

PART 2

"Johnny," Roy said tentatively as he sat on the bench in the locker room, readying his bunker pants for the night, "listen, is there something I can do? You know I'm really sorry about what I said at the picnic." *Man, I hope I can reach him. He hasn't said more than two words to anyone all day.* He watched Johnny turn off the faucet and shake his hands over the sink.

Johnny grabbed a towel from the rack and dried his face. He stared in the mirror. His expression remained neutral, his jaw flexed from side to side. Johnny sighed deeply, then turned around. "I know you're sorry, Roy." He tossed the towel into the hamper. "I don't know if anybody can help Seth, except some kind of therapist or a shrink." Johnny walked over to his locker and pulled it open. "Did I tell you I heard from Mona?" he asked solemnly.

"No," Roy shook his head. "What did she say?"

"She wanted me to keep Seth for another 10 days so she could get her new house in order." Johnny looked at Roy, disbelief in his eyes. "I had to say yes, or the kid would be out on the street." He removed his unbuttoned uniform shirt, and hung it neatly in his locker. "I'm really worried about Seth. He's headed for a fall, Roy, and I don't know if I'll be able to stop him from going over the edge." He grabbed his uniform jacket and closed his locker. "He's a good kid at heart, but he's got some real problems I'm not sure I can handle." Johnny glanced at the clock, "He doesn't trust his mother, and he sure doesn't trust me. I'm doing what I can," he said as he locked eyes with Roy, "but it's not enough." His shoulders slumped as he walked out of the locker room.

Roy stared at the door as it closed behind Johnny. *He's in over his head, way over his head, and he knows it.*



"Didn't I tell you it would be fun?" Pincher slapped Seth's back as the youth removed the paper sack from around his nose and mouth. He pulled his jacket closer. The cool night air flowed through the broken windows of the old warehouse. He leaned back against one of the old packing crates that still littered the floor.

Seth smiled lazily. "Yeah, Man, you were right." He passed the bag to Opie, and took a bottle of beer from Pincher. "This is cool."

"Sure beats bein' at Cousin Johnny's, now, don't it?" asked Opie. "Man, we need to go back and take a second look at that place. That camera was worth a mint!"

"I know what I want," said Pincher, as he grabbed a gasoline-saturated rag and held it to his face. He inhaled deeply, then threw it to the ground. "That Rover of his is perfect for a little...family picnic in the woods."

"Or the mountains," added Seth numbly. He took the paper bag back from Tim, and took another hit. "My cousin took me hiking one day. It was pretty cool."

Pincher scoffed. "I'll bet. I'm sure Mr. Fireman really knows how to have a good time." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and held them out for the rest of the group. He puffed as Tim held a lit match to the end of the cigarette, then flicked the embers off.

Tim tossed the still lit match on the floor.

Opie jumped at a "poof" that sounded behind him. "Hey!" he pointed to the flaming rag, "be careful, will ya?"

The boys stared in awe as the rag burned itself out. "That was cool," Pincher said. A dangerous smile crossed

his face. He studied the interior of the warehouse. "You know," he turned to his compatriots, "why don't we do the county a little favor?" He held up a warning announcing the building's condemnation and impending demolition. He draped an arm around Seth's shoulders. "Who knows? Maybe we'll see Mr. Fireman himself pay this joint a visit." He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, then picked up the gas can.

Seth's expression darkened through his induced haze. "You're not gonna...?"

Pincher opened the gas can, and sprinkled its contents liberally on the nearby boxes and the floor. "Yeah, I'm gonna...." He moved menacingly toward Seth, and made as if he were going to shower Seth with the fluid. Pincher laughed at Seth's raised arms, and stopped. "You got a problem with that?"

Seth shook his head.

"Good!" Pincher emptied the rest of the gasoline and threw his lit cigarette onto the cartons. He slapped Seth on the back and watched the boxes burst into flame.

The gang stared, momentarily transfixed by the colors in the flames. "Let's go outside and watch the rest of the show." Pincher whistled happily as he led the the boys from the warehouse.



John sighed and leaned up against the wall, massaging his temples. He'd let the phone ring at least fifteen times before coming to the conclusion that Seth was not going to answer and finally hanging up. *This is just great! All I need! Now, how am I supposed to get any sleep?*

"You look pretty beat," Roy surmised. He opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk and poured two glasses full. He handed one to his discouraged looking partner, who accepted it with a weary smile. "You want to talk about it?"

John hesitated, reluctant to discuss Seth with Roy. "I tried calling home, no one answered," he finally stated, looking down at the floor. "I don't know if he's there and just not answering to annoy me...or what."

Roy simply nodded his understanding. *Wish I knew what to say....* "Maybe...maybe he's just sleeping?"

"Maybe..."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of the klaxons.

"Station 51, Station 36...structure fire..."

Both men set their glasses on the table and headed for the squad.



Seth and the other boys quickly found their way out of the old warehouse. The building was being rapidly consumed by the flames and the temperature seemed unbearable. With relief, they stepped out in to the street and turned to watch the flames shoot out of the first floor windows. It was after a few minutes that they realized one of them was missing.

"Hey, where's Opie?" asked Tim, still slightly out of breath.

"He was right behind me," Seth answered, looking around the deserted street. He now could hear sirens in the distance and his first reaction was that they needed to get away from there.

"Damn! We're gonna get busted!" shouted Pincher. "We gotta get outta here!"

"We can't just leave Opie in there!" Tim shouted back. He grabbed Pincher by the sleeve as the other boy attempted to flee the scene.

Pincher roughly pulled out of the grasp and shoved Tim hard, knocking him to the ground. "I ain't hangin' around here until the cops show up! You losers want to go back in there...be my guest! I'm getting the hell outta here!"

The two boys watched as Pincher sprinted down the street. Tim got to his feet and glanced uncertainly at the burning building and back to Seth. Finally, he shook his head remorsefully and began walking backwards in the direction Pincher had fled in. "He's right...there's nothin' we can do. We gotta get outta here or we're gonna end up in a lot of trouble!"

"But...we can't...just..." Seth's eyes grew wide in disbelief, he looked back at the building. Seth didn't particularly care for Opie, but didn't wish him any harm, either. *Come on out of there, Opie!*

Tim grabbed Seth by the arm. "Come on!" He turned around and began jogging away, pulling Seth along behind him.

Hesitantly, Seth followed the other boy down the street. Two blocks away, Tim turned left and darted between two buildings, not looking back. Seth stopped abruptly and watched as the other disappeared down the dark alley.

Out of breath, he took a chance and peered around the corner of the building. He could see the flashing lights of a police car that was parked in the intersection. *Damn! Cops!* He watched as fire engines began arriving. *What if they don't find him? How will they even know he's in there?*

He wrestled with his conscience for another brief moment before coming to a decision. Taking a deep breath, he headed back toward the warehouse. He resigned himself to facing whatever outcome was in store for him. *I guess I'll worry about going to jail later.*

He noticed the number '51' on the first engine. *Oh man! I'll bet Johnny is here!* He wasn't sure whether he felt relief or dread over that probability. He jogged toward the engine, seemingly unnoticed in the midst of the activity.

Suddenly, somebody grabbed him firmly by the arm. "Hey! You're Gage's little cousin! What are you doing here?"

Little? Oh great! The "Playboy" guy! "Uh...I think...there's somebody...my friend is still in there."

Chet Kelly regarded the teenager suspiciously, before pulling him by the arm, to the other side of the engine. "Cap!" he called out, directing Seth up to the captain, who was shouting orders in to the HT. Stanley turned toward them, surprise registering in his features, he gave Kelly his full attention. "Cap, the kid here... thinks there's someone in the building."

Captain Stanley studied Seth for only a moment, before returning to action. "Gage! DeSoto!" he shouted, gesturing for the two paramedics. John and Roy, adjusted their SCBA and jogged from the side of the squad, over to the captain.

Johnny was immediately aware of the identity of the boy standing next to his captain, he was also clearly aware of the implications of his presence. *Oh God Seth!* He suddenly had a sick feeling in his stomach. Chancing a quick glance at Roy, he could tell by the sympathetic expression, that his partner was thinking the same thing.

"We could have a victim inside, somewhere on the first floor," Hank informed, nodding at Seth. "I want you guys to get in and out. Real quick!"

"Right, Cap," Roy acknowledged and pulled his facemask down in to place. "Come on, Johnny."

Bestowing one last despondent look on his charge, John followed his partner through the wide spray of water pouring over the entrance of the warehouse.

"I can't see a thing!" Roy shouted, once inside the building. "Stay close!"

They progressed through the first floor, searching as thoroughly yet quickly as they were able. The increasingly thick blanket of smoke was making their attempt seem nearly futile, but as the paramedics made their way back to the point of entry, they spotted the boy.

Focusing the beams from both flashlights on the figure, they were able to distinguish the teenager lying beneath the rubble that had come from a large portion of a wall that had collapsed. Johnny hurriedly removed enough of the pieces for Roy to slide the boy away from the pile. They carefully placed him over Roy's shoulders and once again made their way toward the exit.

They had almost made it to the door when a large chunk of ceiling came crashing down. Roy continued out of the warehouse with his victim, hurrying past Marco and Chet who stood aiming a hose in their direction.

"Johnny's still in there!" Chet yelled to Marco. "I'm going in after him!"

Marco nodded his acknowledgment and gripped the hose tighter, while Chet rushed back in to find John.

Roy, with the help of Captain Stanley, gently laid the unconscious form on a small grassy patch of ground, near the squad. "Cap, can you grab the bio-phone and the O2?" He forced himself to remain focused on the patient, in spite of his concern for his partner.

"Wh-where's Johnny?" Seth finally spoke up, kneeling next to the paramedic.

Roy removed his helmet and glanced over at Seth, noting the hint of panic in the boy's eyes. *Are you afraid for Johnny...or for yourself?* He chose not to answer, afraid of what he might say at the moment. Restraining his anger toward Seth, he adjusted the oxygen mask over the other boy's face and went about assessing his injuries.

"Here they come!" Stanley related, clapping Roy on the shoulder.

Roy looked up from his task, a wave of relief washed over him. Johnny, with help on either side to support him, was safely out of the building and being brought in his direction. He heard a voice next to him whisper... "Thank you."



Seth watched nervously as Johnny and Opie were loaded into the ambulance. In the melee that had followed

Johnny's removal from the burning building, the boy had been nearly forgotten. Johnny had been conscious, but a bit disoriented. To Seth's relief, his cousin was confused enough to overlook the teen's presence at the scene. The boy watched as Roy DeSoto climbed inside and the ambulance departed. Seth turned away, hoping to make a quick getaway, but a restraining hand on his arm stopped him.

"Not so fast."

Seth stared into the face of the fireman with the playboy collection. *What was his name? Chad?* "I ...ah...was gonna take the bus to the hospital...see about Johnny."

Chet held onto Seth's arm, leading him to the squad. "I'm driving the squad in. You can hitch a ride with me. I think some people will be very interested in talking to you."

A knot formed in the pit of Seth's stomach as Chet opened the passenger door. Resigned, the teenager climbed into the squad, then huddled in the corner, staring out the window as the fireman started the engine and pulled away.



Dixie McCall stood back as Roy DeSoto and the attendants unloaded the injured boy from the ambulance. "Room 4," she said as she deftly maneuvered a wheelchair around the gurney. She looked into the ambulance at the dark-haired man who sat in the back with his eyes closed. "And you come with me."

"I'm fine, Dix," Johnny protested. "I don't need that."

"Let us be the judge of how fine you are." She gestured to the chair. "Let's go, Mister."

Johnny sighed and slowly stood up. He grabbed onto the walls of the vehicle, waiting until a wave of dizziness subsided. When he opened his eyes, the head nurse was frowning as she moved to help him.

"You don't look so fine." She led Johnny to the wheelchair, practically pushing him into the seat.

"Just tired." He sneaked a peak at her expression and knew that she wasn't buying his story. Silently, she pushed him into Treatment Room 2.



Chet stared at the sullen boy as they drove towards Rampart. "So, what were you doing at that fire, kid?"

Seth didn't answer.

Chet shrugged. "Don't tell me then. I'm sure the cops will get an answer from ya."

Seth felt his stomach flip-flop, but his sulky expression never changed. Finally he glanced at Chet. "We was just walkin' by."

The fireman snorted. "Right. Just walking by. And your friend runs into a burning, abandoned building ...for no reason. Come off it, kid. You think anyone will buy that trash?"

"It's the truth," Seth said hotly, desperately trying to come up with a plausible story. "My friend saw a...a cat run into the building. He went in to get it."

Chet shook his head. "If you were my cousin, I'd have turned you over my knee about a week ago." He paused. "You know, kid, I knew guys like you growin' up. You're on a fast track to trouble. I just hate to see you taking Gage with ya." He pulled into the Rampart's emergency entrance.

Seth turned his head and looked out the window, trying to calm the butterflies that churned in his gut.



Roy sighed as he poured himself a cup of coffee. He sat at the small table in the lounge and shook his head. *What a mess!*

The door opened and Chet Kelly entered the room, heading for the half-empty coffeepot. "How's that kid?" He sipped the strong brew and grimaced.

Roy shook his head. "Not good. They think the beam broke his spine. He may never walk again. Plus, he's still unconscious."

Chet sat down heavily. "Stupid kids. What the hell were they thinking?"

DeSoto shrugged, staring into his mug. "Speaking of, where's Johnny's cousin?"

Chet grinned. "Outside, talking to Vince. I hope he scares that kid to within an inch of his life. He needs it."

Roy nodded.

Chet glanced at Roy. "Any word on Johnny?"

"Mild concussion." Roy sipped his coffee. "They're gonna want to keep him overnight."

Kelly glanced up at his co-worker. "What'll happen to the kid?"

Roy sighed. "I guess Vince will take him into custody for a night. Put him in a center. Unless..." He trailed off, frowning.

Chet glanced up. "Unless?"

Roy finished his coffee and walked to the sink. "I guess I could take him, but..."

"...but you don't want to," Chet finished.

Roy put the mug on the drainboard. "That kid worries me, Chet. He's trouble. As much as I want to help Johnny, I don't want to subject Joanne and my kids to Seth."

Chet nodded. "Hey man, you don't have to convince me. I don't blame you."

"Damn!" Roy swore softly.

Chet stood up. "Roy, you don't have anything to feel guilty about. That kid is not your responsibility."

Roy nodded. "I know, Chet. But, Johnny is my best friend. What kind of friend am I being?"

Chet stood silently, not sure of what to say.

Roy sighed again. "I'm gonna go check on Johnny." He walked slowly to the door and exited. Chet shook his head as he watched Roy go. Then, he cleaned his mug and went out to find Seth.



"Really, Dix," protested Johnny as she started a new I.V., "I feel fine." He flashed a crooked grin at the head nurse, then jumped as he felt the needle inserted beneath his skin.

"Ouch."

"I'm sure you do," Dixie said, unconvinced. She attached the tubing and smiled tiredly at the paramedic. "Somehow, I think that 'ouch' also included the pounding headache you're probably feeling right about now." She gathered the wrappers off the bed and threw them in a nearby garbage can. "You can't fool me, John Gage. The glazed look in your eyes, and the tint of green around your gills tells me you're feeling pretty lousy." She patted Johnny reassuringly on the arm. "Kel will be in shortly. He's looking over your skull films now." Dixie stuffed her hands in the pockets of her uniform.

"I guess there's no foolin' you," Johnny said flatly. "Yeah, I've got a headache, and I'm a little queasy, but at least the room's not spinning when I move." He rubbed his eyes, then rested his hands on his chest. *Won't even mention the ringing in my ears.* "So, what are you doing here at this time of the morning?"

"One of the nurses went home sick, so they called me in early." Dix looked at her watch. "Hopefully, I can leave a little early to make up for it." She headed towards the door. "Get some rest," she admonished. "I'll be back later to check on you."

"Thanks, Dix." Johnny put his arm over his eyes and closed them tightly. *These bright lights aren't helping either. Man, it feels like I got some dude with a jackhammer breaking up a sidewalk in my head.* He rubbed his eyes, and his temples. *I remember pulling up to the fire, and going in after some kid, but the rest is pretty fuzzy. I wish I could just sleep the rest of the day, but what am I gonna do about Seth? I can't leave him alone all day. Can't ask Roy to bail me out of this one.* Johnny's heart sank as a picture of Seth standing at the fire scene flashed in his mind. *Seth. What have you gotten yourself into now? I shoulda just stayed home the rest of the week. He wouldn't have gotten in this mess if I'da been there.* Johnny opened his eyes at the sound of the door opening. "Hi, Doc."

"How are you feeling now, Johnny?" Dr. Brackett set an x-ray folder on the counter, then approached the bed.

"Fine, Doc," Johnny shrugged and smiled unconvincingly at Dr. Brackett. "Just a little headache. I'm ready to get out of here." *Little headache, my butt.*

"Uh-huh." Dr. Brackett twitched his mouth in amusement. "Let me take another look at you, okay? Then we can discuss whether or not you can leave." He pulled a penlight out of the pocket of his lab coat. "First, I need you to answer a few questions. What's your name?"

Johnny sighed. "Do we have to do this?"

"Yes, Johnny," Dr. Brackett replied firmly. "You were unconscious, and disoriented. Now, tell me your name."

Johnny frowned. "John Gage," he said grudgingly.

"What place is this?" Dr. Brackett asked.

"Rampart, General."

"What day is it?"

"Tuesday...wait, no, Wednesday?" Johnny looked up at the doctor.

Dr. Brackett nodded. "It's Wednesday." He held up his right index. "Follow this with your eyes. Don't move your head."

Johnny followed the moving finger of Dr. Brackett with his gaze. The queasiness increased in this stomach.

"Okay, Johnny," Dr. Brackett held his finger still. "Touch your nose, then reach for my finger."

Johnny pulled his right hand from beneath the covers, then touched his nose. He reached out for Brackett's finger, but missed slightly to the right. *Damn!* He tried it again, then missed again. *Come on!* Johnny touched the doctor's finger three times in a row.

Dr. Brackett twitched his mouth. "Okay, this'll be the last thing, then you can get some rest." He held up two fingers on each hand. "Squeeze my fingers as hard as you can."

Johnny grasped Dr. Brackett's fingers, then squeezed.

"You can let go." Dr. Brackett picked up Johnny's chart. "Any lightheadedness, dizziness, double vision?"

Johnny shook his head. "The dizziness is gone." He leaned back into the pillow. "I just have a headache.

Dr. Brackett jotted a few notes in Johnny's chart. "Just as I suspected, you've got a mild concussion. The good news is that it seems to be resolving fairly quickly. Your strength is better, but your coordination is still off. You'll need to be admitted for observation."

Johnny shook his head emphatically. "Doc, as much as I'd love to stick around here, I can't stay." *I wouldn't mind a quick nap. I'm beat, and my head is pounding.*

"WHAT?" Dr. Brackett closed the chart. "What do you mean you can't stay?"

"Just that, Doc," Johnny said stubbornly. "I can't stay."

◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

Roy opened the door to Treatment 2 and found his partner arguing with Dr. Brackett.

"I can't agree to that, Johnny. You need to be admitted for observation."

Johnny's jaw jutted out stubbornly. "You said yourself it's a mild concussion. So, I'll...I'll set my alarm for every two hours. I won't drive. Hell, a couple of aspirins and I'll be fine."

"What's going on?" Roy asked concerned.

"You're bullheaded partner insists on being released," Brackett answered grimly. "I want him admitted for observation. He suffered a concussion and he should be watched."

"Johnny..." Roy began.

"I can't stay," Johnny insisted hotly. "I have to take Seth home."

Roy hesitated, guilt overriding his fears. "I'll...I'll take him to my house."

Johnny looked evenly at his friend. "I appreciate the offer, Roy, but I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask," Roy answered. "I offered."

Brackett shut the chart. "Problem solved. I'll get you admitted."

"NO!"

Stunned, both men stared at Johnny.

"Seth is my responsibility. I will take him home." Johnny swung his legs off the treatment table. "Thank you, Roy. But, I can't burden you or Joanne with my problem." He stood up slowly, hoping to stave off any dizziness. For all his bravado, what he really desired was to take Brackett up on his offer and fall asleep in a warm hospital bed. His head was killing him, but he couldn't let them see just how much he was hurting.

"Johnny," Roy started, but a knock interrupted him. Vince Howard opened the door and stuck his head into the room

"Can I come in, Doc?"

Brackett nodded. "May as well, for all the good I'm doing here."

Vince nodded to Roy, then looked at John. "John, I took a statement from your nephew--"

"Cousin," John stated.

"Cousin," Vince corrected himself. "I understand you're responsible for him?"

Johnny sighed. "Yeah. He's staying with me for a couple of weeks."

Vince nodded. "Well, the kid claims he and his friend were walking by when a cat ran into the building. Says the friend ran in after it."

John rubbed his temples as Roy and Brackett exchanged a look of disbelief. Vince smiled grimly. "I found the story a little thin myself, but I can't disprove it...yet." He glanced at Brackett. "I understand the other boy can't be questioned yet?"

Brackett shook his head. "I'm afraid he's still unconscious."

Vince nodded. "I'll check back with you." He waved goodbye and left the room.

Johnny looked from Roy to Brackett. "Sign me out, Doc. I'm going home."



Johnny opened the apartment door and stood aside as Seth entered. The paramedic turned around to Roy and Tom Dwyer, who was replacing Johnny for the remainder of the shift. "I appreciate you two seeing us home. Tom, thanks for driving my Rover here."

"No problem, Johnny." Tom smiled. "Just take it easy, okay. Roy, I'll wait in the squad."

Roy looked at Johnny. "I better get going. If you need anything, call me okay?"

Johnny nodded. Roy turned to leave.

"Roy?"

He paused, looking at Johnny.

"I did appreciate the offer." Johnny smiled.

Roy nodded and watched his friend go into the apartment and shut the door. Then, he turned and walked to the squad.



Seth sat with the TV on softly, thinking back over the night. *I wish I could make last night disappear. If I had it to do over, I'd have...I'd have stayed in! Man I wish I never met those guys.*

Johnny had been so angry when they came home that he barely looked at Seth. He told the boy they'd talk later, then had gone into his room and slammed the door. The teen could tell the paramedic was hurting. The knot that had been in his stomach since the incident refused to abate. He stood up and headed to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

As he opened the refrigerator door, he heard the sound of a door opening. He paused, placing a carton of milk on the counter. The door closed. Seth headed to the living room.

"Johnny?" he started when he was grabbed from behind and thrown into a wall. Pincher grabbed his face as Timmy and Deke watched. The gang leader held the pocketknife he had stolen to Seth's throat.

"Okay, kid," Pincher hissed. "What exactly did you tell the pigs?"

"Nothin'!" Seth insisted, his voice pitched high. "I swear, Pincher, I didn't tell 'em nothin'!"

Pincher's hot breath blew into Seth's face as the older boy stared menacingly into Seth's eyes. "You better not be shittin' me or you'll be sorry," he sneered. "Right, boys?"

"Right, Pinch," Deke confirmed.

Pincher smiled evilly and lowered the knife. Seth slumped against the wall. Pincher punched him playfully in the shoulder.

"Hey, man, lighten up. I'm just joshin' ya," Pincher said.

Pincher's words notwithstanding, Seth didn't feel reassured. There was pure malice in the eyes of the troublemaker.

"Got anything to eat or drink around this dump?" Pincher asked as he began opening cupboards and the refrigerator.

"Uh...there's some Twinkies, and, um...some milk," Seth supplied.

Pincher turned a contemptuous eye toward his young friend. "Twinkies and milk. Ain't that sweet," he muttered. He slammed the fridge shut, the quest for food forgotten. He opened drawers and rummaged through them.

"Hey, uh...I don't think you should—" Seth began.

"What? You don't think I should what?" Pincher asked pointedly.

"Well...there's nothing in them. That's just junk and papers," Seth said.

"Oh, so you know what's in these drawers? Well, I guess that don't make you any better than me, does it?" Pincher grinned at Deke and Timmy. "Hmmm, where does he keep 'em?"

"What do you m-mean?" Seth stammered.

"Don't play dumb with me, Cousin Seth," Pincher warned. He wagged his eyebrows. "You know what I'm after."

Seth laughed nervously. "He doesn't have anything! You already know that...you've been in here before."

Pincher clamped a grubby hand on Seth's bony shoulder and guided him forcefully to the sliding glass door that overlooked the parking lot. "There's where you're wrong, Sethie baby," he said gleefully. "That," he announced, pointing to Johnny's Land Rover, "is what I want. I think today's a good day for a joy-ride, don't you fellas?"

Timmy and Deke's expressions mirrored Pincher's. "Yeah!" they agreed in unison.

The color drained from Seth's face. "You mean...you don't...you're not..."

Pincher cackled. "Whassa matter, Sethie?"

"I just...I mean, you can't!" Seth protested.

The smile disappeared from Pincher's face. "You know, Seth, you're really getting to be a drag. I used to think you were cool. Now I can see you're just Johnny Junior, Mr. Do-Gooder. What a waste."

"I think you'd better leave," Seth said with less bravado than he hoped.

"Oh, we'll leave all right. When I have the keys to that car."

"No."

Pincher shook his head ruefully. "Have it your way, Sethie baby. The cops'll be very interested to know how you started that fire in the warehouse last night."

"I did not!" Seth asserted.

Pincher laughed. "Your word against mine. And we're all bad boys, but at least the local cops know me, and I've never been an arsonist...you, on the other hand, they don't know. I'm sure they'd be very interested

indeed..."

"You're lying!"

"Seth, Seth, Seth...save yourself. Just get the keys like the good boy you are, and we'll be pals again. Understand?"

"What are you gonna do?" Seth ventured to ask.

Pincher effected an innocent expression. "Just take it around the parking lot, man. No harm, no foul. I just always wanted to drive one of those." He shrugged benignly, but his eyes were cold as the arctic.

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll have to break the steering column and wire it, because I *am* gonna drive that car today. When my mind's made up, I do it. So you decide, Seth. Do you get the keys or do I bust up your cousin's precious Rover?"

Seth took a deep breath and turned to walk slowly toward Johnny's bedroom. He knew what he was doing was wrong, but he felt he had no choice. Turning the knob slowly, he crept into the darkened room and heard the gentle breathing of his older cousin. Seth carefully made his way to the bureau and felt around for the keys, his eyes still not accustomed to the darkness. Finding them, he gathered them slowly so as not to jingle, then stealthily left the room. He walked down the hall in a trance, still disbelieving what he was about to do. The ringing of the telephone startled him. He looked at Pincher questioningly.

"Answer it!" Pincher hissed.

"Hullo?" Seth said as naturally as he could.

"Seth, this is Roy DeSoto."

"Oh, hi."

"Listen, I just called to see how Johnny's doing."

"He's...he's asleep," Seth told him.

"I think it's about the time he should be awakened," Roy said, referring to the doctor's orders that Johnny be roused every two hours for a neurological check. "Would you go and do that while I wait on the phone?"

Seth's mind raced. He looked at Pincher, who stared back intently. "He-he was already awake," Seth lied.

"He was? When?" Roy inquired.

"About 20 minutes ago. He woke up and got some water and then went back to bed." Seth was surprised and pleased at how smoothly the lie flowed.

"How did he seem?"

"He seemed okay."

When no elaboration came, Roy decided to accept that. "All right. Uh...he's supposed to be awakened again at 10:00. I'll come over around then and make sure he's all right."

"Kay."

"See you then," Roy said.

"Kay. Bye."

"Bye."

Seth held the phone until he heard the click on the other end of the line. He slowly replaced the receiver.

"Well?" Pincher asked.

Seth held his hand out and uncurled his fingers, revealing the set of keys.



Roy sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. Something didn't seem right, but he couldn't say what. Seth had sounded so toneless, the sullen manner he usually employed gone.

"Roy, your breakfast is getting cold," Joanne prodded gently.

"Yeah, thanks honey." Roy continued to gaze out into the backyard.

"Roy?"

"Hmmm?"

"Your breakfast."

"Oh." Roy sat at his usual place and picked at his breakfast, not tasting it. "I think I'll call over there again."

"To Johnny's?" Joanne asked, already sensing where her husband's mind had gone.

"Yeah." Roy sighed and threw his napkin down, abandoning any pretense of an appetite. "No. No, I'm going over."

Joanne nodded. "I think that's probably good."



The apartment door shut solidly with a resonating thud.

Johnny's eyes fluttered open in the dim light of his bedroom. *That sounded like the door.* He raised his head to sit up, but the wracking pains that resulted stopped him. He shifted upward on the bed so that his head and shoulders rested against the headboard and he pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, massaging the orbs deeply.

"Seth?" he called out weakly.

An overwhelming fatigue pulled him back into a light sleep. The next sound that woke him was far more grating and he fought his way back to consciousness, willing his tired brain to identify it. *That sounds like... gears grinding. Someone's fighting to get something into gear. Damn, they're tearing it up—*

Johnny's eyes flew open this time. The Rover! Ignoring his excruciating headache, he struggled out of the bed and stumbled to the window, parting the curtains. The sudden daylight sent stabbing pains into his eyes and he squeezed them shut momentarily before prying them open again and straining to see. "Shit!" he cursed under his breath.

Without bothering to put on a shirt or shoes, Johnny, in sweat pants and tube socks, staggered toward the bedroom door, using the furniture to steady himself as he went. "Seth!" he called again, knowing he wouldn't get a reply. He continued unsteadily down the hall and to the front door, stepping onto the second floor landing. He clung to the stair rail as he made his way down as quickly as he dared. Once outside, he could see that his Land Rover was fully occupied, although his vision wasn't clear enough to distinguish faces inside the vehicle. Still, he knew.

The Rover's engine was running and it would roll a few inches, halt suddenly, then emit the strident noise of gears being stripped by an inexperienced driver. Johnny stood on the grass and struggled to focus two identical vehicles into one as he held up his hand.

"Hey, stop!" he rasped. "Seth?" *Damn, I can't see worth a shit!* He advanced closer to the car.

The driver side door flew open and Pincher stepped out, drawing himself up to his full height and thrusting his chest out defiantly.

"Where's Seth?" Johnny asked, squinting.

"He's with us, and you're not gonna ruin our fun this time, gimp!" Pincher taunted.

"Shut the engine off and give me the keys," Johnny seethed.

Pincher, sensing his advantage over the injured man, refused to back down. "No," he said simply.

"Look, you punk—" Johnny began before another sharp pain lanced through his skull. His face registered the sudden pain as he faltered, swallowing back the accompanying nausea.

"Look? Look at you!" Pincher sneered. "You can't stop us."

Johnny looked from the boy to the car. Everything swam in an out of focus, splitting into two images and merging again. He didn't see Seth emerge from the rear passenger door. The boy stood uncertainly, his loyalty torn between his friends and his cousin. He slowly shuffled towards the sidewalk, leaving the car door hanging open.

"Pincher, don't do it," he said softly. "Let's just leave it, okay?"

At the sound of Seth's voice, Johnny regained his alertness. "Seth! Get inside!"

"Don't be a loser, Seth!" Pincher warned.

"Seth! Do what I tell ya!" Johnny ordered. He looked in Seth's direction at the blurry image before him. "Go,

Seth," he said hoarsely.

Seth slowly skirted the standoff, placing himself closer to the building than the car. He was clearly making his decision. Yet, his feelings of doom prevented him from escaping inside. Somehow, he remained frozen in his place between his cousin and the door, his eyes trained on the scene.

"That's it, Seth!" Pincher snorted derisively. "I always knew it. You're just a big baby."

"Leave him out of it!" Johnny warned. "Give me the keys. Now." Johnny advanced on the delinquent, his hand outstretched.

Seth watched the scene unfold in slow motion. He saw the evil grin flit across Pincher's face. Saw Pincher's hand brush past his thigh on its way to his back pocket. Saw Johnny shuffle unsteadily toward the thief. Saw Pincher lunge at his cousin. Saw Johnny's arms raise defensively.

The two tussled briefly. Pincher suddenly backed off, gave his nemesis a strange look, then turned and scrambled to the Land Rover, climbing inside.

Johnny staggered backwards, hunched. He felt the foreign object protruding from between his ribs on the left side and in his less-than-coherent state, grasped it and jerked it free with a strangled grunt. He stared unfocused at the object he held, realization dawning on him. He faltered, turning partially. The sharp stinging of the penetrating wound increased exponentially and he gasped.

Seth still didn't know what had really happened. He was rooted to his spot, paralyzed by an indefinable fear.

Pincher slammed the door of the Rover and threw it into forward gear. Popping the clutch, he maintained scant control of the vehicle as it lurched forward, hopping the curb. He wrestled the wheel to one side as it roared directly towards the doubled-over paramedic. "Shit!" he shrieked as the left quarter panel struck the man's hip, spinning him and slamming him into the ground. Pincher floored the accelerator, digging deep ruts in the lawn as the wheels spun and finally took hold. The car raced from the scene.

"JOHNNY!!!" Seth screamed.

The paralysis that had gripped Seth's limbs finally left him. His mouth was so dry he wondered how he even managed to yell, "Johnny! Johnny!" as he dashed to his fallen cousin.

"Johnny!"

Seth could do no more than stare with wide-eyed shock when Johnny rolled from his side to his back. The paramedic let out a strangled moan at the pain the movement caused him. Johnny's palms were pressed against the spot on his bare chest where the knife had gone in and come out, but that action didn't hide the blood that was seeping through his splayed fingers. Seth watched as the blood ran down Johnny's stomach to be soaked up in the waistband of the gray sweatpants he'd worn to bed. When the cotton material couldn't hold more liquid the blood trickled to the blacktop pavement of the parking lot.

The boy took two steps backwards as Johnny grimaced and moaned again. Seth had never witnessed someone suffering from such terrible pain before. That it was Johnny, the man who had only tried to help him and be his friend ever since he'd arrived here, made it all the worse for Seth.

The paramedic bit his lower lip and pushed himself to his side. His blurred vision barely allowed him to make out Seth's tennis shoes. He knew he was scaring the boy and berated himself for that action.

Keep it together, Gage. You gotta keep it together for Seth.

Johnny raised his knees to his stomach. Seth watched him struggle like a fish out of water for a few seconds, then realized what Johnny was trying to do. The boy waved his hands in a negative gesture.

"Johnny, no! Don't stand up! Just...just...just..." Seth looked around the lot. There were few cars parked here at this time of the morning. Mrs. Hanson didn't allow children unless they were temporary visitors meaning most of the building's inhabitants were single people like Johnny or young newlyweds, all of whom worked during the day.

A devastating sense of helplessness washed over Seth as he dropped to his knees. When he reached out to touch his cousin's shoulder he was surprised at how cold Johnny's skin was.

That's gotta mean something bad. It's warm out, and the pavement is hot. How can he be cold? And he...he's so pale all of a sudden. It's like his tan has melted off him.

"Don't move, Johnny! Stay still. I'll get help!"

Johnny had no idea if the boy would really get help, or if he would run off because he was afraid what just happened was his fault. The last thing Johnny needed was further worries regarding the teenager.

The paramedic opened his mouth to reassure Seth that he wasn't going to be in trouble, but found he could do nothing more than gasp for air. Johnny's head came up as he coughed three times, then fell back to the pavement in a way that indicated to Seth his cousin had little strength to spare. When the boy saw the blood dotting the skin around Johnny's mouth he jumped to his feet.

"I'll be right back, Johnny! I'm gonna get help!"

Johnny couldn't have said anything in return if he'd wanted to. What little air he could draw in didn't leave him with the ability to speak.



Roy had called Johnny's apartment twice since hanging up from Seth. He'd let the phone ring twenty times on the first try, and thirty on the second. For each ring the phone went unanswered Roy's concern only grew.

If Seth left that apartment after both Doctor Brackett and I specifically told him what he had to do for Johnny today he'll be more than sorry when I get my hands on him.

Roy made a third call to Johnny's apartment. This time he didn't know how long he let the phone ring. He slammed the receiver down and scooped up his car keys from the kitchen counter.

"No answer?" Joanne questioned from the sink where she was washing the breakfast dishes.

"No answer."

"Maybe he didn't hear it ring."

"Seth or Johnny?"

"Both."

"One of them would have heard it ring. Johnny's apartment isn't that big and he's got three phones. Seth should have picked up the one in the living room, or Johnny should have picked up the one next to his bed. I've...Jo, I've got a weird feeling that something bad is going on over there."

"Something bad? Like what?"

"I don't know. But I'm headed to Johnny's now."

Roy was already behind the wheel of his little convertible when Joanne came to the front door and yelled, "Call me and let me know what's happening!"

"I will!"

"And be careful!"

Roy simply waved a hand in the air in acknowledgment of his wife's words. Today he paid no attention to the comforting feel of the wind blowing through his hair and the warmth of the sun on his face as he drove to his best friend's home. The knot in his stomach overruled any comforting feeling that might come Roy DeSoto's way.



Seth was in a state of total panic as he ran through the halls of Johnny's apartment building. He knocked on doors pleading, "Help! Help!" in a voice that sounded more like a terrified little boy's than that of the young man who so recently thought of himself as an adult who didn't need anything from anyone. But now Seth did need something, something more important than he'd ever needed in his whole life, and he found himself without the ability to get it.

"Help! Someone please help!"

Seth raced to Mrs. Hanson's door. He pounded so hard with his fist the door shook in its frame.

"Mrs. Hanson! Mrs. Hanson, help! Johnny's been hurt!"

Seth had seen the landlady's car in the parking lot, but he also knew she often went on outings during the day with several other elderly widows who lived in the building.

"Mrs. Hanson! Mrs. Hanson, it's Seth! Johnny needs help! Mrs. Hanson!"

Seth turned circles, his eyes darting from one closed door to the other. When no one appeared he shot around the corner and darted up the stairs. He threw the door open to Johnny's apartment and ran for the living room phone. With trembling fingers he dialed the O. When the operator came on the line the boy could barely calm himself enough to get out a coherent story.

"Operator."

"Help! Please, I need help!"

"Son, calm down. What kind of help do you--"

"It's my cousin! He's been stabbed! He needs...he needs an ambulance. And paramedics! Please send paramedics!"

"Where's the location of the stabbing?"

"His chest. He's been stabbed in the chest!"

"No, son. What I mean is where's the victim?"

"In the parking lot of his apartment."

"What's the address?"

"I...I don't know!"

"You don't know?"

"No. I'm just visiting." Seth tried to remember the names of the streets outside Johnny's building. "Clayborne! I think one of the streets is Clayborne."

"Is that the street the building is on?"

"I...maybe. I'm not sure. But I know it's near here."

"All right. I'll put a call in to both the fire and police departments. In the meantime you go back outside and watch for their vehicles. When you see them, direct them to you. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I can do that."

Seth hung up the phone. By far he didn't have the knowledge Johnny did when it came to offering aid to an injured person, but without Johnny being aware of it Seth had been passing some of his time by reading his cousin's paramedic manuals. He'd learned enough to know he had to try to stop the bleeding and keep Johnny from going further into shock.

The boy pulled two blankets and an armload of towels from the linen closet shelf. He didn't bother to close the apartment door behind him as he flew down the stairs and out to the parking lot.

Johnny was rocking his body from his side to his back as he gasped for air. His eyes were open, but he didn't appear to be aware of Seth's presence. The boy covered Johnny to mid-stomach with both blankets, then fell to his knees and began folding a bath towel into a thick pad.

"Johnny, I'm back! I called for the fire department. I told her to send paramedics! Johnny! Johnny, please answer me!"

Johnny blinked four times. He thought Seth was talking to him, but couldn't focus on the boy's face. And his voice; Seth seemed so far away. Like he was talking to Johnny from the distant end of a tunnel.

"Johnny, I've got towels. You need to move your hands for me. I've got to stop the bleeding."

When Seth grabbed Johnny's hands the paramedic cried out and clutched his chest tighter. Seth fought

back the tears he felt well up in his eyes.

"Johnny, please! Please let me help me you!"

Seth was so upset he never heard the little sports car come to a screeching halt in the parking lot, nor the sound of running feet slapping against the pavement. The next thing the teenager knew a pair of capable hands was taking the towel from him.

"Here, let me do that. You get another towel ready. Did you call for a squad?"

Seth could not imagine a time he'd be happier to see Roy DeSoto in all his life.

"You mean paramedics?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, I did that."

"Good boy."

Any pride Seth might have felt at Roy's praise was negated by the fact that Johnny was hurt because of him.

Roy's attention shifted to his injured partner. "Johnny, it's Roy. You need to move your hands for me, Junior."

Johnny was barely able to gasp out, "Ro...Roy?"

"Yeah, John, it's me. I need to take a look at your chest. Move your hands. Johnny, come on. Move your hands for me."

Johnny's head came off the ground. He squinted with both pain and concentration as he tried to absorb just what it was Roy wanted him to do.

"Ha...hands?"

"Johnny, move your hands away from your chest."

When Johnny failed to do what Roy asked the blond paramedic grasped his partner's hands and pulled them away from the wound. Seth gawked at the free flowing blood, but forced himself past the trauma of the sight in order to hand Roy a second towel.

Roy hated the cry of pain that came from Johnny as he applied pressure to the wound, but knew he had no choice but to be 'paramedic' at this moment rather than friend. The blond man turned to Seth.

"I need you to hold your hand on top of these towels just like I'm doing. You've got to keep applying pressure until the squad gets here."

Seth moved to do as the man ordered. He watched as Roy crawled to the back of Johnny's head. When Johnny rocked to his side once more Roy took advantage of that body position in order to check his friend for neck and spinal injuries. When he found none Roy initiated his next course of action.

"Johnny, I'm gonna lift you up and prop you against my shoulder so you can breathe easier. Okay?"

" 'Kay."

Johnny steeled himself for the pain that was to come. He couldn't keep from crying out when his torso was lifted from the pavement, but Roy was right. Once the worst of the pain passed it was a little easier to take in air.

Seth's hand never moved from the towels. He kept pressure on Johnny's wound just like Roy had told him to.

"What happened here?" Roy asked the teenager as his eyes traveled Johnny's body.

Bloody scraps, asphalt burns, and bruises dotted Johnny's entire right side. Roy lifted the blankets to see that the scraps and bruises disappeared beneath the waist of his partner's sweat pants. He reached down to undo the tie.

"Now don't slug me, Junior. I promise I'm not getting fresh."

"Promises...promises." Johnny attempted to joke between gasps for air. "And on...on our first...first date, too."

Roy slid the pants and the waistband of Johnny's boxer shorts half way down the paramedic's hip. He palpated the area that was already a vivid shade of black and blue. Johnny winced, but this time the pain wasn't so severe that it made him cry out.

"Pretty tender, huh, Junior?"

"You...you could...say that."

Roy's eyes met Seth's again as he pulled the blanket back up to Johnny's stomach. He arched an inquiring brow.

"Seth? What happened?"

The boy opened his mouth twice in an attempt to speak before he could finally get something to come out. Seth's shame over what his actions had caused was so great he could barely meet Roy's eyes.

"Pincher...a guy I know, he...he came into Johnny's apartment a while ago and wanted the keys for the Rover. I didn't want to give 'em to him. Really, I didn't! But he made me. So I got the keys, gave 'em to Pincher, and told him and the other guys to leave. He...he kinda forced me to go with him."

Roy voiced his skepticism. "Forced you?"

"Yeah. I...he didn't say it in so many words, but I was afraid he'd hurt Johnny if I didn't do what he wanted me to."

"It looks to me like he hurt Johnny anyway," Roy said as sirens wailed in the background.

"Yeah. He...Johnny musta woke up after we left. Pincher...he was tryin' to drive Johnny's Rover. Johnny came out to stop him. He...Johnny told me to get out of the Rover. I did, and then Johnny told Pincher to give him the keys. They fought for a few seconds, and then Pincher stabbed him. After that...after that I'm not really sure what happened. I don't think Pincher knows how to drive. He was tryin' to get to the road, but he hit

Johnny on his way there."

Before Roy could ask the boy any further questions Squad 110 came to a halt ten feet away. Right behind it was a police cruiser, and the ambulance siren could be heard coming from down the block.

Ned Timmons and Paul Landers jumped from the squad. They pulled the biophone, drug box, trauma box, and oxygen from various compartments before running to Johnny's side.

"What happened, Roy?" Ned asked.

"He's been stabbed in the left side of the chest. His pulse is thready, respirations labored, and he's semi-conscious. He was hit by a car, too. He's got a good-sized bruise on his right hip, and bruising all up and down that side of his body. The hip doesn't appear to be broken, but he may have suffered internal injuries from the impact. He also suffered a mild concussion at a fire earlier this morning. Because of that you'll want to let Rampart know Johnny's your patient."

Roy heard Paul contacting the hospital. Ned grabbed pressure bandages from the trauma box while gently urging Seth aside.

"No!" The boy shrugged his shoulders from the man's grasp. "I've got to help Johnny! Roy said I have to keep these towels here."

"Son..."

"No! No, I have to help him! He's my cousin! He...he's the only one who's ever cared about me. The only one!"

Roy kept one hand around Johnny's shoulders while reaching out with the other. He gave Seth's arm a squeeze.

"Seth, you have helped Johnny. You kept him alive until Ned and Paul got here. But now you need to move aside."

Johnny was only dimly aware of what was going on around him. He felt like he was watching the action through the haze of a dream. He forced himself to rise above the fog that seemed to shroud his brain.

"Seth...Seth...it's okay. I...I'll be...be all right," Johnny paused to cough. Without being aware of it he brought up more blood. "Do...please...do what Roy...what Roy tells you to. Please."

Seth locked eyes with his cousin. Several long seconds passed before the teenager gave a small nod of his head. He reached out and with careful fingers wiped the blood from Johnny's chin, then stood on shaking legs and stepped back.

As Paul lifted Johnny's head from Roy's shoulder in order to slip the oxygen mask over his nose and mouth, Johnny looked up at his partner. The few words he could form wouldn't have made sense to anyone but Johnny's best friend.

"Roy, Seth...please."

"Don't worry, Johnny. I'll take care of him."

"Tha...thanks," Johnny mumbled as finally he slipped into darkness.

Roy continued to support his partner's upper body while Paul and Ned followed the instructions given by Joe Early. An IV of Ringer's Lactate was started, but because of the earlier head injury, and now the impact with the Land Rover, Doctor Early wouldn't allow the paramedics to administer any pain medication.

Roy heard Joe Early's final instructions as the ambulance attendants arrived with the gurney.

"Continue to monitor and transmit vitals enroute, 110."

"10-4, Rampart."

Roy helped the men lift Johnny onto a gurney. The head of the gurney had been raised to a forty-five degree angle to aid Johnny's attempts to draw in air. Ned jumped in the back of the ambulance while Roy helped Paul gather up the equipment.

"You and the boy wanna ride with me, Roy?" Paul asked.

"Thanks, but no. I've got my car here. We'll follow you."

"Okay. See you in a few minutes."

Roy nodded. He walked over to where a young police officer he didn't recognize was questioning Seth.

"I don't know his last name," Roy heard Seth say as he approached the pair. "I don't even know his first name. I just know him as Pincher."

"Where does he like to hang out?"

"At the park a few blocks from here."

The cop looked up from his notepad. His gaze fell on Roy.

"Do you know this boy, Sir?"

"Yes. The man who was hurt, Seth's cousin, is my partner."

"Partner?"

"We're county paramedics. I'm Roy DeSoto."

The officer asked Roy a few questions, most of which he couldn't answer.

"I didn't arrive until after the stabbing occurred. By the time I got here the boys, and Johnny's Land Rover, were gone."

"I see. Seth said his mother is out of town and that he's been staying with Mr. Gage?"

"That's correct."

"In that case, because he's a minor and Mr. Gage was acting as his guardian, I'll have to take him to Children's Services until his mother can be contacted."

Seth felt his heart slam against his chest with fright. He knew Children's Services placed kids in foster care. He'd had a friend one time who was bounced from foster home to foster home, each one worse than the last. His friend had been beaten, had his things stolen by other kids in the houses where he'd stayed, and even been hurt once in a way that was both scary and hard to believe possible. Seth didn't want to go to a foster home, and suddenly realized how lucky he'd been to have a man as good as Johnny looking after him the past few weeks.

The teenager focused on Roy with open shock when the paramedic said, "Seth can stay with me and my family."

"All right," the cop nodded. "I'll need your address and phone number then in the event we need to question Seth further."

Roy supplied the man with the requested information. Seth didn't say anything until the cop was pulling out of the parking lot.

"You...I mean...I...after all the trouble I caused you're really gonna let me stay at your house?"

"Yes, Seth, I am."

"But why? I...I don't deserve that."

"Maybe not. But Johnny does."

"Huh?"

"I made a promise to Johnny a few minutes ago, Seth. I promised him I'd look after you. I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing it for your cousin. I'm doing it because Johnny is a good man, and my best friend. And because if something happened to me and my wife, and our kids needed a place to stay, Johnny wouldn't hesitate to open his door to them."

With that the tears started streaming down Seth's face. His words came in stuttered gasps and hiccuped pauses.

"No one's...no one's ever cared about me the way Johnny does. Not even my mom. I...he's done so much for me, but I...I haven't been very good to him in return. I...I stole from him. Stole money from his cookie jar. And then I got caught stealing from a store. But he...Johnny tried to teach me right from wrong. Even when I stole from him again and he caught me at the park with Pincher. He...he told me the wrong choices are the easy ones, and the right choices are the difficult ones. But rewarding. He said...Johnny said the right choices are rewarding. And...and he showed me that's true. He...he taught me how to work for my money. He made me clean the apartment and his Rover, and he said...said I should get a job with Mrs. Hanson and I did. A real...real job where I...I worked for someone else. And...and Johnny did stuff with me like...like a father might do with a son. Or at least how...how I always imagined the kinds of things to be a father might do with his son. He took me hiking...and bowling...and for pizza...and to a car show...and out to breakfast. My mom and me...we don't do none of those things. She's always working...or with men. And...and at your picnic...I know I really embarrassed Johnny when I broke into Chet's car. I...I felt bad about that but...but I didn't know how to tell Johnny. He was...he was real upset 'cause you were so mad at him. He...he didn't say that, but I could tell. I offered to let him whack me with his belt, but he wouldn't. Other guys...guys my mom has dated, some of them have beaten me a lot. But Johnny...he's never hurt me. Never. Not even when I deserved it. I don't think..." Seth could barely finish his sentence because of the sobs that were coming hard and heavy now. "I

don't think Johnny...that he could ever...ever hurt anyone."

Roy took a step forward and pulled the crying boy to his chest. He was forced to swallow the lump in his throat as he held the sobbing teenager.

Oh, Johnny, why the hell didn't you tell me everything that was going on over here?

Roy forced himself to acknowledge the answer to his own internal question.

Because Johnny didn't think I'd approve of the way he was handling Seth. Because he thought I'd lecture him. Because Johnny thought I'd remind him in a high and mighty way that he's not a father, and therefore doesn't know as much about kids as I do. How stupid could I have been? This could have been avoided if Johnny felt he could turn to me. Seth would have come home with me earlier this morning, and Johnny would have stayed in the hospital where he belonged if only I had been a friend to Johnny when he needed me the most.

When Roy could finally speak he said softly, "No, Seth, Johnny wouldn't hurt anyone. That's what makes him such a special friend."

Roy wasn't sure how long it was before Seth pulled away from him. The boy swiped an arm across his red, water-filled eyes.

"Come on," Roy said, as he bent to retrieve the blankets and bloody towels. "Let's go up to Johnny's apartment and get you a few changes of clothes, then head over to Rampart."

Seth nodded as he fell in step beside the man. As they entered the building the teenager paused.

"Roy?"

Roy stopped his progress for the stairway and turned. "Yeah?"

"He'll...Johnny will be okay, won't he?"

Roy thought a few seconds before answering.

"Seth, you're fourteen. That's almost a grown man in my book so I'm not going to lie to you, okay?"

If this is what it felt like to be a man, Seth thought he'd rather be a little kid again. He did his best to hide that thought, and his fear for his cousin, from Roy.

"O...okay."

"Johnny was hurt very badly. He couldn't breathe because blood was filling his chest cavity. If the doctors can't stop the bleeding he...Johnny won't make it."

Seth swallowed hard. He hesitated just a moment before scooping the blankets and towels out of Roy's arms, then dashing past the man to take the stairs two at a time. Roy had barely made it to Johnny's door before Seth dashed out again with his clothes shoved in Johnny's backpack. The boy slammed the door and tested the knob to make certain it was locked.

"Come on, Roy, let's go! I wanna get to the hospital. Johnny...if Johnny...I just...I don't want him to be alone if

something bad happens."

Roy didn't want Johnny to be alone if something bad happened either. But he didn't voice that worry to Seth, he simply ran along behind the teenager.

Less than a minute later Roy and Seth were headed to Rampart. Roy, who was normally a cautious driver, paid no attention as the speedometer of his little car approached seventy.



"I'm afraid he's still unconscious..." Dr. Brackett's words ran through Seth's head in a loop that wouldn't stop. *"...not waking up like we'd hoped..."*

Seth swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat as he stared at his cousin. Various tubes snaked around the unconscious man, actually making it hard to see the person underneath all the medical paraphernalia. The oxygen mask rested on his pale and battered face where fresh bruises decorated Johnny's already damaged features.

"Oh, God, Johnny..." Seth said as tears welled up in his eyes once again. "I'm so sorry... this is all my fault."

Not totally my fault. This is Pincher's doin'.

Pincher. Seth clinched his jaw and wiped the tears away from his face.

"Johnny, I don't know if you can hear me, but there's some things I need to tell you. You treated me better than anyone ever did my whole life. My mama always blamed me for taking her youth away, but I didn't ask to be born..."



PART 3

