, but he didn't feel any broken bones. "Looks like you just sprained your ankle." He pulled a roll of gauze out of his pocket, picked up a branch and broke it in half. "I'm gonna wrap this around your leg. Then we're gonna go back to the trail and look for your mom and dad. Okay?"

Lauren nodded, watching as John wrapped her ankle.

"Did you hit your head when you fell, Lauren?"

"Unh-uh."

John finished wrapping the gauze around the branches, tied it off, then sat back. "Do you hurt anywhere else?"

Lauren held out the palms of her hands. "I scraped them."

John put the remaining gauze away, then pulled disinfectant from another pocket. "I'll clean those up. It's gonna sting."

Lauren rolled her eyes. "I know. It does even when my mommy does it."

John chuckled. "That means it's killin' all the nasty germs." He pulled a gauze pad from its pack, then poured disinfectant on it. He cleaned the scrapes, waving the gauze over them after wiping them. When he was done, he put the pad and bottle back in his pocket. "Ready for a horseback ride?"

Lauren giggled. "It's a piggyback ride," she corrected.

John grinned. "I think I look more like a horse." He winked, then turned and lifted the girl to his back. Lauren's arms came around his neck. "Ah, you've done this before."

Lauren giggled.

John stood. "Ready?" He felt Lauren's nod and started walking back toward the trail.

The last ambulance with the last survivor of the accident pulled away from Triage #1, headed north to Clermont. Once the medical personnel were released by Dr. Loomis, Jim helped the nurses and other volunteers clear the median of equipment and supplies.

Jim dropped off two of the tackle boxes, then checked his watch. John had been gone nearly an hour. Jim was free to leave with the other volunteers, but the thought of leaving for a motel didn't feel right. *Not until John gets back, safe and sound.* He looked around and saw Mary, who was checking off returns at one of the other trucks. "Could you use another pair of hands at the first aid station?"

Mary looked up and smiled. "Every pair helps, but are you sure you wanna do that? You've put in more than a day's work here."

"Johnny's not back from the park." Jim shrugged. "I can't leave without him."

Mary nodded. "We'll be headed out in a few minutes."

Jim looked around the median, then turned back to Mary, who'd finished checking the truck. "Any word on the evacuation?"

Mary shook her head. "Not down here." She smiled. "I'm sure they know more at the first aid station." She set the clipboard inside, then closed the doors. "Do you wanna ride with me?"

Jim gestured toward the south. "I've got my truck. Where's the first aid station?"

"Okay, go north on 27. About three miles up you'll see a gravel road on the right. Turn there and follow it in. There's a clearing about a quarter mile up. Everything's set-up, so just report to Dr. Steiner when you get there." Mary winked. "If he gives you any grief, tell him I sent ya."

Jim nodded. "Thanks, Mary."

Forty minutes later, the trail John was following wound its way into a clearing that served as one of the park's campgrounds. His legs were tired, his shoulders, back and neck ached and the turnout coat threatened to suffocate him. He trudged toward the nearest picnic table and turned to gently set Lauren down to sit on the table.

"I've . . . gotta . . . stop," John huffed as he pulled off the turnout coat and helmet. He was beyond feeling any change in the temperature with or without the coat. He dropped down to the bench and leaned his arms on his thighs in an effort to catch his breath.

When his breathing slowed, John sat up. He looked over at Lauren. "Does this look . . . like where you were . . . camping?"

Lauren looked around. "I don't think so. It was bigger."

John took a deep breath and slowly let it out. *We need water.* He looked around and spotted a spigot sticking up from the ground on the other side of the clearing. He looked back at Lauren. "Are you thirsty?"

"A little." Lauren nodded.

John stood and immediately fell back to the bench as a wave of dizziness made the world around him spin. His vision grayed out for a second, then cleared. His ears continued to ring and the world continued to spin. He somehow managed to get his head between his knees and waited for the dizziness to pass. *This can't happen now. I've gotta get Lauren outta here.*

When he lifted his head again, Lauren was sitting next to him with her hand on his arm. John smiled at her. "How'd you get . . . down there?"

"I climbed. But I was careful." Lauren tilted her head. "Are you sick, Johnny?"

"Just thirsty." Still smiling, John stood, slowly this time. He picked Lauren up. "Let's get some water." He went to the spigot, carefully knelt and held the little girl on his lap. *Please, let there be water.* After turning the tap on, he let it run for a minute before smelling and tasting the water to be sure it was drinkable.

"I'm gonna . . . lean you over," John began. *Gotta catch my breath.* "Cup your hands and . . . get a drink."

"I can't." Lauren pouted.

John smiled. "Sure you can." He reached around and demonstrated. "Like this."

Lauren gave him a dubious look, then put her hands together.

"See, you can." John leaned Lauren over. He frowned when she rubbed her hands in the water.

"Gotta wash my hands." Lauren cupped her palms beneath the running water.

John managed a weak chuckle, then placed his hand beneath hers. Lauren took several drinks, then stopped.

"I'm gonna . . . put you down for . . . second." John set the girl down, then bent and put his head under the running water. After a minute, he sat back and shook his head, then wiped his eyes. He filled his palms and drank several times, then turned the spigot off.

"I smell smoke." Lauren wrinkled her nose.

John picked her up, then stood slowly and carried her back to the picnic table. *It's bad enough being separated from her parents. I didn't wanna tell her there was a fire, too.* "There's a fire." He set her on the picnic table, then put on his turnout coat and helmet. "But we're gonna . . . find your mom and dad . . . and get outta here." He lifted the girl to his back. "You don't worry. 'Kay?"

"Kay."

John crossed the clearing and picked up the trail again. *We've gotta be close to the pick-up by now.* The smoke seemed to be growing thicker with each step.

"What's that noise, Johnny?"

John couldn't hear much over the ringing in his ears. He stopped, trying to distinguish between the ringing in his ears and whatever sound Lauren heard. His eyes soon provided the answer his ears couldn't. The flames were ahead of them, devouring the trees on both sides of the trail. As he watched, two trees only a few yards away burst into flames.

"Fire!" Lauren shouted, then whimpered.

"We're gonna be okay." John turned and headed back to the clearing at the fastest pace he could muster. He set Lauren down next to the spigot, turned it on and quickly shed his turnout coat. He pulled his shirt from his jeans, then used his knife to cut off two large pieces. He wet the first one and tied it around Lauren's nose and mouth. "We can't get low . . . so you're gonna breathe . . . through that."

Lauren nodded and fingered the wet material.

John wet the second swatch and tied it around his nose and mouth. *We're damn lucky this worked.* When he was done, he picked Lauren up. The trail had wound so many times, he wasn't sure what direction they'd been headed in. He looked around, finally finding the sun, which was setting in the western sky beyond the woods bordering the clearing. *The highway's west.* Their only hope was to reach the highway before the fire caught up to them.

The wildfire first aid station hadn't yet been as busy as the triage area. In the hour Jim had been there, the injuries had all, thankfully, been minor ones. A fireman with smoke in his eyes had just been brought in and Jim was rinsing his eyes.

"Any word from the search party?" Jim tried to keep his voice neutral and failed.

"Last I heard, one of the guys wasn't responding on his radio."

Jim finished rinsing the man's left eye, then switched sides and started on the right. "Do they know who?"

"Don't think so." The man reached for his left eye.

Jim intercepted the man's hand. "Don't wipe at it," he said gently. "You still feel like you've got stuff

in there?"

"Yeah."

Jim finished the right eye and moved back. "How's that?" he asked after a minute.

"Yeah, better."

Jim shut off the saline, then helped the fireman sit up. The man blinked several times as Jim helped him stand and escorted him over to a chair. "Dr. Steiner's gonna have a look at you."

"Yeah, thanks, man."

Jim heard a truck on the gravel outside and left the shelter of the first aid station. He immediately recognized Rick, who was first off the truck. *Thank God, Johnny's back.* Jim met the truck as the burly firefighter helped several campers and hikers down. Jim directed the people toward the first aid tent, anxiously searching the faces for his son's.

"I. WANT. LAUREN. WHERE'S LAUREN?" A small boy clutched his mother's hand and sobbed as she led him away.

He can't be more than 3 or 4. For a second, Jim saw John at that age, being led away by Betty the day they moved to Big Cypress. Jim blinked and looked back to the truck.

The last fireman jumped down from the truck and a knot formed in Jim's stomach. *Johnny's missing.* Pepper appeared and joined Rick and the other firemen.

"Cap, we've got a little girl and a man missing," Rick informed. "We got everybody to the truck, then the fire moved in and we had to get out."

Jim joined the captain and firemen.

"The pumper's filling the deluge truck right now. Take it in on the south side . . ."

"I'm going with 'em." Jim cut into the conversation.

Pepper turned. "We've got it covered." He turned back to the firemen.

Jim turned the captain around and stared down at the slightly shorter man. "Maybe you didn't hear me the first time. I'M. GOING. WITH. THEM."

"Look, Mister . . ."

"Gage. It's my son your men left in that park."

"Now, you look . . ." Rick took a step toward Jim.

"Linda, you stay with the boys." A dark haired man stepped over. "I'm going, too. We've gotta find my little girl."

Pepper stepped in. "We're sending men back into the park. They'll find 'em." He looked from the man to Jim. "Y'all just sit tight and soon's we know somethin', you'll know."

"Your men're gonna be busy with the fire," Jim argued.

"Mr. Gage, I'm tryin' to be nice 'cause I know you're worried about your boy." Pepper's eyes narrowed. "But you try to set one foot on my truck and I'll have the Sheriff sit on you." He turned to Rick. "That pumper ought'a be done."

Jim watched Pepper and the firemen walk down the gravel road. He turned to the man. "That went real well," he said dryly.

The man shrugged, put his hands in his pockets and walked over to the two boys. Logan was kneeling, talking quietly to his distraught brother.

"I want Lauren! I want Lauren!" The little boy wailed as his father picked him up.

"We have to go back. I can't believe this is happening. CJ, why won't they let you go with them? She's just a little girl!" Linda couldn't stop the tears.

C.J. let loose a string of expletives, then turned to his wife. "What the hell was she doing wandering away in the first place? I didn't want to come here. I knew something like this would happen!"

Before Linda could respond, C.J. handed the crying child to her, then walked away.

Jim looked down at her, then put a hand on her shoulder. "My son's probably with her. He'll get her out."

"What if he isn't? What if she's hurt?"

"Mommy, where's Lauren? I want Lauren!"

"Landon, please stop crying. Please." Jim could hear the desperation in the woman's voice. *I wish I could help her.* He looked at the red-faced child. *Poor kid.* Jim turned, put his head down and went back into to the first aid station.

Night fell as John moved along the uncleared forest floor toward what he believed would be the highway bordering the park. He wasn't sure whether it had been minutes, or hours since the fire cut them off. Lauren remained quiet, whimpering only occasionally when the crash of trees felled by the fire sounded behind them. He didn't miss the turnout coat until branches and brambles scratched his arms and face.

They'd managed to elude the fire and escape the smoke, although John wasn't sure how. *We're not moving that fast. Walking faster would hurt my head worse than it does already.*

"Lauren? You . . . okay?"

"M sleepy."

"Almost there. Gotta . . . keep me . . . awake."

"Kay."

John saw a white light beyond the trees and concentrated on it, moving doggedly toward it. He never questioned that it would lead them out of the park. He just knew it would.

The light seemed to get closer, then to move away. John gritted his teeth against his aching muscles and exhaustion and kept trudging toward the light. His determination paid off when he spotted a break in the trees. It, too, seemed to move away just as he reached it. *Eyes're playing tricks on me.* John blinked several times and the clear space stopped moving away.

John stepped out of the trees and immediately stopped, checking the grass with his foot before setting Lauren down. He knelt in front of the girl and held her up as she tried to curl up on the grass.

"Lauren . . . wake . . . up." John gently patted Lauren's cheek.

"Wha?"

"Stay awake . . . for me . . . hun," John panted.

"M tired."

"I know . . . you are." John brushed the child's matted hair back. "We're . . . almost there." He took off the helmet and set it on the grass, then stood, wincing at the pain in his back and thighs. When the pain backed off to a nagging ache, he turned to walk the eight feet across the grass to the highway.

John didn't see the grass slope down into a ditch with six inches of brackish water sitting in it. His right foot slipped and he slid down the slope, not stopping until his feet hit bottom. Pain lanced up his shins, through his knees and thighs, then settled in his hips. For several minutes, he lay there, panting and staring up at the stars circling the white light he'd seen from the woods.

So close. John closed his eyes, ready to let exhaustion pull him under.

"Johnny?" Lauren's voice brought him back.

Lauren's parents are probably worried about her. John opened his eyes and blinked. Lauren was sitting next to him. *I didn't leave her there, did I?*

John looked back up at the sky for a second. The stars had stopped moving, but they'd turned yellow. *My dad's probably worried, too. I can't die doing this. Then he'd be right. It's too important.* John slowly pulled himself up. "M okay. Jus' . . . resting." He stood in the water, picked Lauren up and moved her across to the opposite side of the ditch, then slowly and painfully pulled himself up the side and out of the ditch.

John picked Lauren up, holding her in his arms to give his back and legs a rest. He turned south,

forcing one foot in front of the other. *No traffic. Highway must still be closed.* A pair of headlights and flashing red lights appeared and disappeared ahead of them. He thought he was hallucinating until he saw a second pair of headlights and flashing lights turn before disappearing.

"Al . . . most . . . there," John panted to the now unconscious child.

Ten feet felt like ten miles. John stopped and looked around, sure that he'd passed the opening in the trees he thought he'd seen the vehicles disappear into. He trudged on, stumbling when the surface beneath his feet changed. *Gravel?* The trees opened up and the gravel disappeared away from the highway. *What's back there?*

The two boys sat on the open tailgate of Jim's truck while Jim went through a few simple magic tricks. He didn't have all his props, but he'd been able to make flowers and animals from paper torn from a notebook he'd found under the truck's seat and knot several scraps from the rag bag he kept in the truck's equipment bin. Those and his spare change had been enough to take the boys' minds off their missing sister.

Landon, the younger boy had watched the tricks with wide eyes and open mouth, finally laughing when Jim pulled a quarter out of his ear. *The same way Johnny used to watch me do these tricks.*

Jim pulled the last rag from his sleeve, wadded the knotted string up in his left hand, tapped his knuckles and opened both hands, which were empty.

"Cool!" Logan, the older boy, was wide-eyed, too. "How'd you do that?"

Jim chuckled. "A magician never reveals his secrets."

Logan folded his hands. "Awww, please? Just that one. I won't ask you to show me any of the others." He smiled shyly. "That one's the coolest."

Jim narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin. "Gee, I don't know . . ." He heard footsteps on the gravel behind him.

"OH MY GOD! LAUREN!" Linda ran from the front of the truck where she'd been watching the show.

Jim turned and his eyes widened as he saw John stumbling toward them from the road.

Linda was trying to wrestle Lauren away when Jim reached his son. "I'm her mother!"

Jim put a hand on John's shoulder. "It's okay, Son. You can let her go, now."

John looked over at Jim and blinked several times. "You're . . . still . . . here?"

Linda took Lauren from John. "Lauren? Lauren, it's Mommy. Open your eyes." Her voice rose. "Lauren, open your eyes."

Mary and one of the doctors appeared.

"Smoke . . . heat . . ." John stopped.

The doctor turned to John. "How long has she been unconscious?"

John closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Let's get her into the first aid station." The doctor tried to take the unconscious child from her mother, then settled for leading Linda toward the shelter.

Jim took John's arm and tried to follow them. John resisted.

"Let the doctor look at you, Son," Jim coaxed.

John shook his head again. "M all . . . right . . ." He pulled his arm away and stumbled over to Jim's truck. He reached the tailgate, then suddenly doubled over.

"Johnny?" Jim followed, stopping as he heard the unmistakable sound of vomiting. When it stopped, he steadied John, who swayed as he straightened. "Johnny, please. Let the doctor look at you."

John feebly tried to push his father away. "M all . . . right," he insisted weakly. "You've . . . got . . . work . . ."

"That's not important." Jim continued to steady John. "It'll only take a few minutes."

John looked at Jim and the shadow of a smile crossed his haggard face.

Jim closed the tailgate. "At least sit down and let me get you some water." He could feel the muscles in John's arm quivering.

John nodded weakly, flailing with his free arm for a solid surface.

Jim guided John to sit on the back bumper of the truck. "I'll be right back. Just stay put."

When Jim returned to the truck, John was leaning forward, absently rubbing at his chest with one hand. Jim set the bottles of water on the bumper and knelt in front of John.

"Son? What's wrong?"

John shook his head. "Can't . . . catch . . . my . . . breath."

"You ready to let the doctor look at you?" Jim stood and helped John up from the bumper. "Let's just take it slow and easy, Son." He put his son's left arm over his shoulders, then got hold of John's belt. *Dear God. He's burning up.*

John groaned, causing Jim to rethink the wisdom of walking to the first aid shelter. *Was it that far to the truck? It didn't seem like it when I got here.* "Just a little further, Son."

They were half-way to the shelter when John stopped. Jim looked over at John just as his knees buckled and eyes slid shut. Jim almost went down with him.

"Johnny!" Jim's lower back protested as he awkwardly lowered John to the ground. "I've got a man down out here!"

John groaned again and moved his head from side to side.

"Try and open your eyes for me, Johnny." Jim put a hand on John's forehead to keep his head still. "C'mon, Son. Open your eyes."

The brown eyes fluttered, then slowly pulled open.

"What've you got, Jim?" Mary knelt next to him.

"He was having trouble catching his breath." Jim moved aside. "And he's burning up."

Two fireman appeared with a Stokes and set it down. They lifted John and laid him in the stretcher, then Jim and the two men lifted it and trotted it the remaining distance to the shelter. Dr. Steiner met them.

"Difficulty breathing and fever," Mary informed as the stretcher was set down on a tarp.

"Let's get him on O₂." Dr. Steiner ordered.

"I've got it." Jim grabbed a tank and set it behind John's head. He uncoiled the hose, then knelt and placed the mask over John's nose and mouth, twisting the knob to set the flow.

John twisted his head and weakly batted at his father's hands.

"It's okay, Son." Jim stroked the dark, matted hair with his left hand, holding the mask in place with his right. "You're gonna be okay. These people're gonna take care of you." He continued repeating the comforting words as Mary got John's vitals and Dr. Steiner checked his pupils.

"B.P.'s 120/80, pulse 120, respiration's 30," Mary informed. "Temp's 103.8."

"Start an I.V. Let's give him a liter of Lactated Ringers and start cooling him off. Then transport him." Dr. Steiner turned and went to the rear of the shelter.

"Somebody get some ice from that truck!" Mary called out, removing the I.V. set-ups from the kit.

I'll bet he still hates needles. "You're gonna be okay, Son. Just stay with me."

"Little stick, John." Mary got the I.V. started, then looked around. "Where the hell's the gurney?" She taped the needle in place, then opened a bottle of saline solution and poured it over John's clothes. When the ice arrived, she packed several handfuls under each of John's arms.

He didn't flinch through any of that. I don't know whether that's good or bad. Jim heard wheels squeak

and looked up as a gurney was wheeled over.

Jim steadied the oxygen mask as the attendants and Mary transferred John to the gurney. One of the attendants raised the gurney and Jim jogged alongside as they rolled it to the ambulance. The same attendant pushed the gurney into the ambulance, retracting the casters. He climbed in behind the gurney and took the jump seat at the back.

Jim's foot was on the step when someone pulled him back.

"We're taking him to Clermont General, sir. You can meet us there," the second attendant informed.

"He's all right, Ed." Mary climbed into the ambulance, then patted the bench seat next to her.

Jim stepped into the ambulance and the doors closed as he sat next to Mary. "Is he gonna be okay?"

Mary deflated the pressure cuff that was still wrapped around John's left arm. She pulled the stethoscope out of her ears. "He's gonna be just fine." She smiled, then leaned forward as the ambulance moved.

The blare of the siren was the only sound Jim could hear as the ambulance rocketed toward the hospital. *Wherever the hell that is.* Jim shook his head. *Mary's good. She'll pull Johnny through this.*

John moved his head and a muffled groan sounded beneath the oxygen mask. In the next second, his arms began pulling at the straps holding them down.

"Just lie still, sir. You're on your way to the hospital," the attendant informed, raising his voice to compete with the siren and the rattle of the ambulance.

John's attempts became more frenzied.

Jim leaned forward and put his right hand on John's forearm. "Can you open your eyes, Johnny?"

John blinked several times, but his gaze remained unfocused. The brown eyes tracked around the ambulance several times, never settling in one place.

"Look at me, Johnny. Look at Dad."

Slowly, John's gaze settled on Jim.

Jim smiled. "That's it. You're gonna be okay." He gently squeezed John's arm. "I'm right here with you, Son. I won't leave you." He smiled again. "You don't leave me, either. You hear?"

John blinked, then his eyes closed. The corners of Jim's mouth turned up in a worried smile as John's hand groped to the side of the stretcher until it finally found his and held on tightly.

Jim paced across the waiting room, stopping to flip through the outdated magazines on the single table. *Haven't gotten any new ones in the last hour.* He crossed the waiting room, stopping in front of

the bulletin board behind the empty information desk. He stared at the board without seeing the For Sale and For Rent notices tacked to it. His gaze finally settled on a closed door at the center of the hall. He looked at his watch, blinking as the numbers on the face wavered. *It's been long enough. Why hasn't somebody come out with some news?* He turned back to the bulletin board. *Wonder if it's like a watched pot?*

"Excuse me, Mr. Gage."

Jim turned to find Linda standing behind him. "Linda." He blinked in surprise. "Is your little girl okay?"

Linda nodded. "They're keeping her overnight for observation." She motioned down the hall. "She's on her way upstairs." She paused and rolled her eyes. "They won't let me go up until she's settled."

Jim nodded. "That's good. I'm glad to hear she's okay."

"I was afraid I wouldn't get the chance to thank you. For helping me with the boys." Linda smiled nervously. "How's your son? I saw them bringing him into the shelter when we were leaving with Lauren."

"I don't know." Jim stopped, trying to control his voice. "They haven't told me anything."

"He'll be all right." Linda smiled again. "You were right. Your son was with Lauren and he got her out of danger." She reached out and gently squeezed his arm. "Thanks for that, too. And thank your son for me." Her voice broke. "Without him, my little girl might . . ."

Jim reached out and squeezed Linda's shoulder. "That didn't happen." he said quietly.

Linda nodded and swiped at her eyes. "Lauren's on the pediatric floor. Let me know how your son is."

"I will," Jim promised.

"Thanks, again. For everything." Linda turned and disappeared into the Ladies' Room at the back of the waiting area.

Jim crossed to the magazine table and wearily lowered himself to one of the chairs. He'd thought his 26 years as a fisherman on the Gulf of Mexico had taught him patience. He would've expected to be able to sit and wait for word about John as patiently as he'd waited for the nets to fill or the catch to be transferred and weighed. Just as he'd waited for John to come back tonight.

Keeping busy's the secret. And there's nothing to do here but wait. Jim reached over to the table, picked up the first magazine on the pile and began flipping through it. As he finished a sentence, his eyes were drawn to the treatment room door down the hall.

This is probably the reason Johnny doesn't call us. He tossed the magazine back onto the table, where it slid off, taking several others with it to the floor. Jim bent over to pick them up, wincing as he felt a muscle in his lower back pull.

"Jim."

Jim shot up, forgetting the twinge. "Mary." He stood, waiting for Mary to sit, then sitting in the chair next to her.

"The doctor'll be out in a minute. But John's gonna be okay." Mary smiled.

"When can I see him?"

"We're still working on getting his temperature down. But once you've talked to the doctor, you'll probably be able to go in for a minute or two." Mary squeezed his arm, then stood. "Just take it easy until then." She winked, then went back to the treatment room.

Jim watched the door swing shut, then reached back and massaged the sore muscles in his lower back. *Thank God. Johnny's gonna make it.* He stood, stretching and bending until he was rewarded with a click that seemed to echo around the waiting area. *I'm glad nobody was around to hear that.*

The door down the hall opened and a white-coated man stepped into the hall. Jim snapped to as the man approached.

"Mr. Gage." The man held out his hand. "Dr. Carver. I'm treating your son."

Jim shook the hand. "How is he? And when can I see him?"

"A bit agitated at the moment," Dr. Carver smiled ruefully, "and his temp's still higher than we'd like." He paused. "Mr. Gage . . . John was in the early stages of heat exhaustion. His temperature was up to 104 when we started treating him. But we're giving him I.V. fluids and replacing his electrolytes, plus we've got him on a cooling blanket." He paused again. "He should be admitted, but he's insisting that we release him." He crossed his arms. "You two were headed back to Panama City?"

Jim nodded. *Johnny's determined not to make me miss work tomorrow.* He smiled. "Today was my last day of vacation."

Dr. Carver frowned. "I see."

"I can call and explain what's happened." Jim suddenly felt guilty. "Can I see him? I'll tell him I called and worked things out."

Dr. Carver nodded. "All right. Give us another few minutes." He turned and disappeared back into the treatment room.

The few minutes turned into twenty. Jim resumed his anxious pacing of the waiting room, not stopping until Mary came back and escorted him to the treatment room. Jim's stomach fluttered and his heart sped up as Mary opened the door and stepped back.

". . . don't understand." John's strained voice carried out into the hall. "I can't stay overnight."

Dr. Carver looked back at Jim as he stepped into the treatment room. "Good luck," he muttered, then walked out into the hall.

"Dad." John struggled to sit up. "M okay. But they won't let me outta here." His face was flushed and his eyes were too bright.

He doesn't look like they've treated him at all. Except to take his clothes off. "What's this I hear about you giving the doctor trouble?" Jim teased, gently pushing John's shoulders back to the exam bed.

John sighed. "We've gotta get back to Panama City."

"Not if the doctor thinks you should stay here, Son," Jim said gently. *I'm not gonna lie to him.* "I'll call Lewis and have him cover for me until we can get back."

"But, your job . . ."

"Is not as important to me as you are." Jim squeezed his son's shoulder. "Now, I'm the dad and you're the kid. So, you're gonna behave 'cause I tell you to. Got it?"

John smiled weakly. "Kay." He sighed again. "Man, I'm tired."

Jim returned the smile. "Then rest."

"Time's up, Jim," Mary informed quietly.

Jim squeezed John's shoulder a final time, then followed the nurse into the hall. As the door closed behind him, he turned and leaned against the wall. *The doctor says John's gonna be okay. But he doesn't look okay.* He took a deep breath and straightened.

"Are you okay?"

Jim smiled at Mary, then nodded. "Yeah, just fine."

John woke in a gray room, which he immediately recognized as a hospital room. *That's an interesting choice. This definitely isn't Rampart.* He tried to sit up, regretting it when every muscle in his body protested. *I won't do that again for a couple days.*

He carefully turned his head to the left, where a window admitted the dim light of early dawn. *That's probably why the room looks gray.* To his right, a tall, dark haired figure sprawled in a chair. *What's Cap doing in Florida?* Then he recognized his father and frowned. *He must'a been really worried to stay here with me all night.*

"Dad." John's throat was dry. He reached for the water pitcher on the table next to the bed, groaning as a muscle spasm started in his right shoulder.

Jim sat up and blinked at him. "Wha?"

"M okay." John gritted his teeth and waited the spasm out. "Thirsty."

"I'll bet." Jim stood and slowly raised the head of the bed, then picked up the pitcher. After filling the glass, he set the pitcher down, stuck a straw in the glass and put it in John's hand.

"Sorry I worried you," John muttered as he guided the straw to his mouth. He knew he should sip, but his first urge was to down the water in one gulp.

"Not so fast," Jim said quietly, gently pulling the glass away. "There's more where that came from."

John stared at a spot beyond his feet as he sipped from the glass.

"I talked to Lewis. He's gonna cover for me until we get back."

"That's good." John finally tore his gaze from the spot and turned to his father. "Dad, I'm sorry I pulled you into that mess." He snorted. "I'm sorry I pulled me into it."

Jim silently took the empty glass, refilled it and handed it back. "Well, the way I see it, you were just doing your job." He smiled. "That's not something you should be sorry about."

"But I thought . . . you said . . ."

"I let my mouth get ahead of my brain," Jim admitted, then held up a hand as John started to speak again. "I had a lot of time to think yesterday and last night. I've got a whole speech ready. But I've gotta be able to get it all out at one time."

John stared open-mouthed at Jim as he pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat down.

Jim rubbed his hands together, staring at them for a minute, then raising his head. "When Alison passed, it hurt almost as much as it hurt when we lost your mom." His voice shook. "Almost as much as the day you left home." He paused. "But I realized that even though I couldn't save her, what I did was just as important." His eyes misted. "Her parents didn't survive the accident. I was there so she wasn't alone when she took her last breath. She wasn't in any pain. And she wasn't afraid." He looked down at the floor. "I guess that sounds kind'a crazy, since I didn't even know her."

"No, I understand it," John said quietly.

Jim looked up again. "There's another little girl that wouldn't be here today if you hadn't been there."

John looked down at the blanket.

"I didn't understand your job, or why you did it. Now that I do . . . well, all I can say is you're a bigger man than I am." Jim held up his hand again. "I'm not running a boat now because I'm afraid to set foot on one."

"That's a normal reaction, Dad," John protested.

"I did it for all those years because I could. And because I was afraid to try anything else," Jim

continued. "I could've gone to college with the GI Bill. God knows your mother wanted me to. But I was afraid of failing." He smiled sadly. "I should've had as much faith in myself as your mom did."

"After I broke my leg in that elevator shaft, I thought about not going back." John admitted quietly. "But I was more afraid that I couldn't do anything else."

"So, we've got more in common than just our good looks." Jim's grin was an exact replica of John's.

"It's that adventurer's spirit." John grinned. "If you ask me, you and mom should've killed it."

Jim laughed. "You remember that?"

"It took me a while," John responded. "Having that head injury brought back a lot of things." He smiled sadly. "Dad, I . . ." He stopped when a muscle spasm struck his right leg, twisting his foot at an odd and painful angle.

Jim stood. "What's the matter?"

"Muscle spasm." John grimaced and made the mistake of trying to straighten his foot. That sent a bolt of pain from his ankle to his hip. *If I didn't know better, I'd swear I broke that leg. Again.*

"The nurse is on her way, Son."

John groaned. "It'll pass in a minute."

"It'll pass quicker if you get your pain medication."

John was about to respond when another spasm worked its way through his back. *Pain medication doesn't sound like such a bad idea.* He leaned back into the pillow. *If I could relax, the spasms'd work themselves out.*

John heard the door of the room swish and cracked his eyes open.

"Morning, Mr. Gage. I'm Marcia. Still having muscle spasms?"

Still? "Yeah." John groaned as the spasm in his back moved from the right side to the left.

The nurse lifted John's wrist. "I'm just gonna take your vitals, then get your meds." When she finished, she pulled a syringe and an alcohol wipe from her pocket. "You'll feel something a little cold," she informed as she swabbed the port. She injected the muscle relaxant, then swabbed the port again. "You'll feel better in a few minutes." She picked up John's wrist again and looked at her watch.

The cold feeling disappeared in the center of his forearm. The spasm in John's leg disappeared, soon followed by the one twisting through the left side of his back. "Thanks, Marcia." He let out a relieved sigh.

"You look much better." Marcia smiled and smoothed the blankets. "Get some rest. And if you need anything, call the desk."

John heard Marcia leave and struggled to open his eyes. "How's the li'l girl . . . Lauren?" He frowned. "Did I as' tha'?"

Jim chuckled. "Not today." His smile wavered back and forth. "She's gonna be just fine."

"Tha's good." John slurred. "Wha' 'bout the fire?"

"They had that out at about midnight. You were out like a light by then."

John heard the chair creak. "You don' hafta stay here." *Man, I feel like I'm floating.*

"I'm all right."

John forced his eyes open and blinked as two Jim's swam in front of him. "Wha' were we talkin' 'bout?"

"It can wait, Son. Go back to sleep."

"Kay, you're the dad," John mumbled, closing his eyes. A second later, he drifted off into the clouds.

John was released later that afternoon with a prescription for muscle relaxants and instructions to rest for two to three days. Jim watched with concern as John shakily stood and shuffled to the truck, which Jim had pulled up to the front entrance.

"Johnny, maybe driving back to Panama City isn't such a good idea."

John's jaw was set as he shook his head. "I'm fine, Dad. Really. I'm just gonna be ridin' in the truck."

"For six hours," Jim started to argue, then stopped and opened the passenger door. "Oh, well. I've been waiting all your life to say `I told you so'," he teased as John stiffly climbed into the passenger seat.

"You're all heart, Dad," John deadpanned, reaching out and pulling the door shut.

"Good luck with him," Marcia smiled as she turned the wheelchair around and disappeared back into the hospital.

Jim laughed, then walked around the truck and climbed in behind the wheel.

"Man, I'm starving. Can you stop somewhere so I can get a burger?" John cracked the passenger window and shifted in the seat.

"You just ate lunch an hour ago," Jim commented. "Even my appetite's not that big." He pulled onto the highway.

"It was hospital food."

Jim chuckled. "Yeah, you're right, it was." He looked over at John. "You know, the food in the cafeteria's great, but what they feed the patients is terrible." He laughed. "What was it you kids used to

call Thursday's lunch when you were in high school?"

John laughed. "Mystery meat." He snorted. "Roy's kids call Wednesday's lunch at their school the same thing."

"Mystery meat. A constant of the universe," Jim commented. "I think it's a conspiracy," he began. "Look at airports, now. They've got restaurants, carts with hot dogs and pretzels. So, what do they do? They give you a piece of dried out chicken breast, a quartered new potato, a few peas and carrots and a single bite of something sweet. That way, you're starving by the time you get off the plane." He paused. "Hospitals must be doing the same thing so that the patients who can get around sneak down to the cafeteria and spend money on real food."

John laughed. "I think you're on to something, there, Dad."

"And think about school lunches. What do your friends' kids pay for their lunches, now?"

"About 75 cents, I think."

"The price just keeps on going up, but the quality doesn't."

John grinned at his father. "So, are you gonna pull over?" He pointed at a passing sign. "You just passed a place."

Jim blushed. "Oops."

Jim unlocked and opened the apartment door, then stepped back so that John could shuffle past him. During the six hour drive John had shifted and groaned frequently, but he'd never once asked Jim to stop at any of the motels they passed along the way. And Jim found he didn't have the heart to needle him about it.

John went straight to the couch and lowered himself onto it with a groan. "Man, I don't think I'm gonna be able to work my next shift."

"When's that?" Jim set the bags down in the entry way, then closed and locked the door.

"Day after tomorrow."

Jim frowned. "You aren't supposed to work." He sat on the chair across from the couch. "You're supposed to rest for a few days."

John winced as he pulled off his shoes, then stretched out on the couch. "Well, I know that." He paused. "But I'll never hear the end of it if I call Cap and tell him I got heat exhaustion working an accident while I was on vacation."

"Well, tell your captain you were out on the beach too long and you got a bad sunburn," Jim suggested.

John shook his head. "I don't wanna lie."

"I could borrow a hand truck, wheel you out to the beach, prop you out in the sun and come back for you in a couple of hours." Jim snickered.

"Ha, ha." John leaned his head back and rubbed his left eye. "I'll figure something out tomorrow."

"I could call your captain for you," Jim offered.

"Nah. But thanks." John laughed. "Now that you mention it, that'd be pretty funny." He laughed a little harder. "My dad calling my captain."

"Why're you worried about it, anyway? Does L.A. County have some kind of exclusive on you?"

"It's not the working the accident part I'm worried about. It's the heat exhaustion part." John paused. "I work with this guy named Chet Kelly." He glanced over at his father. "Imagine Al about 4 inches shorter, 10 pounds lighter, with a mustache."

"Ah, I see." Jim laughed and shook his head. "Well, we could make the sunburn story work, if you change your mind." He stood. "You want anything to drink?"

"No, thanks."

Jim walked into the kitchen. "I'm gonna call your aunt and Peggy in a few minutes," he informed. "Do you feel up to going out for dinner with Peggy, again?"

"Not really."

Jim returned from the kitchen with a can of soda.

John grinned at him. "I don't wanna spoil your date." His grin widened. "But y'all can bring me a doggie bag."

Jim winked. "I'll make sure Peggy remembers."

By the following morning, most of the stiffness in John's muscles was gone, which would make the flight first to New Orleans and then on to Los Angeles a bit more comfortable. Father and son entered the airport half an hour before John's flight was scheduled to take off. John checked in at the airport's single ticket desk, then he and Jim went into the small waiting area.

"Man, I'm really sorry I missed Peggy last night," John commented as he set his bag down in the waiting room. He sat down in one of the chairs, slouching down a little, then crossing his ankles and folding his hands on his stomach.

Jim chuckled, then laughed.

John's eyes narrowed and he frowned. "What's so funny?"

"You didn't miss her." Jim took a deep breath before continuing. "You were asleep on the couch when we came in."

John's brow furrowed. "I was?"

Jim chuckled again. "You woke up and told Peggy 'good-bye'. She hugged you, then you said you were going to bed and went back to your room." He took another deep breath.

John laughed. "I don't remember. Guess I wasn't really awake."

"I guess not."

John shook his head. "Well, I hope you're not gonna tell Peggy that."

"Your secret's safe," Jim promised.

"Thanks." John straightened in the chair, leaned forward slightly and rubbed his left eye. "Dad . . ." He stopped, took a breath and rested his chin on his hand. "I'm not any better than you are just 'cause I've gone back to the fire service after I've been hurt." He looked over at Jim. "If you wanted to go back on a boat, you could. I know it."

"Thanks, Son." Jim smiled sadly. "Maybe I will. Some day."

"You will. When you're ready." John paused. "I'm glad I made this trip," He admitted quietly.

Jim cleared his throat. "Me, too."

"And it doesn't matter who called who."

Jim nodded. "Nope."

John sat back in the chair and stretched his legs out. After looking at his shoes for a minute, he turned to Jim. "I learned a lot on this trip." He took a deep breath. "Like no matter how old I get, I'm always gonna be your kid. And that means you're always gonna worry about me. I'm sorry about that scene at the truck stop . . ."

Jim held up his hand. "All that's over and done with, Johnny." He paused and smiled. "Or, maybe I should start calling you John. You have grown up. A lot."

John chuckled. "Like Aunt Helen calls you Jim?" He shook his head. "My friends call me Johnny." He winked at his father.

They both fell silent for a minute.

"Dad, when I decided to leave, I should've explained my reasons. I know you didn't understand."

"You did, Son. You didn't see any future." Jim squeezed John's shoulder. "I'm sorry I didn't listen." He squeezed again. "I won't make the same mistake again."

"I didn't try." John sighed. "I could've talked to you about leaving . . . about a lot of things, but I didn't."

"You tried, John. You had it pretty rough, but you always tried." Jim looked away, then turned back to his son. "Let's just say we both made mistakes and leave it at that, okay?"

John nodded. "You were a better father than I gave you credit for, Dad. I'm sorry it took me so long to see it."

Jim smiled. "You were a good kid. Made my job easy." He grinned. "Except for that time you shaved the dog."

"That's why I moved to California!" John laughed. "I'm surprised Helen and the rest of the family didn't mention it."

"But you noticed there weren't any dogs at Helen and Howard's place," Jim teased.

John blushed, then shook his head.

"Flight 107 to New Orleans and Lake Charles is now boarding."

"That's me." John stood and picked up his suitcase. "Hey, Roy, Chet and I are planning a fishing trip next month. We've got four days off duty. It'd be great if you could come along." He frowned. "Well, if you want to, that is."

"Of course I'd want to." Jim frowned. "You're not goin' out on a boat, are you?"

John rolled his eyes, then laughed. "Fly fishing, Dad." He winked. "From the shore."

Jim smiled and nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good deal." John grinned.

"Last call for Flight 107 to New Orleans and Lake Charles."

"Don't wanna miss my flight," John mumbled, then turned.

"Johnny."

John turned and Jim pulled him into a hug. "You're a good man, John. I'm really proud of you." His breath caught. "I love you, Son."

John swallowed the lump in his throat. "I love you, too, Dad."

Jim pulled away. "Now, go on, before you miss your plane." He cleared his throat. "Call me when you get in."

John nodded, still trying to swallow the lump caught in his throat. "Yeah, I will." He turned to look over his shoulder at the small plane on the tarmac outside. The last passenger was climbing the ladder.

"I'd better go."

Jim nodded.

John turned and walked toward the glass doors leading out to the field.

"Johnny!"

John paused with his hand on the door and turned.

Jim grinned. "Don't forget to reverse the charges!"

John laughed and shook his head. "What about your phone bill?" He called back, then waved and turned to walk through the door. When he reached the plane, he handed his bag to the uniformed baggage handler, then went to the steel stairs.

At the center of the steps, John stopped and turned to look back into the airport. Jim was still standing where John had left him. Jim stood at attention and saluted. John returned the salute, then turned and climbed the remaining stairs and stepped into the plane.

Once he was settled in his seat, John looked out the window, imagining that he could still see his dad standing in the terminal. *Man, this was the scariest thing I've ever done. But it was worth it.*

John settled into the seat and fastened his seat belt. As the plane taxied away from the small terminal, he continued looking out the window until the plane turned and the terminal disappeared behind it. He closed his eyes and folded his hands across his stomach. *I hope Dad makes it out for that fishing trip. Me and Dad against Chet.* He grinned. *Chet'll never know what hit him.*

The End

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<g>

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