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## Relative Strangers

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"Gooooood mornin'!" John Gage sang out as he encountered Roy DeSoto in the locker room at the start of a new shift.

"Hi, Johnny. How was your weekend?" Roy greeted his long-time friend and partner.

"Oh, pretty good, pretty good. Did some spring cleaning around the place. Got my bills and stuff all sorted out. And, I got Rover cleaned up, finally. Man, what a chore. That last camping trip really did her in." Johnny slipped off his plaid shirt and jeans, neatly folding each.

"Yeah, you gathered a bit of mud, as I recall." Roy smiled slyly. He sat on the bench, lacing his boots.

"An enormous amount, more like it. I still can't believe what a disaster that was."

"Well, you survived to camp another day," Roy philosophized.

"It'll be awhile before I'm ready for another campout, believe me," John asserted as he applied the finishing touches to his uniform. He placed his folded clothes on the locker shelf and grabbed his badge.

"Let's go see if there's any breakfast left over," Roy suggested.

"You're singin' my song. Lead the way."

Entering the kitchen, the pair engaged in good-natured banter with their fellow crew members and the departing men of C shift.

"Hey guys, anything to eat?" Johnny asked eagerly, nosing around.

"Hungry, pal?" Captain Hank Stanley asked.

"When is he ever not hungry?" Marco inquired with a smile.

"I'm a growin' boy," Johnny insisted.

"Gage, don't you ever eat at home?" Chet Kelly chided him. "You know that room in your house that has a sink and a stove and a refrigerator? That's called a kitchen. Normal people keep food in them."

Johnny looked pointedly at the dirty plate and crumpled napkin in front of the mustachioed fireman. "Kelly, what about you?" he asked mildly.

"Well, yeah, but... you see-"

"But, but, but," Johnny interrupted. His eyes lit up as he spotted a forlorn danish that was definitely past its prime. Plucking it off the platter, he took a big bite.

"Coffee, Johnny?" Roy asked from the stove.

"Mmm, yeah," Johnny mumbled around his bite. He bounced over to his partner.

Chet shook his head. "Bottomless pit," he groused.

Johnny patted his thigh. "Hollow leg," he joked, his mouth still full.

"Hollow head," Chet muttered.

The phone rang. "Station 51, Captain Stanley speaking," Hank said pleasantly. He listened for a moment. "Yes, just a minute." He held the phone out. "Gage, it's for you." As Johnny reached for the phone, his face mirroring his curiosity, the captain whispered, "female." Johnny grinned wolfishly and crooned "Hello?" His expression softened. "Mona! Hey, long time no hear...yeah! Doin' good. You?...that's fantastic!...wow...really?... Hey, great!...uh, well, sure, I mean, yeah...for how long?...No, no problem, I just..."

Chet smirked and shook his head. "Sounds like his juggling act again. What do you wanna bet he's already on the hook with another chick?"

"You're just jealous," Marco retorted.

"Am not!"

"Are too!" Hank, Roy, Marco and Mike chorused. Johnny plugged his ear against the din.

"...well, I'm on shift until tomorrow morning...perfect! How about Shoney's?...yeah, that works. Okay!...yeah, see you then!...bye-bye now." Johnny replaced the receiver and walked slowly to the table, deep in thought.

"Hey, John...why don't you cast one my way? I'd be glad to help you out, pal," Chet offered.

"Huh?" Johnny regarded Chet blankly.

"Your girl problem. You're overbooked, right?"

Johnny squinted his eyes. "Chet, what are you talking about?"

"Who was on the phone, Johnny?" Roy broke in.

"Oh, that was my cousin, Ramona."

"I didn't know you had a cousin," Chet remarked.

Mike threw a baleful look at Chet. "Everyone has cousins!"

"Is she coming to visit?" Marco asked.

"Yeah...I mean, no-that is, she's coming to L.A. to catch a cruise. We're going to have breakfast tomorrow."

"A cruise. Must be nice," Hank said dreamily.

"I guess so." Johnny puffed his cheeks and blew out slowly.

"Aren't you happy to see her?" Roy ventured.

"Sure! Mona and I were really close growing up. We kinda...drifted apart." Johnny shrugged. "It'll be good to see her," he added casually.

"I hate to break up this cozy little domesticity, but it's time to get to work," Hank prompted. "I'll be in my office."

The group disbanded, the two paramedics sauntering to the squad to check supplies.

Roy noticed that Johnny's earlier ebullient mood had dissipated and been replaced with a pensive one. As they checked the drug box, Johnny practically grunted his responses to Roy's queries. He wasn't hostile or sulking; rather, he sported a faraway expression, as if he was physically present but mentally somewhere else.

"Two pink elephants," Roy stated.

"Check," Johnny acknowledged. Roy sighed and lowered his clipboard. "Johnny, what is it?"

"What is what?"

"What's with you? You've been in another world since that call from your cousin."

Johnny's shoulders slumped. He smiled wistfully. "You're right. I've been...thinking." He looked up. "It was really weird to hear from her. Ramona. I'd heard she was doing all right, but..."

"You used to be close. What happened?" Roy dug gently.

"She had some problems. Big problems. The wrong crowd, drugs...the whole cliché. I managed to avoid those pitfalls. My home life was more structured. More was expected of me, I guess. I don't really know."

"So you drifted apart?"

"Actually, she didn't want anything to do with me. Thought I acted superior, just because I was on the straight and narrow. And then," Johnny raised his eyebrows. "And then, she had Seth."

"Seth?"

"Her son." Johnny smiled again. "What a great kid. He seemed to be just what she needed. She settled down some, quit hanging around punks. We got kinda close again. I helped her with Seth. I babysat him, took him places, heck, I even diapered him, Roy."

Roy chuckled. "Somehow, I never pictured that."

"It's true. I did a good job, too. For a kid." Johnny's grin faded. "Ramona and I, we were just 15 when Seth came along. She did a good job for a couple of years, but she slid back into that old life. By then, I was out of school and moving on in my life. And Seth, he sort of fell through the cracks. I hate to say that. But I had to live my life, and he wasn't MY kid, after all..."

"He's what? 14 now?" Roy calculated.

"Yup, almost 15." Johnny shook his head in disbelief.

"How's he doing now?" Roy asked.

"Well...I guess I'll find out tomorrow." Johnny smiled.

"Oh yeah? Ramona's taking him on the cruise too?" Roy surmised.

"Ramona's...going on her honeymoon. Apparently, she, uh, just got married."

Roy waited.

"Seth is...going to stay with me for awhile." Johnny looked at Roy, trying to gauge his reaction.

Roy's eyebrow shot up. He opened his mouth, but quickly snapped it shut, busying himself poking through the drug box. Johnny stared at him. "What?"

Roy shook his head.

"No, really," John insisted. "You look like you have something to say. What?"

Roy leaned back on his heel. He looked steadily at his partner. "It's just...a fourteen year old boy is a **BIG** responsibility. Are you up for that? And what do you really know about this kid?"

Johnny pointed to his chest indignantly. "I can handle one fourteen-year old boy. I was one myself once, you know. "

Roy shrugged, returning to the drug box.

"And he is my cousin's son," John continued, eyeing his silent friend. "I **CAN** handle it." He paused. "I can!"

Roy nodded.

John's mouth dropped. "You don't think I can handle this, do you?"

Roy sighed. "Look, all I said is it's a big responsibility. I just...I hope you know what you're getting yourself into."

John snorted. "I'm a responsible adult, Roy."

Chet, who was walking by, overheard the comment. "You, Gage? A responsible adult? Yeah, and I'm the Flying Nun."

John whipped around to face Chet. "Look, Kelly, no one asked for your input, so go... go..."

Chet laughed. "Come on...I sense a **WILD** comeback just dying to escape."

Roy laughed. John turned around to glare at his partner.

Just then, the tones sounded. "**STATION 51....Child trapped. McCallen's Junkyard. Forrester and East 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Time out, 8:55 AM.**"

Roy closed the drug box and placed it back in the compartment and within minutes, the engine and squad were on their way.

At the site, they saw Vince Howard questioning the yard's manager. Captain Stanley, followed by Gage and DeSoto, approached the officer. "What have we got, Vince?"

Vince gestured toward a pile of cars. The pile was about ten cars high and appeared very unstable. "We got a

kid in the top car. Climbed up on a dare from his buddies, but now he's too scared to come down."

The firemen eyed the shaky pile. "Great," Stanley said flatly. "Okay, any ideas?"

"I think I can climb that, Cap." John looked at Hank.

Stanley frowned. "I don't like it, pal. The whole stack could come down ... you and the boy with it."

"I'm with Cap, Johnny." Roy added grimly. "There's nothing to tie off on, and it's not safe to hook a line up there."

"I'll call for a Ladder company." Stanley picked up his Handi-talkie. "Roy, get on the microphone and tell that kid to STAY STILL."

An hour later, the boy had been safely removed from the car and the men were on their way back to the station. "What a run!" John remarked to Roy.

Roy nodded. "Kids. You never know what they'll do next."

Johnny turned in his seat and threw his partner a look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Huh?"

"That's another crack about me taking Seth, isn't it?" Johnny shook his head angrily. "Man, you must think I'm some kind of idiot."

Roy sighed. "Johnny, it wasn't a crack. I wasn't even thinking about your cousin's kid."

"I can handle this, Roy!"

Roy agreed calmly. "I'm sure you'll do great."

"Besides," Johnny finished uncertainly. "It's only for 10 days. What could happen in 10 days?"

Roy rolled his eyes, careful not to make any verbal response. *What could happen, indeed?*

### ***The Next Morning:***

Johnny hitched his plaid pants up, smoothing down his rust-colored polyester shirt. He walked into Shoney's, glancing around.

"Johnny?" Across the room, a petite brunette waved him over. He smiled, hurrying to her table. She stood up as he approached and the two hugged.

"Mona!" Johnny appraised his cousin. "You look great."

She smiled, blushing slightly. "So do you!" She turned to the sullen boy sitting in the booth. "Seth, aren't you going to say hello to Johnny?"

The boy grunted, barely meeting John's eye. Johnny ignored his attitude, sliding into the booth. "Hey, Seth.

It's nice to see you again. Last time I saw you, you weren't any higher than this table."

Seth rolled his eyes disgustedly, but made no other comment. Johnny's smile faltered. Ramona quickly jumped in.

"We appreciate you doing this, Johnny. Don't we, Seth?"

Seth snorted. "YOU appreciate it. You're the one dumping me."

"Seth!" Ramona warned. She looked at Johnny. "He's just having a hard time with all this change."

Johnny nodded uncomfortably.

"I'm sure you two will get along fine!" Mona gushed. She smiled at Seth. "Johnny was ...is ...my favorite cousin. And he did so much for you when you were a baby."

The boy didn't respond. His mother rushed on. "I'm sure you will have a great time. He's never been to L.A.," she explained to John.

The paramedic jumped in. "Oh, we'll have a great time. We can maybe get tickets for the Dodgers game, camp out on the weekend..."

The boy sneered at John. "Camping is for geeks and I hate baseball."

"SETH!" Ramona snapped.

Johnny opened his mouth, then slammed it shut. *This is gonna be a long ten days!* He could already hear his partner saying "I told you so".



The ride from Shoney's to Johnny's apartment had been uncomfortable to say the least. The paramedic made several attempts to engage Seth in conversation, only to be smugly rebuffed. Johnny decided to keep his mouth shut during the last few blocks. *Can't say I blame him. Just because I remember him doesn't mean he should remember me...or even have any familial feelings whatsoever. Besides, he said it himself: he feels like he's being dumped.*

Johnny glanced over at Seth who was staring glumly out the window. *Good-looking kid, if a little unkempt. Heck, what am I talking about? I could use a haircut myself...He'll be a lady-killer some day.* Johnny smiled in spite of himself.

Johnny carried Seth's overnight bag upstairs as the boy dawdled behind. Throwing open the door to his apartment, he grandly announced, "Well, this is it! Home sweet home!"

Seth rolled his eyes in contempt. The boy meandered into the small but neat dwelling and appraised it with a critical eye.

"I know it's not much, but it's my castle, at least for now," Johnny said apologetically. "Besides, what could a couple of bachelors need that isn't here? Fully stocked kitchen; help yourself to whatever you want. Uh... bathroom's right down the hall there. My room's at the end. I guess you'll be sleeping here on the couch... hope you don't mind. You can watch TV late if you want."

"How many channels do you get?"

"Huh?" Johnny was taken so surprised that Seth spoke that he didn't hear the question.

"Channels. How many?"

Johnny shrugged. "I dunno...ten or twelve I guess."

"Hmm," Seth grunted.

"Anyway, we'll be doing other stuff. I mean, if it's what you want to do. I won't make you do anything you don't like, of course. We can figure out what kind of stuff you like to do, and we can go...do it," Johnny finally trailed off.

"Got 'ny Coke?" Seth asked. He switched on the TV and plopped down on the couch.

"Oh. Uh, yeah! I uh...is Pepsi all right?"

"I guess."

Johnny started to get the drink, then stopped. *No, I'm not going to wait on him for ten days.*

"Seth? Why don't you come here?"

Seth rose and slowly trudged to the kitchen.

"Okay, the glasses are here, plates are over there. Cereal is in that cabinet there. Uh, utensils are here, in this drawer. And, the Pepsi is in the fridge, of course." Johnny looked to the boy for acknowledgment.

Seth made no move to help himself.

"So, get what you need," Johnny added. "I've got to get a load of laundry going."

A few minutes later, Johnny came out of his bedroom with an overflowing clothes basket. He noticed Seth sitting on the couch again, a soft drink in hand, watching "The Price is Right."

"Be back in a few minutes," he said casually, heading for the door. Seth neither turned nor spoke. Johnny headed out and shut the door behind him.

### ***Two Days Later:***

"Morning Johnny," Roy said cheerfully from the station's stove. He reached for another mug to pour his partner a cup of coffee.

"Oh, hi Roy."

"You have a good couple of days off? I know I did. Joanne and I actually got to go see that new Woody Allen movie, the one she's been bugging me about. We got a sitter and just went!" Roy chuckled. "Seems so simple,

but for some reason we just don't do it that often. I guess it's the expense. By the time you pay a sitter, then pay for movie tickets and popcorn, it starts to add up, you know? Well, I guess you don't know. You don't have to hire a sitter. But you date a lot, so you know how much it costs to go out. I tell ya, Johnny, I was shocked at the price of popcorn. A buck-fifty! Can you believe that? Things have changed since Joanne and I were dating, that's for sure."

"That's nice," Johnny said. He was leafing through the newspaper on the table.

Roy was baffled. He never knew quite how to deal with Johnny's quiet moments. They were so rare. "So, how's it going with your cousin's son?" Roy asked. "What did you say his name is?"

"Oh, it's Seth. His name is Seth," Johnny answered absently. "It's uh...it's going all right."

"Just all right?"

"Well, we're still kinda...getting acquainted. I mean, the last time I saw him he was just a little guy. And he doesn't remember me at all."

"That must be tough," Roy sympathized. "I'm sure you'll win him over with all the great activities you had planned."

Johnny sighed wearily. "Actually, we haven't done much of anything. All he wants to do is watch TV and read comic books."

"Maybe he's missing his mom," Roy theorized.

"I don't know," Johnny said doubtfully. "He hasn't even mentioned her."

Roy smiled. "Good. You know, I was going to call you and invite you and Seth over for dinner, but I figured you'd be having so much fun—" Roy caught the fleeting look of longing that crossed Johnny's face. "But then again, the kid deserves a real meal, and I figure he's not gonna get it at your place."

Johnny broke into a genuine grin. "That's real nice of you, partner. Say when."

"How about tomorrow night? I'll give Joanne a call and make sure it's all right."

"That'd be great! Thanks, Roy." Johnny replied.

Roy felt relieved. He didn't know what triggered the sudden improvement in John's mood, but he was glad it reversed.

John Gage was a man with an abundance of energy who liked nothing better than to be busy when at home and work. But for once he was thankful Station 51 had a quiet shift. The down time gave Johnny the opportunity to call Seth on several occasions throughout the twenty-four hour period A-shift was on duty. Johnny hadn't been too crazy about leaving Seth alone all night, but when he mentioned that to the teenager the boy simply scowled and said, "It's no big deal. My mom does it all the time."

"Your Mom leaves you alone all night?" Johnny had questioned with open skepticism. "I highly doubt that."

"Doubt it or not, makes no difference to me 'cause it's true."

Johnny was sure he'd catch the boy in his own lie if he just kept quizzing him.

"Where is she that causes her to be gone all night?"

"Sleeping with that old man she married I suppose. The one who left his wife for her."

"Old man?"

"Yeah. You know, her boss. He's like sixty-two or something. Older than my grandpa. Jeez, are you dense or what?"

Had the boy been his son Johnny would have let him know that number one; no he wasn't dense. And number two; if Seth ever spoke to him like that again he'd find himself sitting on his rear end on the other side of the room.

*No, I'm far from dense, kid, but it would have been nice had your mother mentioned the age of her new husband. And the fact that she had something to do with breaking up his marriage. Geez, Mona, what the hell are you doing? He's your boss? He was a married man? And he's sixty-two?*

Johnny didn't push the issue of adult supervision with Seth any farther that first day they were together. Instead, he made sure his landlady, Mrs. Hanson, knew the boy would be staying there alone while Johnny was at work. Johnny wasn't surprised when the older woman volunteered to check on Seth for him. He told her he'd appreciate that, and made a mental note to add some extra money to his next month's rent for her trouble.

When Johnny returned to his apartment after getting off duty on Thursday morning he discovered he'd worried for nothing. Mrs. Hanson met him in the hallway and told him all had been quiet while he was gone. "I invited the boy to eat dinner with me, Johnny, but he made a face and said no. If you ask me he could use a lesson or two in manners, but other than that things were fine. As far as I know he stayed inside the whole time and just watched television."

"Thanks, Mrs. Hanson. I really appreciate you keeping an eye on him while I'm gone. And as for his manners, I apologize. I think he's had kind of a rough life. He's never met his dad, and his mom was just a kid herself when she had him. She's always had to work full time in order to make ends meet. I get the impression he's more or less raised himself."

"That's too bad. But it seems to be the case with so many children now days. Sometimes I wonder what this world is coming to and where we're headed."

"Yes, Ma'am. Me, too."

Mrs. Hanson smiled at her favorite tenant. He was such a charming young man, and so sweet. She didn't have enough fingers to keep track of how many times he'd offered her his help when it came to small repairs around the building, or by giving her a ride to the grocery store when her car was in the shop. Edna Hanson's husband had died two years earlier. She'd soon discovered managing this apartment building by herself wasn't as easy as she'd thought it would be. That's why she was all the more grateful for a tenant like John Gage.

"Ten days with you just might do that boy some good, Johnny."

Johnny wasn't sure what the old woman meant, but simply nodded and again repeated, "Yes, Ma'am."

The paramedic let himself in with his key. After what Mrs. Hanson had just told him he wasn't surprised to find Seth sprawled on the couch watching television. The boy never looked up when Johnny entered the living room.

"Hey, Seth," John said in way of greeting.

The teenager mumbled something, but whether it was 'hey' in return, or 'get lost,' Johnny couldn't tell. It could have easily been either one, or maybe he'd just moved his mouth to make Johnny think he was returning some sort of pleasantry.

Johnny took note of the discarded clothes tossed around the living room that were too small to belong to him. Two cereal bowls, three dinner plates with crusted on food, an assortment of silverware, five drinking glasses, and eight empty Pepsi cans added to the mess.

The dark headed man held his tongue as he walked through the dining area. He was almost afraid to see what awaited him in the kitchen. As he expected, the mess had overflowed into here. Cabinet doors were open, cereal boxes littered the counter, an open bag of Chips Ahoy cookies had be left out, five pans formed an unstable pyramid in the sink, and the stove was splattered with grease from fried eggs.

The paramedic took a deep breath as he walked through the living room once more, this time headed for the bathroom. When he got there his temper was no longer willing to stay in check.

"Seth! Seth, get your butt in here right now!"

When he got no answer Johnny stomped out of the bathroom.

"Seth!"

The boy's eyes never left the TV screen. Johnny went over and pushed in the button that would shut it off.

That got a reaction out of the teenager. He sat up on one elbow.

"Hey! What'd you do that for?"

"I did that because this apartment looks like a bomb went off in it. You left wet towels laying all over the bathroom, globs of toothpaste in the sink, there's dirty dishes from here to the kitchen, not to mention enough grease on the stove to keep Elvis's hair slicked back for a year. I hate to break the news to you, but over the next couple hours you're going to be busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"Cleaning."

"Cleaning!"

"Yes, cleaning. As in cleaning up the mess you made."

"I ain't your servant."

"I never said you were. But I'm not your servant either, young man," Johnny said, while at the same time a distant part of his brain was surprised to discover he sounded just like his father. "I'm allowing you to stay

here, which means you owe me the respect of keeping my home the way I like it. And I like it clean."

"I don't owe you nothin! And it wasn't my idea to stay here anyway!"

"Maybe not, but that's just the way the ball bounces sometimes, kid. You've been here two days, you've only got eight to go. You'll live through it despite what you think. Now start cleaning."

"Who's gonna make me?"

Johnny took another deep breath. Fourteen and a half years old or not, if he'd ever talked to his dad that way he'd have found himself bent over a horse stall in the barn getting his backside warmed. But Seth wasn't his son, therefore Johnny didn't feel he had the right to touch the boy even though the kid was begging for a good old-fashioned spanking.

In place of the spanking Johnny shot the teenager a glare even Roy would be surprised he possessed, and in a tone that allowed for no argument said, "Seth, I'm the adult here. You're the kid. This is my home. End of story. You do what I tell you to and you do it now, or I'll have you off that couch and on your feet so fast your head will spin."

Seth rolled his eyes and picked up the remote control. He aimed it toward the television. Johnny stepped in-between Seth and the TV, thereby preventing the remote from working.

"Off the damn couch, Seth. *Now.*"

Johnny wasn't sure what he would have done had Seth refused to obey him. He knew he really wouldn't lay a hand on the kid, but fortunately Seth didn't realize that. He sat there a few more seconds before finally pushing himself to his feet.

"All right, Mr. Fireman. Have it your way. I'll clean up your stinkin' place. But I'll make sure I tell my mom you treated me like a goddamn maid."

If Seth thought Johnny would be upset by his swearing he was sadly mistaken. Johnny simply shrugged and said, "You do that."

As he walked to his bedroom to get a change of clothes Johnny called over his shoulder, "Start in the bathroom! I wanna take a shower in a few minutes. Oh, and by the way, I expect it to be so clean in there I'm blinded by the sparkle. Even the latrine."

"Latrine? What's a latrine?"

Johnny poked his head out his bedroom doorway. His eyes twinkled with amusement as he grinned.

"That's fireman talk for toilet, kid."

"I'm not a kid. And I ain't cleaning no toilet."

"Yes, you are. And don't give me that look. The longer you stand there, the longer it takes you. Which means the less time we have time for hiking."

"Hiking?"

"Yep."

"Hiking where?"

"In the mountains a few miles from here. That's what I thought we'd do after I get out of the shower. But we're not going until this place is as spotless as it was when I left for work."

"There's mountains out here?"

"Yep."

"Oh."

Johnny wasn't sure what that noncommittal 'Oh' meant, but he did see Seth head for the bathroom. When he entered it twenty minutes later to take his shower he wouldn't exactly call it sparkling clean, but he could tell the boy had made a good effort. Johnny had a feeling it was the first time Seth had ever been made to pick up after himself and to participate in household chores.

*Well, while he's staying with me he's going to be picking up after himself whether he likes it or not.*

Johnny lingered under the hot water that morning knowing Seth would be tied up for a while. Later, as he combed his hair and shaved he could hear the sounds of Seth's footsteps as he walked back and forth between the kitchen and living room. Johnny resisted the urge to offer the teenager his help. He puttered around in his bedroom, the only clean room in the house, until he heard the dishwasher start cycling and then the TV click on. He finished lacing up his hiking boots, slipped on a denim jacket and grabbed his backpack from the closet before walking to the living room.

"All done?"

"What does it look like to you? My fingers are practically bleeding, you know."

"Good thing I'm a paramedic then. I know what to do for fingers that bleed because of too much housework."

"Ha. Ha," the boy grimaced. "That was so funny I forgot to laugh."

Johnny ignored his house guest's biting tone. The living room was now back to its original state of cleanliness. He headed for the kitchen, finding it to be in the same shape save for the stove which still needed a little more elbow work. Johnny decided he'd let that pass for now. Again, he could tell Seth had made an effort to get the grease cleaned off the white surface if nothing else.

"Good job, Seth!" Johnny called from the kitchen. "Get a jacket and put your shoes on!"

"Why?"

"Because we're going hiking."

There was a long pause, then Johnny heard the TV click off. He smiled to himself as he went about making four sandwiches. Within a few seconds he knew he was being watched.

"I hope you like peanut butter and jelly. It's not quite as tempting as roast beef or turkey slathered with mayonnaise, but it holds up a lot better in warm weather."

"Peanut butter and jelly's okay I guess."

Seth watched as Johnny put eight Oreo cookies in a sandwich bag then grabbed two apples from the refrigerator. Those things went in his backpack along with the sandwiches. A cold six pack of Pepsi was put in an insulated carrier and surrounded by chipped ice from the freezer. That also went in the dark green backpack. Johnny shouldered into his pack, then turned and acted surprised to see Seth still standing there.

"Go on. Get a move on. You cleaned this place up like I told you to. You did a great job, too. So as a reward we go hiking."

"What if I don't wanna hike?"

"Sorry. That's the plan for today. It's too nice outside to sit in here and do nothing but watch television."

"You can't make me do something I don't wanna."

"Seth, once again. I'm the adult. You're the kid,...excuse me, you're the teenager. Yes, I can make you do something you don't want to. And if you'd quit giving me lip about it you just might find out you like it."

"Yeah, right."

"Yeah, right nothing. Get your jacket, get your shoes on, and let's go."

"I don't like this place, you know. Los Angeles. This apartment. Staying with you."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was really looking forward to your visit. Like your mom told you at breakfast the other day, I used to take care of you for her when you were just a little guy. We had some good times together. I thought we could have good times again."

Johnny saw some type of fleeting emotion other than anger pass across the teenager's face, but he couldn't quite identify it. Longing maybe? But longing for what? A part of his past he couldn't recall and had never been told about?

Just that quickly the softness about the boy's features turned to the ever-ready scowl. Seth swiveled on one sock clad heel.

"Oh, all right. Have it your way. We'll go hiking. But if I fall and break my neck my mom will kill you."

Johnny chuckled to himself. He could tell Seth wasn't nearly as upset about the prospect of hiking as he was letting on. As a matter of fact John thought he could detect a hint of excitement to the boy's tone, but heaven forbid if the kid actually allowed it to show. The paramedic gave an exasperated shake of his head as he gathered up his charge and headed for the door.

*Teenagers*, Johnny silently bemoaned, knowing he was in for a long eight days.



The hours Johnny and Seth spent hiking went better than Johnny thought they would considering how their day together started. At times Seth almost forgot he was supposed to be surly and unappreciative, and actually let Johnny get a glimpse of the curious, intelligent, nice kid he could be. Of course that 'nice kid' never stayed around too long before Seth would once again begin complaining about how his legs hurt, or how

hot it was getting, or how hiking was a stupid way to spend your time when you could be sitting in an air conditioned apartment watching TV.

Johnny was glad when it was time to leave for Roy's house. He was looking forward to having a conversation with someone who didn't spend half his time scowling and the other half rolling his eyes.

The paramedic pulled the Land Rover into Roy's driveway at six that evening. Before he allowed Seth to get out he said, "Now look, Roy DeSoto is my partner at work, and also my best friend. His wife Joanne is my friend, too. I expect you to behave yourself while we're here. No scowling. No rolling your eyes. No smart remarks. No mumbling. And speak when you're spoken to. Got it?"

"You sound like you're my father. You're not my father, you know."

"No, I'm not. But I am your cousin."

"You are not."

"Seth, I'm your mother's cousin. That makes me your cousin, too. Your much older cousin. Just like I asked you to have respect for my apartment, I'm asking you to have respect for my friends. You don't have to like them, but you do have to be polite and act civil while you're in their home."

No one had ever spoken like this to Seth before. No one had ever told him what they expected of him. There was a part of him that thought it felt nice, like maybe Johnny cared about him just a little bit, but then there was another part of him that wanted to tell Johnny to go to hell. That was the part Seth voiced.

"You're not the boss of me."

"You're right, I'm not. Nonetheless; what I've just told you is what I expect to see happen this evening. If you can't do what I ask then you can miss out on the great meal I know Joanne has waiting for us and sit here in the Rover until I come back."

"How long is that gonna be?"

"At least three hours. Maybe four."

Seth's growling stomach won out over his pride. Sitting in a vehicle by himself for three hours sounded worse than being stuck in an apartment all day watching TV.

The boy made no verbal response, but then he didn't have to. A few seconds after Johnny exited the vehicle Seth followed suit.

Johnny had barely set foot on the front lawn before two blond headed children came barreling around the corner of the house.

Jennifer's arms were stretched wide as she cried, "Uncle Johnny! Uncle Johnny!"

Johnny bent and scooped the six year old from the ground. He swung her around and around until she threw back her head and laughed with glee.

"Hey, Jenny Bean!"

When the spinning stopped Jennifer wrapped her arms around Johnny's neck and gave him a hug. "Hi, Uncle Johnny. I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad I'm here, too."

Chris, Roy's nine year old son, stood at Johnny's side.

"Hey, Uncle Johnny! Guess what?"

"What, Christopher Roy?"

"I got another merit badge for Boy Scouts. And I batted the winning run in for my baseball team yesterday."

While still holding Jennifer with one arm, Johnny reached down with the other and pulled Chris to his side, giving him a firm hug.

"Good for you, Sport, on both accounts. I'm so proud of you."

Chris's smile lit up his whole face. "I knew you would be. I couldn't wait to tell you."

Seth stood back watching this scene. He wondered how it would feel to have a man hug him and tell him he was proud of him. Of course, Seth couldn't think of anything he'd ever done to give someone reason to be proud of him, but he thought it might be nice to have the opportunity just one time. After all, that kid sure looked happy and all Johnny had done was say, 'Good for you, Sport. I'm so proud of you.'

Before Seth could ponder that any further a man and woman stepped out the front door. The woman walked down the steps and, like her children, greeted Johnny with a hug.

"Johnny, I'm so glad you could come. The kids and I haven't seen you for weeks now."

"Yeah, I've been kinda busy. And hey, thanks for having us. I really appreciate it."

Johnny put Jennifer on her feet, then turned. With a wave of his hand he beckoned Seth over.

"Seth, come here. I want you to meet the DeSotos."

Joanne's first impression of Seth was that he was a handsome young man who favored Johnny somewhat in looks. His hair wasn't the coal black Johnny's was, more like a medium walnut in color, but it was thick and shaggy like his older cousin's. His eyes were dark brown like Johnny's, and he had Johnny's thin, lanky build, though he wasn't more than five foot eight in height right now.

Joanne's second impression was of an unhappy teenager who certainly didn't possess his cousin's charm or exuberant nature.

"This is Mrs. DeSoto,..."

"Johnny, come on. Don't do that. You make me feel old," Joanne admonished her husband's partner before smiling at the teenager. "You can call me Joanne, Seth. And this is my son Chris, and my daughter Jennifer. My husband, Roy, is the guy standing over there on the front steps."

Roy smiled and gave a little wave. "Hi, Seth. Johnny's told me a lot about you."

Seth didn't say anything until he got a light nudge against the side of his shin by Johnny's tennis shoe.  
"Huh...hi."

"Johnny, take the kids around back to the deck," Joanne instructed. "Supper's just about ready to set out on the picnic table. I hope you like hamburgers cooked on the grill, Seth."

"I,...I guess. I mean,....I guess I probably do, but I've never had 'em before."

Jennifer's eyes grew round with amazement. "You've *never* had a hamburger before?"

Seth felt his face begin to burn.

"Jennifer!" Joanne scolded.

"No,...I,....," Seth stammered, "I've had hamburgers. I mean,....I've just never had 'em cooked outside on a grill is all."

"Well, you'll love 'em made that way," Johnny assured. "Roy's one heck of a chef. And if I know Joanne she's got lots of good things ready to go with those hamburgers."

"I sure do. After all, I knew John Gage was coming over this evening. I had to make plenty of food in order to feed the bottomless fireman."

Seth could tell Joanne was teasing Johnny, and even though Johnny put up a hearty protest to her words, he could also tell his cousin enjoyed the teasing. Seth had always thought people only teased you when they were trying to be mean. At least that was his experience when the kids at school called him Trailer Trash because he and his mom lived in a run down trailer park at the edge of town, or when they called his mom a Gold Digger. Seth wasn't really sure what that phrase meant, though the way the kids said it made him know they weren't paying his mother a compliment. But what was going on between Johnny and Joanne was a different kind of teasing. Like maybe the kind you do when someone is your friend and you're simply telling them that without really putting it into words.

The teenager eyed Roy, waiting for him to get mad because of the interaction going on between his wife and Johnny. But Roy didn't get mad. As a matter of fact he seemed to find the whole thing amusing which confused Seth even more. All the men his mother had ever dated, and there had been a lot of them, would get mad if his mother paid attention to another guy. Even him. Her new husband, Gerald,....he was like that, too. He got pissed off if Ramona's time was taken up by her son. But this Roy guy seemed okay with the way his wife was paying attention to Johnny.

It made Seth wonder if Roy was some kinda weirdo, or if this was how normal people who were good friends acted around one another. Seth thought about what it would be like to be able to trust someone as much as Roy evidently trusted Johnny around his old lady. Seth didn't think he'd ever know what that kind of trust felt like so decided it wasn't worth dwelling on.

As Joanne and Roy went back in the house to put the finishing touches on dinner, the DeSoto children grabbed Johnny by the hands and pulled him toward the backyard. Johnny looked over his shoulder.

"Seth, come on! We'll play some baseball before we have to eat."

The last thing Seth was going to do in front of a nine year old and six year old was confess he didn't know

how to play baseball. He followed the entourage at a slow pace, hoping he didn't make a fool out of himself in front of the little kids.

An hour later a hearty meal had been consumed. Johnny rained compliments on the cook while leaning over to give her a chaste peck on the cheek.

"As usual, Joanne, everything was great. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Roy cocked an eyebrow. "And you don't have a thank you for the chef?"

"A thank you, yes. But you can forget about the kiss."

"Believe me, Junior, I don't *want* the kiss."

Once again Seth felt a foot nudging his leg. He looked at Johnny to see him wagging his eyebrows while giving a slight jerk of his head toward Roy and Joanne. It took the boy a moment to figure out what his cousin wanted him to do.

"Huh,...thanks. For the food and all. The,...everything was good. Especially the hamburgers."

"You're welcome, Seth," Joanne smiled. "We're glad you could come over this evening with Johnny."

Joanne looked at her children. "Why don't the two of you take Seth and play here in the backyard."

"Okay," Chris said as he jumped to his feet. "Come on, Seth! We can play kickball. Even Jennifer's good at that."

"I dunno. Maybe later."

"Come on, Seth," Jennifer urged. "It'll be fun."

"I don't really,..."

"Seth," Johnny intervened. "Go on. It won't hurt you to play with them. We'll be leaving within the hour."

Seth wanted say he didn't play with Boy Scouts and little girls, but the look on Johnny's face told him there was no use to argue. He sighed as stood.

"Okay, fine. I'll play with them. But I ain't gonna let 'em win just 'cause they're little kids."

Jennifer voiced her outrage at what she perceived to be Seth's insult.

"I'm not a little kid, am I, Uncle Johnny?"

"No, Jenny Bean, you're not a little kid." Johnny winked at the girl. "And I know first hand what a mean game of kickball you can play, so you just show Seth here what an athlete you are."

Before Seth could say anymore Jennifer grabbed his hand and dragged him off the deck. Chris ran to the garage and came back with a plump ball just right for kicking.

When Jennifer's and Chris's shouts made it impossible for the children to overhear the adults Johnny said, "I'm sorry about Seth's attitude. We're working on it."

"How are things going otherwise?" Joanne asked.

"Okay," was the only answer Johnny gave, which led Roy to believe things weren't going all that great, but after their rather heated discussion three days ago Johnny was never going to admit it.

"Roy told me your landlady is keeping an eye on Seth while you work. Would you like him to come here instead?"

"Here?"

"Sure. You could drop him off on your way to the station, and pick him up the next day."

Johnny mulled over Joanne's offer. It certainly would relieve him of worrying about Seth when he was at work, yet he had no desire to impose on Joanne like that. Not to mention the fact that Seth would blow a gasket if Johnny even suggested such a thing.

"Thanks, Jo. I really appreciate the offer, but Seth's doing okay on his own at my place."

"What about just for the evening then? I can pick him up shortly before supper time. He can eat here with the kids and me, then stay overnight. You can come for him the next morning after you get off-duty."

"Well,....I gotta admit I don't really like the thought of him spending the night alone." Johnny watched as Seth half heartedly kicked the ball to Chris. Certainly not having to worry about the teenager for fourteen or so hours of his twenty-four hour shifts would be a big help. "Okay. I'll take you up on it on two conditions."

"And those conditions are?"

"That it's okay with Roy."

"It is," Roy said. "We've already talked about it."

Johnny smiled. "I figured as much."

"And your second condition?" Joanne asked.

"The second condition is that I pay you something for your trouble."

"No, Johnny. Absolutely not. You've watched our kids more times than I can remember and have never accepted any money for it. You've taken them to movies, the circus, ball games, and never allowed Roy and I to send even a dime along. So no more talk about money. Besides, you only work what,....four more shifts until Seth's mom returns?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"Four shifts is nothing. Believe me, I can handle one fourteen year old boy for a few nights."

Neither Johnny nor Roy had reason to doubt Joanne's words. As the two men stood to help her begin clearing

the picnic table Johnny thought of what was yet to come with Seth. He already knew the kid would throw a fit when told he would be spending some nights at the DeSoto home. Johnny didn't look forward to that conversation, and was glad he could put it off until the next evening. He didn't have to return to work until Saturday morning. The next day was Friday and he planned to take Seth to a Dodger's game.

*If I'm lucky a day at the ball park will put the kid in a mellow mood.*

Johnny turned when Seth ran up the steps of the deck.

"Can we go now? I'm bored."

It was Johnny who had to remind himself that he'd been the one who had said there would be no eye rolling allowed.

*Yeah, luck. I have a feeling I'm gonna need more than that until Mona comes back to collect her sweet little...angel.*



Hank Stanley awoke instantly to the sound, ready to pull on his turn-outs and face whatever his duty required of him. Then the phone rang again. He relaxed when realized that's the sound that had awakened him and not the tones. "Station 51, Captain Stanley," he answered sleepily, looking at the clock. *11:30, Damn, only been asleep 30 minutes...*

"Hank, I'm sorry if I woke you... it's Joanne. I need to talk to Roy. Is he there?"

*She sounds upset.* "Um, I don't know if they made it back yet, Joanne. Let me check." Hank set the phone down and peered at the empty bunks of his paramedics. He walked to the bay and saw that the squad was not there. Returning to the phone, he picked it up. "They're still on a run, Joanne. Is everything okay?"

"It's not an emergency or anything like that, but something's happened and I really need to talk to him. Can you have him call me the minute he gets back?"

"Um, yeah, sure. I'll get the message to him. You sure everything's okay?"

"It will be," Joanne sighed. "Sorry if I woke you, Hank."

"That's okay, Joanne. I'll have Roy call you as soon as he can."

"Thanks. Bye."

"Bye, Joanne." *Wonder what that's about...*

He had only just hung up the phone when he heard the squad pull up in the bay. He walked out of the dorm to meet his two paramedics.



"I can't believe how this shift's gone," Johnny complained as Roy backed the squad into the bay. "We hardly had time to swallow two bites of food all day, and now I bet we won't get two hours of sleep all night."

"Yeah, I'll be glad when this shift is over," Roy agreed. He turned the engine off and noticed the captain in the bay. "Engine company must have just gotten back too," he commented. He got out the squad and stretched, not noticing the look on Hank's face as he approached.

"Roy," Captain Stanley greeted, "I just got off the phone with your wife."

Johnny stopped dead in his tracks when he heard the captain's message. He looked up to find out what was going on.

"Joanne called the station this late? What's wrong? Did she say?" Roy questioned worriedly.

"No, she said it wasn't an emergency, but she needed to talk to you as soon as possible. She wanted you to call her as soon as you could."

"She wants me to call her now?"

"Yeah. She sounded upset about something."

"Okay, Cap. Thanks." Roy headed toward the kitchen to use the phone.

"Hope everything is all right," Hank said before making his way back to the dorm.

Johnny followed Roy into the kitchen and waited while Roy dialed the phone.

"Joanne? He WHAT? When? Where is he now? Chris knows better than that! Um hmm...okay...yeah... okay... I'll take care of it. Yeah, I'll tell him. Try to get some sleep. I'll talk to Chris tomorrow. Okay. Okay. Bye."

Johnny looked questioningly at his partner. "What was that about?"

Roy sat down at the table and signaled for Johnny to do the same. "Johnny, Joanne had some trouble with the boys tonight."

Johnny held his breath. "Oh no...what?"

"They're not hurt or anything like that," he said seeing Johnny's worried expression. "It's Seth. I don't think Joanne's going to want him coming to the house anymore."

Johnny could hardly stand it. "What'd he do?" his voice rose.

"Well, Joanne said she had everyone in bed around 9:30, and then she went to bed around 10. She said she heard a noise not long after she'd gone to bed so she got up to investigate." Roy paused, not sure how to tell his partner what kind of kid his cousin seemed to be.

"Go on," Johnny urged.

"She caught the boys in the laundry room. Seth had a pack of cigarettes and he gave Chris one. They were both smoking in there."

Johnny felt as if he'd been slapped in the face. He was at a loss for words. He could only stare blankly at the floor, trying to process the information he'd just been given. *How could he do this?* Finally, he cleared his throat and looked up at Roy. "I'm really sorry."

Roy was unable to read his partner. At the moment, his jaw was set, he was calm and alarmingly quiet. He wore an expression that Roy had rarely seen on the dark haired man. "Johnny, you know...he is a teen-ager," Roy offered, consolingly. "They are infamous for making stupid mistakes."

Johnny nodded with a slight grin. *He's trying to make ME feel better!* It wasn't the fact that Seth was experimenting with cigarettes that had John so upset. That was bad enough in itself. What upset him even more, was that he had chosen to do this at his best friend's house, with his best friend's son. *How could he let Christopher smoke?*

"I told Joanne that I'd talk to Chris in the morning," Roy said.

Johnny sighed and looked thoughtfully at Roy. "What are you going to say to him?"

"Well, I'm not really sure right now," Roy admitted, seeming perplexed. "Actually, I hadn't planned on having to do this...at least not yet."

Johnny scratched his head, looking slightly puzzled himself. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Roy? I really am sorry about this," he affirmed, looking Roy straight in the eye.

Roy had never doubted John's sincerity and gave him a friendly squeeze on the shoulder. "It isn't your fault, Partner. Come on, we better get some sleep."



The next morning came all too soon, as far as Johnny was concerned. He was not looking forward to confronting Seth and puttered around the station rehearsing in his mind what he was going to say. He was half way inside of his locker, with an armful of old magazines and mail when Roy found him.

"I've been looking for you. B shift is all ready here, we better get going." *He only cleans his locker when he's really upset.*

"Yeah, I know. I just wanted to get rid of some of this junk." He dropped the armload of debris into the trash.

"So...have you thought about what you're going to say to Seth?" Roy asked, hesitantly.

*Like I can think of anything else?* "I don't know Roy. I'm pretty disappointed that he'd do something like that...especially at your house!" He paused briefly in contemplation and then closed his locker door. "I still don't know what to say to him though."

"You know, Johnny, I told you this might not be an easy task." Roy purposely kept his tone light, not wanting to wanting to put Johnny on the defensive.

In John's mind however, he had just been 'I told you so,' once again by his partner. "Roy, it's not like he robbed a bank!" *Yet!* "I mean, sure he was smoking, but it's not like he's the only kid in the world to try smoking! It's not that big of a deal!"

"Johnny! I can't even believe you said that!" clamored Roy. He took a deep breath, regaining control of himself. "Johnny, do you really think it's not a big deal?"

"No. I mean... I don't know," he said, clearly frustrated. "Look, Roy, I said I was sorry! What else do you want from me?"

Roy shook his head. "I don't know, but we better get going."



As the two paramedics were coming up the walkway that led to the DeSoto's front door, they were nearly trampled by an angry teenager. "Seth!" shouted John as the boy stomped past.

Seth turned and glared venomously. "What!"

Johnny felt a flush of embarrassment, followed by anger wash over him. "Get over here!"

Seth made no move in either direction.

At that moment Joanne poked her head out of the doorway. "Thank goodness!" she said, with obvious relief at the sight of her husband and his partner.

Roy and John glanced at each other and Johnny drew a deep breath, readying himself for Joanne's report.

Joanne walked up to the two men. "Chris is in his bedroom," she informed Roy. She then looked sympathetically at Johnny. "Johnny... I'm really sorry but... I just don't think it's a good idea for Seth to stay here," Joanne said very quietly and looking very uncomfortable. "It's just that..."

"It's okay, Joanne," Johnny assured her. "I understand. I'm just really sorry about everything." He hesitated for a moment, before asking. "He didn't... do anything else, did he?" John glanced back at the defiant teen. He was still standing in the same spot.

Joanne looked uncertainly at Roy, debating with herself on how to continue.

"It's okay, Joanne. You can tell me," Johnny prompted.

"Well Johnny, Seth is..." she paused, searching for the right words. "He's very angry..."

Just then, the front door flew open and Jennifer ran outside. "Daddy! Uncle Johnny!" she squealed and jumped into her father's arms. "Daddy! Christopher got in BIG trouble!" she righteously informed. "Mommy made him eat soap!" She made a disgusted face and stuck her tongue out for emphasis. "Wanna know what he said?"

"Jennifer!" Joanne shouted, cutting her off. "What did I tell you about that word?"

Jennifer sighed dramatically. "That nice children don't say words like that." she recited with total disappointment. "Can I tell 'em what it rhymes with?"

Seth snickered and Johnny turned his head to glare at him.

John turned back to Roy and Joanne. "Um... guys, we're going to head out now. Thanks for everything, I'll talk to ya about this later on, okay?"

He motioned for Seth to get in the car and headed for the driver's side. He wanted Seth to apologize for the trouble he'd caused, but doubted that he'd be able to get that apology from the boy at this moment. He gave the DeSoto's a small wave and got into the white Land Rover.



Johnny tossed in his bed and punched his pillow. He flipped onto his back throwing an arm over his eyes in an

attempt to get comfortable. He sighed as he remembered the ride home from the DeSotos.

*"I want you to apologize to the DeSotos." Johnny glanced at the sullen teenager as he drove. The boy did not react. "They are my good friends and I am ashamed of your behavior. What were you thinking? Your mother would-"*

*"Would what?" The boy sneered. "Who do you think bought me my first smokes?"*

*"I find that hard to believe." Johnny answered evenly. Truthfully, he was shocked. **Mona had always been a little wild, but could she really be so irresponsible?***

*Seth laughed harshly. "Mona only cares that I'm out of sight. She lets me smoke. It ain't that big a deal. And you ain't my boss. The only difference between you and the other nerds she dumps me on is that I don't have to call you 'Uncle'."*

*Johnny opened his mouth and then abruptly shut it. This time he couldn't hide the shocked expression on his face. He took a deep breath. **What did I get myself into?** He looked at Seth and felt a pang of sympathy for the troubled boy. **He's only a kid and what a life he must have had.** Johnny sighed. "Well, look, as long as you're living with me, there will be no smoking. What your mom lets you do, well, that's her business. But under my roof, it's my rules." **God, did I say that?** Johnny was tempted to look around for his father.*

*As soon as they entered Johnny's apartment, Seth had plopped himself down in front of the television. Johnny sighed. **How can he do that for hours on end?** "Look," Johnny said. "I need some sleep. Just...just stay out of trouble, okay?"*

*Seth had snorted, his eyes glued to the screen.*

*An hour later, Johnny was finally drifting off. Soon, he thought. **Soon, Ramona will return and my life will be back to normal!** He mentally crossed off another day on the calendar in his mind.*

*Seth was bored. He hated it here. At least at home, he had friends. He wandered into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, glancing at the shelves, and then closed it again. **Nothing worth havin' here!** He wandered over to the counter and began rummaging through Johnny's cupboards. Finally he spotted a cookie jar on the back shelf. He grabbed it and put it down on the counter. Opening the jar, he reached in, hoping it was filled with chocolate chips. To his surprise, his hand closed around paper. He pulled it out. **MONEY!** Seth counted the bills. A little over a hundred dollars was hidden in that jar. Slipping a twenty into his pocket, he replaced the rest and returned the jar to the shelf. **I'm sure "Cousin" Johnny won't mind this loan!** The boy smiled to himself. The day was looking up. He headed to the door, quietly closing it behind him as he left the apartment.*

*An hour later, Seth was smoking a cigarette in the courtyard when a voice startled him.*

*"Hey, can I bum one of those?"*

*Seth turned around to look at the speaker. A boy about his age stood there pointing to Seth's cigarettes. He was shorter than Seth and about ten pounds heavier. His greasy blond hair hung in his eyes and small clusters of acne covered his face. Silently, Seth handed him a cigarette and a pack of matches.*

"Thanks." The other boy lit the cigarette and handed Seth back the matches. He took a long drag, slowly blowing out the smoke. "Names Mike, but everyone calls me Pincher."

"Seth. Why does everyone call you Pincher?"

"'Cause I can pinch anything from any store," the boy answered proudly.

Seth snorted.

"Don't believe me?" Mike brushed his greasy bangs back from his face. "Care to bet some money on it?"

Seth considered the offer. "Five bucks."

The kid nodded. "You're on. Let's go."

Seth followed the boy for a few blocks until they reached a row of shops. On the way, Pincher had kept up a running dialogue, so that Seth now knew his life story. Seth had mentioned only that he was visiting for a while.

The boys stopped in front of a sporting goods store and walked to the door, motioning Seth to follow behind him. "What do you want?"

Seth looked around. "Um...how about that pocket knife." He pointed to a fancy Swiss Army knife.

"Ok. Stay behind me."

Seth nodded, following behind Pincher. He watched as the shorter boy examined the hunting knives that were placed next to the Swiss Army one. Pincher turned and nodded to Seth and motioned him outside. Seth left the store behind the boy and followed him around the corner. Pincher reached into the pocket of his jacket and extracted the Swiss Army Knife. Seth's mouth dropped open.

"Man, that was good. I didn't even see you take it," Seth said.

The boy grinned. "That's why they call me Pincher. Now it's your turn."

Seth looked up. "What?"

The boy planted his feet and stared at Seth. "Now, you gotta take one. What's the matter? You chicken?"

"I'm not chicken!" Seth said hotly. He turned and walked back to the store, the smaller boy trailing behind.

Seth entered the sporting goods store and wandered the aisles. He looked around nervously. For all his bravado, he had never stolen anything from a store in his life, but he couldn't let this punk show him up! He wandered the knife aisle.

"Come on, already!" Pincher hissed.

Seth ignored him, studying the hunting knives. Slowly he reached his hand out until it was touching the prize. He closed his fist, jamming it into his jacket pocket. He turned and followed Pincher to the door. He stepped outside, and a wave of exhilaration washed over him. Then, his blood ran cold as a beefy hand closed around his shirt collar. He whirled around and stared into the face of one of the biggest men he had ever seen.

"What ya got in that pocket, son?"

"No-Nothing!" Seth stammered. He looked down the street, but Pincher was long gone.

The man practically picked Seth up and threw him back into the store. "Yeah. I seen you pocket that knife, kid. Man, I'm sick of being ripped off by little punks like you." The man dragged Seth to an office in the back of the store, throwing the boy into a chair. "Here's your choices, Sonny. You put that knife on the desk, and we call your old man. Or I make a call to the cops. What'll it be?"

Seth hesitated, staring at the angry man. He stood up and placed the pocketknife on the desk. Then he reluctantly gave the man Johnny's phone number.

Johnny drove to the sporting goods store, his jaw set in a grim countenance. He'd been awakened from his sleep by a cryptic phone call from the store manager, something about some kind of incident involving Seth. Johnny didn't know the situation but he had his suspicions. He only hoped his suspicions were wrong.

Entering the store, a clerk directed him to the manager's office. The door had a small window; looking through, he saw a muscular man sitting behind the desk, writing. Slumped in a chair before him was Seth. Johnny walked in. He looked back and forth between the two questioningly.

Seth, seeing the serious expression on his cousin's face, slumped further, refusing to acknowledge John's presence.

"I'm John Gage. You called me about Seth?" Johnny addressed the man behind the desk, his brown eyes glinting.

The burly man stood. "Yes, Mr. Gage. I'm Dan Poff, the store manager. Seems your son here—"

"He's not my father!" Seth protested.

"Seth!" Johnny warned. "Mr. Poff, Seth is my cousin. What did he do?"

Poff glared at the boy. "I told you I wanted your father's phone number! Not some cousin who's going to protect you from being punished!"

"Mr. Poff, right now, I am the closest thing to a father Seth has." Seth stole a quick glance at John. "Now, why don't you tell me what's going on so *\*I\** can decide whether or not there'll be any punishment."

Poff reached for the knife on the desk. "The boy tried to make off with this knife without paying for it." The manager waved the item in the air.

"Is that true, Seth?" Johnny asked sternly.

"I was gonna pay for it!" Seth insisted.

"When?" Poff thundered. "After you'd tried it out for a week? When I stopped you, you were already out the door, kid!"

"I forgot, that's all!"

"You forgot! Sure, you did, kid." Poff chuckled.

"Seth, tell the truth," Johnny said.

"I was! I was gonna buy it! I just...forgot."

Dan Poff snorted.

"And what were you going to use for money?" Johnny challenged him.

"This!" Seth dug in his pocket, pulling out the wadded \$20 bill.

Johnny was taken aback. "Where did you get that kind of money?"

"My mom gave it to me. For spending." Seth didn't blink.

Johnny sighed and rubbed his face. "Mr. Poff, what would you like me to do?"

"Get him out of here. I don't want to see his face in my store again." Poff sat down and shuffled some papers on his desk.

"You have my assurances, Mr. Poff. Seth won't come into your store again. Isn't that right, Seth?" Johnny's brown eyes bore into the cringing young man.

"Yeah," he muttered.

"What?"

"I said yes," Seth said more clearly.

"I could've called the cops, you know," Poff said pointedly.

"Seth, I think you owe Mr. Poff an apology," Johnny said to deflect Poff's wrath.

"Sorry about the knife," Seth mumbled, his eyes on his feet.

"We'll be on our way," Johnny said. "Mr. Poff, thank you for your patience and understanding." *Talk about humiliation.* "Come on, Seth."

"Watch yourself, kid," Poff threatened.



The drive home was strained. Johnny opened his mouth to speak more than once, only to stop himself for fear of coming across wrong.

"Seth, what is going on?" he finally asked.

"What do you mean?"

"First, the incident at the DeSotos. Then that...back there. Do you really expect me to believe you planned to pay for that knife?"

"I *told* you, I just forgot." Seth's tone was defensive.

"I know what you told me. I just find it hard to believe."

"Then don't believe me! No one else ever does."

"Was anyone with you?" Johnny quizzed.

"Huh?" Seth looked fleetingly panicked.

"Were you alone at the store, or with someone else?"

"I-I was alone. I don't know anybody here but you."

"I just thought maybe...someone put you up to this." Memories of childhood blackmail swam through John's consciousness. He shook his head. "I don't know what to think."

"I don't give a shit *what* you think! I'm telling the truth!"

"Cool it with the swearing, y'hear? I'm not impressed!" Johnny glared at his cousin, then back at the road.

"Look, we've got a few more days together. Let's see if we can just get through it without any more problems."

Seth rolled his eyes. "Sure, Cousin Johnny. Whatever you say."

Johnny bit back a harsh reply. "Seth, I'm not trying to be the bad guy here. I really was hoping we could have a good visit together. Get re-acquainted and have some good times. It's just...not going quite the way I—"

"Give me a break," Seth grumbled.

"What?"

"I said give me a break! You're just like all the rest! All this 'I wanna be your friend' garbage, and then boom, you're gone!"

"Seth—"

"No, it's true! Ten days! And it's half over. And in a few more days, you'll be rid of me and I'll never hear from you again. So quit pretending to care." Seth stared out the passenger side window.

*Maybe he's right. I abandoned him once. The way things are going this time around, I'm going to be glad to have him gone, and he knows it.*

They drove the rest of the way home in silence.



Around 5 am, John gave up on sleeping. With the exception of the odd doze here and there, he spent the whole night thinking about Seth. Unfortunately, he still had no ideas about what to do or how to get through to Seth.

All through the evening Seth didn't speak more than two words at any time, and only when conversation demanded an answer.

John sighed. He knew he had gotten in over his head after the incident at the sporting goods store. After much deliberation throughout the night, he came to the conclusion that he wasn't ready to give up on Seth yet.

*Why did I think it would be like it was when Seth was little?*

John looked over at the clock going on 5:15 am. *No use in trying to go back to sleep now. Might as well get up, grab a shower, and make some breakfast.*

John padded into the bathroom, and turned on the water, then stepped under the spray.

*Maybe Roy could give me some advice about what to do? No, Seth has upset his family enough. Besides it would be like admitting defeat to Roy. I'm not ready to do that.*

He shut off the shower and started to dry himself off.

*I can't believe there isn't some good in that kid, it just needs to be reached. We've got 5 days left together. Starting today, we are going to have some quality time together whether Seth likes it or not.*

Feeling better about reaching a decision, John walked out of the bathroom and headed to the living room. The TV was playing, as he came up the hall. John started into the living room.

"Seth, I'm glad you're up, We need to talk about..."

Johnny looked around. Seth wasn't in the living room. He went into the kitchen, it was empty. The cookie jar was on its side, open on the counter, empty.

John went back into the living room and looked out the window. Nothing, no one in sight at all.

"Damn Seth, where did you go now?"



Johnny spent two hours cruising the area streets in search of the wayward Seth. It was a few minutes before eight when, on a whim, he turned the Land Rover onto a paved path that would wind him through Fairview Park.

At this hour of the morning the park was nearly deserted. The paramedic paid little attention to the two joggers he passed, nor to the woman walking her dog he came upon a few minutes later. His eyes roamed the familiar grounds as he drove. Whenever Roy's kids stayed at his apartment Johnny always brought them here to make use of the swings, slides, and other play ground equipment. Not that he expected to see Seth taking a spin on the merry-go-round, but he couldn't think of anywhere else to look for the boy so figured this was a last ditch effort before returning home in defeat.

Johnny had almost driven the entire three mile length of the park's main road when he spotted a group of boys sprawled on top of two picnic tables. He did a quick head count and came up with ten. No, now that one boy had shifted position, make that eleven. Lucky number eleven. Seth.

The sight of the Land Rover coming to a stop caused Seth to hastily snub out his cigarette. Johnny had to admit he found that action funny. After the stunts Seth had already pulled, getting caught smoking another cigarette wasn't going to make much difference one way or another.

Johnny rolled down the driver's side window. He kept his facial expression neutral and his tone even when he said, "Seth, come on. Time to go."

"Who's that?" Pincher asked, as all the boys turned to stare at the paramedic.

"My cousin Johnny. The guy I'm stayin' with."

Pincher tossed the paramedic a big wave. "Hi, Cousin Johnny."

The other boys laughed and imitated their leader. "Hi, Cousin Johnny!"

Johnny had little use for smart aleck teenagers. His parents had raised him to be polite and respectful to all adults, even those who might not give him the same courtesy in return. However, he knew he'd only make things worse if he embarrassed Seth in front of these boys, so gave a small wave and a "Hi, guys," in return. He spoke to his cousin again. "Seth, come on."

"Tell him to go to hell," Pincher murmured. "You don't gotta do anything you don't wanna."

Seth looked over at Johnny. Although the paramedic's facial expression hadn't changed, Seth saw the firm set to his jaw. He knew Johnny wasn't going to leave without him, and also knew it wouldn't be beneath Johnny to drag him kicking and screaming to the Land Rover. Johnny might be skinny, but Seth had seen him without a shirt on. The paramedic's upper arms and shoulders were muscular, reflecting the time he spent lifting hoses and carrying people out of burning buildings. Seth knew he didn't want to get into a physical confrontation with his cousin. He'd been knocked around more than once by some of his mother's boyfriends. He had no desire to be on the receiving end of a beating again.

Seth turned to Pincher.

"Johnny...he's lettin' me stay with him while my mom's outta town."

"So?"

"So, I kinda gotta do what he says if I want food to eat and a place to crash at night."

Pincher nodded. He'd slept on the streets enough to understand the need for a soft bed and free chow.

"I see how it is, man. Ya' gotta do what ya' gotta do to keep your belly full. Maybe we'll see ya' later, huh?"

"Sure. Later."

The other guys called goodbye to Seth as he trotted for the Rover. When he was settled in the passenger seat and had the door shut Johnny put the vehicle in gear.

Pincher watched the Rover make its way out of the park. He turned to his friends.

"That is one far-out set of wheels. I bet we could all fit in that baby. You know, take her for a little spin up into the mountains even. Lift some beer and food, have ourselves a little cookout, pick up some chicks..."

"Get laid," a red headed boy called Opie added.

"You ain't gotta a chance in hell of gettin' laid anywhere but in Mayberry, Opie," Pincher scoffed. The teenager jumped off the picnic table, his friends following suit. "But me...well me, that's a different story. Anyway, we ain't talkin' about gettin' laid. We're talkin' about gettin' us some wheels. And that thing he was driving...what was it called?"

"A Land Rover," a blond headed fourteen year old named Tom eagerly supplied.

"Yeah, Tommy, that's right. A Land Rover. That is one real cool car. Reeeal cool."



Seth wasn't sure what Johnny was going to do to him for his latest misdeed, but he certainly didn't expect it to be pleasant. Johnny didn't say a word as he drove through morning traffic, and didn't spare the teenager so much as a glance.

*I.....I hope he doesn't take his belt to me. I took his money. He's gotta know that by now. I bet he's real pissed. He'll probably beat me good.*

Seth stared in puzzlement at the Shoney's sign when they pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

*Maybe he's just gonna dump me here and tell my mom this is where she can find me.*

Johnny shut the Rover off, climbed out, and pocketed his keys.

"Come on. Let's get some breakfast."

"What?"

"Breakfast. As in breaking the fast. That's what breakfast means, you know."

"No. Huh,...no. I didn't know that."

"Well, it does. So let's get inside before it's time for lunch."

Sometimes Seth thought Johnny was a little on the strange side, and this was one of those times. He knew his cousin had to be mad as hell at him, but yet the guy was taking him out for breakfast.

Johnny shot a charming grin at the forty-something waitress who came to their table.

"Hey, Sylvia."

"Hi, Johnny. No Roy today?"

"Naw. It's our day off."

Johnny and Roy often stopped here for breakfast when they were going off-shift.

"Who's the handsome guy you brought with you then? Looks a little young to be a fireman."

"My cousin Seth."

"Hi, Seth."

Seth never looked up from his menu. "Hey."

Sylvia didn't let Seth's attitude dissuade her. She had three moody teenagers of her own at home. She winked at Johnny.

"Kinda lacking the Gage charm, isn't he?"

Johnny smiled. "No doubt he'll grown into it."

When Johnny ordered a big breakfast of three pancakes, two eggs, four strips of bacon, toast, and a glass of milk, Seth followed suit.

*What the heck, if he's buyin' I might as well eat what I want. It's not like my mom ever takes me to a restaurant.*

Nothing was said between the pair until they'd finished their meal. Johnny thanked Sylvia when she brought him the bill. He waited until she'd walked away, then leaned back in the booth and looked at his cousin.

"You know, Seth, my dad always said making the wrong choices is an easy thing to do, and making the right choices is difficult. Difficult, but in the end rewarding."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Johnny stood. "You figure it out." He tossed the bill at Seth. "Pay that. And don't forget to leave Sylvia a nice tip."

Before Seth could protest Johnny was out the door. The boy allowed a full minute to pass, but when Johnny didn't return finally slid out of the booth. He dug three singles out of his pocket and left them on the table for Sylvia. Using a ten dollar bill he paid the cashier at the front register for their meal.

When Seth got in the Rover Johnny brought the engine to life. The boy was quiet as they drove. He didn't speak until Johnny turned the vehicle into a massive parking lot filled with freshly washed and waxed cars of every color, make, model and year.

"Whatta we doin' here?"

"There's a car show today. Thought we might see what they've got."

"You buyin' somethin' new?"

Johnny laughed. "I'd love to. But on my salary a person doesn't buy a '57 Corvette."

The paramedic lead the way with long strides. When they got to the gated entrance he looked over his shoulder. "Pay for our tickets, Seth."

Seth sighed as he reached into his pocket again. Eight dollars later he and Johnny were slowly walking amongst rows of classic cars. Seth didn't even notice when he stopped being sullen and started having a good time.



Roy had just finished tying his shoes when Johnny entered the locker room the next morning.

"Mornin', Junior."

"Hey, Roy."

"How was your time off?"

"Fine."

There was a hint of caution to Roy's voice when he asked, "How are things going with Seth?"

Johnny began exchanging his street clothes for his uniform while answering his partner.

"Okay."

"Did you punish him for the cigarettes?"

That question caused Johnny to take a deep internal breath before answering. He didn't think it was any of Roy's business whether or not he punished Seth, and he didn't like the tone of voice Roy was using with him. As though Johnny was too stupid to know a fourteen year old kid shouldn't be smoking. Any thoughts Johnny had about sharing with Roy his most recent problems regarding Seth left the thin paramedic at that moment.

*If I tell Roy the kid got caught stealing, and then ran off on me and seems to have found himself a gang of boys to hang out with, I'll never hear the end of it. I'll especially never hear the end of it if Roy finds out I took him to breakfast and the car show yesterday morning, and then bowling and out for pizza last night. Of course, I did make Seth pay for everything which just about wipes out the little stash he lifted from my cookie jar, but I doubt Roy will exactly consider that punishment.*

Johnny answered his partner as he tucked his shirt into his pants. "I told Seth he has to apologize to you, Joanne, and Chris."

"That's it?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Johnny..."

"Look, Roy, the kid's mom will be coming for him in four days. I'll let her handle it."

"It doesn't look like she's done a very good job of handling it so far."

"If this is all I'm gonna hear for the entire shift just drop it, okay? You might not think Ramona's done such a great job with Seth...hell, I don't even think she's done such a great job with him, but she's still my cousin."

Roy opened his mouth to respond to his partner's hot tone, then just as quickly shut it. Johnny didn't very often get seriously angry, but when he did the wise man respected his temper. For the sake of their friendship Roy changed the subject.

"You still coming to our picnic tomorrow afternoon?"

"Picnic?"

"Yeah, you know. The annual A-shift picnic Joanne and I host every year. She sent out the invitations a few weeks ago with the date."

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Well, to tell you the truth I was planning to come, but with Seth here and all... Maybe it would be best if I skipped it this year. I don't like leaving him by himself anymore than I have to. Mona's done enough of that to last the kid a lifetime."

"I don't expect you to leave him alone."

"Huh?"

"Bring him."

"No," Johnny shook his head. "After the trouble he caused for Joanne and Chris I,...."

"Johnny, Jo and I have already discussed it. The picnic won't be the same without you there. We want you to bring Seth."

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure." Roy smiled and gave his partner's arm a pat as he headed out for roll call. "Besides, it's like Joanne said. How much trouble can one fourteen year old get into with a back yard full of firemen?"

Thinking of the fun he and Seth had together the previous day caused Johnny to set aside his misgivings as he walked beside his partner to the engine bay.

"Yeah, you're right. How much trouble can the kid possibly get into?"



Seth had put up a fuss about having to attend the "stupid fireman's picnic," as he put it, but secretly he was kind of excited about it. He'd never been to a picnic before. As they drove to the DeSoto home he thought back over the last forty-eight hours. Johnny never had punished him for running out of the apartment, or for taking the money from the cookie jar, though Seth supposed having to pay for their day on the town was kind of a punishment. By the time it ended he only had fifteen dollars left, and Johnny made him hand that over when they walked into the apartment from bowling.

"Stealing from others is one of those easy choices, Seth," Johnny had said as he put his bowling ball in the

entry way closet. "Earning your own money is one of the difficult, yet rewarding choices."

"Earn it? How?"

"Oh, I imagine I can pay you say,.....five dollars a day to keep my apartment clean. You know, wash the dishes, keep the clothes picked up, clean the bathroom. Cleaning the inside of the Rover for me will earn you another five dollars. And Mrs. Hanson always needs help doing something. She might pay you to run errands for her, water the flowers, sweep the front hall, stuff like that."

Seth made a face that night, but the next day when Johnny was at work he did clean the apartment, and he did get hired by Mrs. Hanson to do some chores for her. By the time late afternoon rolled around the boy's work was finished. Mrs. Hanson paid him ten dollars, and Johnny had left five dollars on the counter in the kitchen with the understanding Seth only got to pocket it if the apartment was in tip top shape. Seth knew he wasn't supposed to leave the apartment while Johnny was at work, but he thought he deserved a reward for his day of labor. Besides, he was lonely. If Johnny was home they could do something together. Johnny liked to do lots of cool things Seth never had the opportunity to participate in before. But Johnny wasn't home, and Seth knew Pincher and the guys would be at the park. The teenager left the TV on so Mrs. Hanson wouldn't realize he was gone, then snuck down the back stairs and out the door.

Seth stayed out all night with the guys, but was wise enough to be home by the time Johnny arrived from his shift the next morning. The teenager cleaned the Rover for his cousin while Johnny took a nap. At two-thirty that afternoon they left for the picnic.

Once again Seth was told how he was to behave.

"The guys I work with are all gonna be there. They're a lot of fun, but I still expect you to be polite."

Seth rolled his eyes. "I know, I know. Speak when spoken to, don't mumble, and don't..."

Together they finished with, "roll your eyes."

Both Seth and Johnny laughed as Johnny parked the Rover next to the curb. Chet's car and Mike's station wagon were already in the driveway. Marco's car and Cap's car were parked at the curb as well.

Seth thought it felt neat to share a joke with Johnny, but his smile soon turned to a frown when he was told, "And you'll apologize to Roy, Joanne, and Chris today for the trouble you caused the last time you were here."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"No. No way. You didn't tell me that was part of the deal."

"There was *never* any deal, Seth. And I don't bargain with fourteen year olds. You caused trouble, now you have to take responsibility for your actions and apologize. That's just the way it is."

Seth thought about staying in the Land Rover and refusing to follow Johnny to Roy's back yard, but the smell of hamburgers cooking and the shouts of children at play were too alluring for the teen to pass up.

Johnny had no intention of humiliating Seth, so made certain the apologies were done in the privacy of the

DeSoto kitchen. Though Seth kept his head down the whole time, and barely raised his voice above a whisper, he did manage to get out, "Sorry for the trouble I caused. It won't happen again."

Roy and Joanne gracefully accepted the boy's apology like Johnny knew they would. Roy simply said, "I'm making some of those hamburgers you like so much, Seth," while Joanne said, "We're glad you could come with Johnny today. We look forward to this picnic all year long."

Like his parents, Chris DeSoto didn't appear to harbor any ill will against Seth. Even though he'd gotten his mouth washed out with soap by his mother for swearing, and gotten a stern lecture and earned a day of grounding from his father for smoking the cigarette, he ran for the patio doors shouting, "Come on, Seth. Let's play ball! Come on, Uncle Johnny! Chet says he's gonna beat your team this year!"

"No, he's not!" Johnny declared as he ran after the boys.

Joanne shook her head as she watched her husband's exuberant partner get all their guests involved in a game of soft ball in the DeSoto back yard.

"See, I told you it wouldn't be the same without Johnny here. Everyone was just sitting around talking, but the minute he arrives the fun starts."

Roy kissed his wife. "Yeah, wherever Johnny goes fun seems to follow." The man turned then and headed out to attend to his duties as chef.

As always, the A-shift picnic was a success. There was more than enough food to eat and fun to be had. Johnny's team won both softball games that were played, then the water balloon fights started. The women retreated to the safety of the DeSoto deck while the men and children raced around the back yard trying to drench one another.

Seth thought the picnic was pretty neat until the balloons started flying. Between Jennifer DeSoto, Mike Stoker's three children, and the four young nephews Marco had brought, there were too many little kids running around shrieking and screaming as far as Seth was concerned. The teenager slipped around the corner of the house and to the driveway. He took his cigarettes out of his back pocket, tapped one into his palm, and fished for his Bic lighter. He stood between Chet's Nova and Mike's station wagon smoking. He jumped when he heard a voice behind him.

"I thought Uncle Johnny punished you for that."

Seth looked down at Chris. The boy's hair and T-shirt were wet from the water fight.

"Naw. Nobody punishes me for nothin'."

"I got punished. I couldn't leave the house for the *whole* day. And the cigarette made me sick, too. I barfed. My dad said I deserved to feel yucky."

"I already told you I was sorry. What more do you want me to say?"

Chris shrugged. "Nothin' I guess."

Seth turned to lean against Chet's car.

"Don't do that. Chet doesn't like anyone on his car."

"I'm not on his car, I'm leaning against it."

"He doesn't like that, either."

"Why not? It's just a crappy little Nova."

"I don't know why he doesn't like it, but it's his property so he has the right to make the rules about it. That's what my dad says anyway."

Seth's eyes gleamed as he studied the little brown vehicle.

"Maybe he's hiding something in it."

"Like what?"

"Beats me. Let's find out."

Seth put out his cigarette then walked around the car trying to open both doors. When he found them locked he turned to Chris.

"Does your dad got a screwdriver in the garage?"

"Sure."

"Go get it."

"Why?"

" 'Cause I said so, that's why."

Chris ran off to do the older boy's bidding. Seth grinned as he slipped the straight edge tool Chris handed him into the lock on the Nova's hatch back. When it popped, he lifted the trunk's lid.

"Huh,...Seth, I don't think we should be,..."

"Holy shit! Would you look at these!"

Chris strained on tip toes in an attempt to see over Seth's shoulder.

"What?"

"This guy must have every Playboy magazine ever published."

Seth pulled out a glossy issue with a big breasted woman on the front wearing a bikini the size of a postage stamp that barely covered her attributes. He started leafing through the magazine. When he got to the centerfold he held it up. Chris made a face.

"What's all that?"

"That's how your mom looks naked."

Chris's eyes grew round with shock. "No way."

"Well,....maybe not your mom but,...." Seth scanned the area until he spotted the DeSotos' next door neighbor bending over pulling weeds from her flower bed. She was young, California blond, slender, knock-out gorgeous, long legged, and wearing pink hot pants and a white tube top that left little to a fourteen year old boy's imagination.

"Like her. That lady over there."

"Mrs. Kenner?"

"Yeah."

"Uncle Johnny thinks she's sexy. I don't know what that means, but I heard him tell my dad that one time when they didn't know I was standing behind them."

Seth practically shoved the center fold picture into Chris's face.

"And this is exactly why Johnny thinks she's sexy, 'cause this is what she looks like buck naked."

"Hey! Hey, what are you kids doing?"

The boys swiveled and plastered their backs to the Nova as a soaking wet Chet ran straight for them. The water fight had ended. Chet had been coming to get a towel out of his car, only to spot Seth and Chris standing in front of his open trunk. He saw the screwdriver protruding from the lock, and saw what Seth had in his hands.

"Why you little juvenile delinquent! What do you think you're doing breaking into my car! I oughta,..."

Chet's shouts brought everyone from the back yard. Roy could feel fury redden his face as soon as he came to the same conclusion Chet had. He wasn't angry with Chet, or with Chris, but Seth,....Seth he was ready to murder.

"Chris, go with your mother to the back yard please."

Chris knew better than to argue when his father looked this mad. Joanne ushered her children and Marco's nephews to the rear of the house. Mike Stoker's wife did the same with her three youngsters, and Captain Stanley's wife, Grace, followed simply because she didn't want to get caught up in the fray. At this moment Grace was thankful she and Hank had two daughters. *And*, that they were no longer teenagers.

"You damn little thief!" Chet yelled, both angry and embarrassed at the same time. He jerked the magazine from Seth's hands and tossed it face down in the trunk before slamming the lid closed. "You've got no business being near my car, let alone breaking into it!"

Chet turned to Johnny. "What are you gonna do about this, Gage?"

"I'll handle it, Chet," Johnny pushed out between clenched teeth. For reasons other than Chet's, he too, was embarrassed.

*Seth, how could you do this to me? How could you pull another stunt like this when we're at my best friend's house? And in front of my co-workers to boot.*

Johnny's, "I'll handle it," was all Roy needed to hear to completely blow his top.

"You'll handle it, Gage! You'll handle it how? The same way you handled the last time the kid did something wrong? By ignoring it! By making him apologize? Well I've got news for you, Johnny, an apology isn't gonna cut it this time! Seth has gone from teaching my son to smoke and swear, to teaching him how to break and enter! Not to mention the little issue of the Playboy magazines! Now, because of *your* cousin, I'm forced to have a talk with my son I hadn't planned on us having for at least another three years. Geez, Johnny, he's just a boy. Just nine. How the hell am I supposed to explain what he saw here this afternoon?"

"Roy...I'm sorry...I...."

"No! Don't you do his damn apologizing for him! Make him take responsibility for his actions for a change! I knew this was a mistake right from the start. You've got about as much business being in charge of someone's kid as I've got being in charge of a production of Swan Lake. I don't know a damn thing about ballet, and you don't know a damn thing about children!"

Hank Stanley could see Johnny's temper was about to ignite. He flicked his head toward the back yard, indicating to his men they should leave the paramedics to settle their differences in private. Marco and Mike were happy to get out of the battle zone, but Hank had to grab Chet by the arm and propel him around the corner of the house just as Johnny's voice was raised in a shout.

"Oh, I don't know a damn thing about children just because I'm not the All-American suburban father, is that it? Just because I'm not Roy Mr. Perfect DeSoto! Well, I've got news for you, Roy, you don't know everything! You don't know anything about Seth's life, or his background, or what he's had to deal with! If you did you wouldn't be so quick to stand in judgment of him!"

"I don't care about his background! All I care is that when he comes to my home he acts like a decent human being! Unfortunately, I have yet to see that! Which is exactly why I can't allow him back here. Ever! Take him home, Johnny. Take him home now."

Seth had stood between the two men during the entire argument. He didn't get any joy out of watching them fight, as a matter of fact he hated himself for what he caused to happen. But the expression on his face didn't show that. He'd learned a long time ago that vulnerability only got you shoved around by bullies. The best offense was a good defense, so in this situation the only thing you could do was act disinterested and removed from what was going on two feet away from you. Which is exactly what Seth did.

"Look at him, Gage! He doesn't even care! Doesn't even feel any regret over the trouble he's caused here today! Over the fact that he's ruined our picnic! And you expect *me* to feel sorry for him? Geez, Johnny, wake up and smell the roses, will ya'." Roy stomped toward the back yard. "Just...wake the hell up."

Johnny and Seth were left alone in the driveway. Every emotion Johnny was experiencing, from anger, to embarrassment, to humiliation, washed over him in one giant wave of feeling. He took a deep breath, met Seth's eyes, and growled, "Let's go."

Seth wasn't too certain he wanted to be in the Land Rover with Johnny right now, but the only other way he had to get back to Johnny's apartment was by walking. Johnny didn't say a word as they drove the six miles to his home. When they exited the Rover all Johnny did was point to the building. Seth walked ahead of his cousin, wondering now if he was going to get the beating he knew he deserved. Once they were inside the apartment Johnny headed straight for the kitchen. Seth could hear the refrigerator open, and could picture his cousin gulping down a glass of milk.

The teenager walked to the doorway of the kitchen. Johnny was standing at the counter with his back to Seth. His head was bent and his shoulders slumped with defeat.

Seth didn't know where the words came from he said next. Maybe from the place that wanted Johnny's love and respect.

"I'll get a belt."

Johnny turned. "What?"

Seth swallowed hard to hide his fear.

"A belt. From your closet. I...I'll get one for you."

"What do I need a belt for?"

"I...I screwed up this afternoon. Made Roy mad at you and embarrassed you in front of your friends. I...I gotta be punished. I...I know that. I...just tell me ahead of time how many whacks you're gonna give me so I'm...I'm ready for 'em."

Johnny's heart constricted at the boy's words. Yes, Seth deserved punishment, but not the type he was suggesting. Johnny doubted he could ever strike a child, and certainly not anything that went beyond a couple swats on the behind with his open palm if it came to that.

"Seth, I'm not going to...."

Before Johnny could finish his sentence the phone rang. He picked up the kitchen extension. Mona's voice came over the line.

"Mona, hi." Johnny put his hand over the mouth piece for a second. "It's your mom," he whispered to Seth with a smile that he hoped didn't broadcast his relief at the prospect of Seth's departure.

Johnny returned his attention to the phone as Seth stood by his side.

"Yeah, he's fine...oh, sure, we've been having...fun.

"What? You...what? Mona, you asked me to take Seth for ten days not...."

"Well...I suppose. I...yes, I understand. I...all right, Mona, yeah. Yeah, I can do that. Do you wanna talk to Seth...Mona? Mona?"

Johnny slowly hung up the receiver, not certain of what he was going to say to Seth. He didn't have to say anything, however. The boy's face held a mixture of anger and tears.

"She's not coming for me, is she? She dumped me again!"

"It's only for another ten days, Seth," Johnny attempted to pacify. "Just until she and your stepfather can get their new home in order. Get your room ready for you and...."

"Bullshit! That's bullshit! She doesn't want me! He doesn't want me! Well, see if I care! You can tell her that, too! You can tell her I don't care if I ever see her face again!"

Before Johnny could stop him Seth ran out the door. The paramedic ran after the teenager, but Seth had too much of a head start. By the time Johnny got to the street he'd lost sight of the boy.

Johnny turned and trudged back to his apartment building. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

*Damn you, Mona. Damn you.*



It had been three long hours since Seth left. It was all Johnny could do not to go out and search for the boy, but he knew he needed time to himself. He only hoped that Seth was alone, and had not met up with Pincher. Johnny looked at the clock for the hundredth time. *I'll give him fifteen more minutes...then I'll start looking again.*

He jerked his head toward the door at the sound of the knob turning, and he watched with relief as Seth walked through the door. The first thing he noticed was Seth's black eye.

"What happened?" Johnny asked, looking for any other signs of injury.

"Nothin'," Seth mumbled.

Johnny could smell beer on Seth's breath. "Have you been drinking?" he asked.

"What difference would it make if I have," Seth answered definantly, looking Johnny in the eye for the first time since he got home.

Johnny looked at Seth and took a deep breath. "Seth, go get cleaned up. You have 15 minutes to shower and change, then we're gonna have a nice long talk."

Seth turned without another word and headed toward the bathroom. Johnny sat down on the sofa and put his head in his hands. *How could you let things get so out of hand, Mona? What am I going to say to him? How are we ever going to make it through an extra 10 days?*

Seth returned to the livingroom twenty minutes later, having showered, changed, and brushed his teeth. Besides the black eye, he looked none the worse.

"Seth," Johnny began, "let's start by you telling me where you've been the last three hours, and what you've been doing." Johnny motioned for the teen to sit down.

"I just needed some time to think," Seth answered, still standing. His arms were crossed defensively.

Johnny sighed. "Sit down."

Seth sat in the chair across from the sofa, his attitude revealing his displeasure.

"Where'd you get the beer?" Johnny asked.

Seth turned his head without answering.

"Okay, if you won't talk, you're going to listen," Johnny stated calmly. "Consider yourself from this point

forward under house arrest. You don't leave this apartment unless I'm with you. If I--" Johnny stopped talking mid-sentence and just looked at the half grown boy in front of him. Memories of a bad rescue suddenly flooded his mind. The face of another teenage boy...

Seth sulked, wanting this whole day to be over with, waiting for Johnny to explode with anger and to scream and yell at him. He waited, but suddenly he realized Johnny wasn't talking anymore. He looked up, to find his cousin staring off in the distance.

"Pincher's brother bought the beer," Seth found himself saying. "He's eighteen. He's been getting the smokes too."

Johnny nodded sadly, but still didn't speak. Seth found the silence more disturbing than being yelled at. At least when someone yelled at him he could yell back.

"I only had one," he continued. "I would have had more if Pincher hadn't left." Seth watched his cousin's reaction carefully.

Johnny closed his eyes. *I could use one myself...* "You won't be seeing Pincher or his brother anymore," Johnny said. "When I'm at work tomorrow, I'm going to call here every hour, or it could be even more often than that. You make sure you're here to answer the phone."

"And if I'm not?"

"I'll call the police and have them find you and pick you up."

"You'd do that to your own cousin?"

"I'll do whatever I have to to keep you safe."

"And going to juvey would keep me safe? Get real, man!"

"No, *you* get real," Johnny'd finally had enough. "Now you get this in your head, and you keep it there. If you don't straighten up, and I mean now, juvenile hall might be safer than the alternative. The alternative can get you *real* dead."

"Drinking beer won't kill me, Johnny."

"Seth," Johnny began, frustration in his voice, his head bowed. "In my job, I get to see a lot of things that most people only read about or hear in the news." He sighed and shook his head. "I really don't feel like getting into that," he laughed at himself for his inability to discuss what was on his mind. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. You just plan on getting to know this apartment really well, because you won't see the light of day when I'm at work."

"Why are you doing this?" Seth asked.

"Doing what? Punishing you?"

"My mom goes off all the time and doesn't bother to call. Why should you?"

"I care about you, Seth. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Seth leaned back, at a loss for words. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had said that to him. His own mother certainly didn't care. He eyed Johnny suspiciously. *I bet he doesn't really care. Nobody cares.* "I'd like to go to bed," he said, pointing to the sofa that he'd been sleeping on.

When Johnny nodded, Seth left the room and soon returned with a pillow and blanket. He threw them in a heap on top of the sofa and plopped himself down. He felt for all the world like crying, but there was no way he'd let that happen.



Johnny went into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk before going into his bedroom. He lay on top of his bed and grabbed the book on the bedside table. He opened it and stared at the words, but he couldn't concentrate enough to read. His mind wandered to the rescue he thought he'd put behind him. *Seth looks a lot like that kid...about the same age...Brackett said it wouldn't have mattered if we'd gotten there sooner...poor kid...he wanted his mom...oh...if only we could have kept him going long enough for him to see her...he was so young...*

"Johnny?"

Johnny's head jerked up at the sound of his name. Seth stood in the doorway, looking younger than his 14 years. Johnny waited for Seth to say something.

Seth just shook his head. "Nevermind...g' night."

"G' night, Seth."



The next morning, Johnny fixed breakfast for himself and Seth, and reminded the boy about staying inside the apartment today and tonight.

"I hate it that my job keeps me away 24 hours at a time, but it does and I can't change that. I'm going to have to trust that you do as I've asked. Don't let me call here and not get an answer."

"What if I'm in the bathroom or something and can't get to the phone?" Seth questioned.

Johnny sighed. "If I don't get an answer, I'll call back in five minutes."

"Well, what if I'm sleeping?"

"Seth!"

Seth raised both hands in the air. "Could happen. I'm a heavy sleeper, man."

Johnny shook his head. "I've got to go. See you in the morning."

"Bye, Johnny."

"Stay outa trouble, Seth."

Seth grinned innocently. *Sure, cuz...anything you say.*



Roy had the contents of his locker on the bench, sorting through what to keep and what to take home. Chet and Marco had finished changing into their uniforms and were on their way to the kitchen.

Chet stopped in the door, holding it open. "You waitin' for Gage?"

"Nah, sorting through my locker," Roy answered quietly.

"Maybe he's gonna call in sick."

Roy shrugged. "Maybe."

"You know, I was thinkin' about it last night. What the kid did wasn't John's fault. He's really got his hands full with Seth. I mean, he's not the kid's father." Chet trailed off, then shrugged. "I'll save you some coffee."

Roy watched the door swing shut, then turned back to his locker. He'd started feeling guilty about the things he'd said to John almost immediately after the Land Rover drove away from the house. *Johnny was right. I don't know what kind of life Seth's had. And that can make a big difference on how a kid acts.* Roy sighed, remembering his own rebellion after his father died.

The door opened and Cap stuck his head in. "Roll Call."

Roy frowned and followed Cap out into the vehicle bay. John was already in his place next to Marco. Roy took his place to John's right, surprised to see the paramedic already dressed in his uniform.

"Morning," Roy muttered. "Running late?" *Damn it. Why'd I say that?*

John kept his head up, eyes forward and didn't respond.



"John, Roy? You guys step in here for a minute?"

Johnny looked up from his inspection of the drug box and nodded shortly. "Be right there, Cap." He closed the box and returned it to its compartment, pointedly stepping around Roy and entering the captains' office. Roy felt a stab of guilt as Johnny walked past, and followed a little more slowly.

"Shut the door, if you would," Hank suggested.

Johnny did as he asked, and turned to face Hank again.

"Sit down," Hank said easily, gesturing at the chair next to his desk.

Johnny's mouth twisted in a scowl, but he sat. Roy reluctantly pulled out a second chair and followed suit.

"I think maybe we need the air cleared here," Hank said, glancing from one man to the other.

Johnny lifted a quizzical eyebrow, then dropped his gaze to study his fingers a minute, saying nothing.

"Johnny." Roy's voice trailed away as Johnny flashed him an angry look. "Look, you think I'm happy about how things turned out?" Roy felt his own ire rising. "I know I shouldn't have lost my temper, but hell, Johnny, he broke into Chet's car!"

Johnny glared at him a moment, then shifted in his chair. "You know," he began, his voice deadly even, "you all seem to forget one thing." He glanced at Hank, then returned his attention to his partner. "That kid isn't my kid. I didn't raise him. I'm not responsible for his lack of morals. All I can do now is the best that I can to keep him from causing too much more damage before his mother comes back." He paused for a shaky breath, forcing down his fury. "So, you can all stop blaming me for his mistakes, okay?"

"No one's blaming you, John." Hank's voice was calm.

"Like hell," Johnny spat. "You all made it seem as if I'm the one who turned him into a thief and a liar. You think I condone that kind of behavior? You think I'm not embarrassed by what he did?"

"I think we were upset that you defended him, is all," Hank tried.

"I was defending myself, Cap!"

Both Roy and Hank blinked at his vehemence.

He turned to Hank. "Is the air clear enough now?"

"I'm sorry, Johnny." Roy's voice was low and contrite.

Johnny looked at him. "Yeah," he replied, "me, too. But probably not for the same reasons." His head lifted. "Can I go now?"

Hank sighed and nodded. "Well, that went real well, didn't it?" he said after Johnny had left.

Roy looked at him miserably. "He's right, Cap," he said quietly. "I broke his trust in me." He shook his head. "He'll be my partner, but I don't know if he'll allow me to be his friend anymore." With a heavy sigh, he rose and followed his partner from the office.

Hank stared after him. *They sure don't teach this stuff in Captain School,* he told himself bitterly.



Resentment was beginning to eat at Seth's stomach like a greasy burger. Lying around watching television all day didn't have the same attraction when he was forced to do it. He pushed himself off the couch and clicked off the TV. Restlessly, he walked around the small apartment, looking for something to do. He gave a glance at the dirty dishes on the counter and stubbornly crossed his arms. "I ain't doing no dishes, no how, Cousin Johnny! You ain't my dad!" he swore, and kicked the closest dining room chair.

He wheeled away from the dining area and began pacing around the apartment, kicking furniture and cursing to himself. Juvey can't be any worse than THIS! He grabbed a pillow off the couch and threw it as hard as he could down the short hallway that led to the restroom and Johnny's bedroom. Seth stalked down the hall to pick up the pillow so he could throw it at something else, when he noticed the door to Johnny's bedroom was slightly ajar. He realized he had never considered going into his cousin's room as long as he'd been here. Curious and a bit apprehensive, he pushed the door open all the way and stepped into the room.

It was a typical man's room, he guessed, though he hadn't seen very many. There was a full jar of change on the dresser. Seth figured he'd keep it in mind if he needed some bread.

He looked at the photos stuck in the mirror on the dresser. Many of the people in the pictures he recognized as the firemen Johnny worked with and their families. Some of the photos were really good landscapes. His eyes wondered around the room. When he saw a nice camera case and tripod, he realized Johnny must have taken the photos himself. He wondered if Johnny would show him how to take photographs like that.

Getting braver, Seth began pulling open dresser drawers. Most held the usual assortment of socks and underwear and jeans, but the bottom drawer was different. In that one, he found a large box, which he pulled out and set on the floor. He found more photos in it, mostly of the firemen Johnny worked with, especially Roy DeSoto. Throwing those out on the floor, he dug deeper in the box and found a collection of newspaper clippings.

Seth settled down on the floor and started reading the articles. They all seemed to be rescues Johnny had been on. One in particular caught his eye, because the paper seemed to have been crumpled together, then opened up and smoothed down. He couldn't tell a lot from the newspaper photo, but it looked like a really bad car wreck. The clipping included a school photo of a boy who had died in the wreck. Seth realized the boy looked kind of like himself. When he read further, he discovered the boy had been getting high with some friends, and had then crashed head on into a bridge abutment. Seth looked off into the distance and for the first time, wondered what Johnny's job was really like.

Suddenly the phone beside the bed rang. Startled, Seth jerked and accidentally tore the clipping. Horrified at what he had just done, and realizing it had to be Johnny calling, he dove across the bed and grabbed the phone.

"Yeah..." he said breathlessly and feeling more than a little guilt at getting caught looking through his cousin's private things. He waited for Johnny's usual question, asking if he was okay.

"Yeah...Listen, do you think you could lay off the phone for awhile? I mean, like, it's 10:00 and I'm thinking about going to bed...I get grouchy when people wake me up in the middle of the night...Where do you think I'm gonna go? Yeah...yeah...okay. Night."

When Seth set the phone back on the hook, he settled back on the bed, his hands behind his head. He'd never thought about what he wanted to do when he got out of high school - if he ever got out. He idly wondered if being a fireman was something worth looking into.

A slight sound coming from the front of the apartment caught his attention. He sprang off the bed and ran to the living room, remembering to close the door to Johnny's room. He just hoped it wasn't that nosy landlady, Mrs. Hanson. Then he realized the sound he'd heard was not a knock, but the sound of somebody trying to get in the apartment. His heart started thumping as he backed away from the entrance. But before he got very far, the door swung open. Kneeling in the doorway with a credit card in his hand, was Pincher. Behind him stood four of his friends.

Pincher grinned and stood up. "My brother taught me how to do that last night. Pretty cool, huh?"

"What are you guys doing here? How did you find out where my cousin lived?" Seth asked nervously. "And how did you know I'd be here alone?"

Pincher and his friends swaggered into the apartment and closed the door. "Don't worry 'bout it. I got lots a contacts, that's all...and your cousin's car wasn't here." Pincher took a quick look around the apartment. "Anything worth anything?"

Seth watched the four other boys began moving around the apartment, opening the refrigerator, looking into cabinets, even going into the back rooms. "Hey, lay off, Pincher! I gotta live here a few more days."

"Poor little baby boy," Pincher said in a mocking voice. "He's afraid of what his big bad Injun cousin will do to him if we borrow a few things."

Seth's eyes grew big when one of the boys walked out of Johnny's room with the camera case in his hand and his pockets bulging with change. "Leave it, Opie!" His voice grew louder and angrier.

Pincher wheeled around and grabbed the front of Seth's shirt. His thrust his fist into Seth's face. "You want me to sic Opie on you again, little boy, so he can black your other eye?" Seth was taller than Pincher, but the LA boy had an air of authority that Seth admired.

"No...I just...I...gotta live here with him... 'til my mom gets me. He's gonna call the cops on me if I mess up again!"

Pincher let him go. "Nah, he won't. He ain't the type, I can tell." Taking a last look around the apartment, he waved the four boys out the door. "We're gonna go pawn the camera and get my brother to buy us some beer." He turned to Seth. "You ever sniffed gas or glue before?"

"No."

"Come on, we'll teach you." Pincher grabbed Seth's arm and pulled him out of the apartment. "It's cool, man. You go floating along, and all the bad feelings just disappear. We got a place where nobody bothers us."

Allowing himself to be pulled along, Seth at least had the presence of mind to close the apartment door. His head was in a whirl of emotions. He was angry and afraid at the same time. How had he gotten into this mess?

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## PART 2

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