

PART 3

"So, Dr. Brackett, is there anything else I need to know that you didn't say in front of the boy?" Roy asked.

Brackett shook his head. "Roy, it was touch and go there for a while until we got the bleeding under control. We're going to monitor his blood counts closely, and give him blood as needed." He put his hands in his pockets. "I'll also feel a lot better once he regains consciousness, but all-in-all, Johnny's one lucky man. The wound was just half an inch from his heart."

Roy nodded in understanding at Dr. Brackett's words. "Thanks, Doc."

"You can see him for a few minutes, Roy, but he's still unconscious, so he won't know you're there."

"Okay. I think Seth's in there now."

Brackett nodded. "I'll check in on him a little later. Remember, don't stay too long."

"Okay, thanks again, Doc."

Dr. Brackett turned and left, leaving a worried Roy DeSoto behind. *Seth. What will happen to him?* Roy had no idea. He started to enter Johnny's room but stopped when he heard Seth's soft voice filter out into the hallway.



"...she used to leave me with whoever she could sucker into it...then she just started leaving me alone. I liked that better. I've stayed by myself two...sometimes three days at a time, so I really don't know why she bothered asking you to keep me...unless..." *Unless she has no plans to take me back...*

"Everywhere I go, trouble seems to follow. My mama called me a bad penny once. I never really was sure what that meant. But I think I know now....Anyway, I just want you to know I won't let my trouble hurt you anymore."

My trouble...Pincher's my trouble.

Seth stopped talking and looked at Johnny for any sign of awakening. Johnny's eyes remained stubbornly closed. Seth seethed inwardly as his eyes took in the bag of blood hanging by the bed. Johnny's heavily bandaged chest had a tube coming out of the side which was emptying into a plastic box-like thing hanging from the side of the bed. *This looks so bad...and I'm responsible.*

NO! It wasn't me that did this! It was Pincher!

"Johnny, no one's ever done for me what you did. I just want you to know that. I'll never forget you. And I'm gonna make sure the person responsible pays for this. Pincher's gonna get what's comin' to him. I promise you that."

Seth wiped his eyes and stood, taking Johnny's hand into his own. "I'm gonna go now, Johnny, but don't you worry. Pincher's gettin' what's comin' to him."

He turned to leave and then stopped. Looking back, he said, "I love you."



Roy stepped away from the door and moved two doors down from Johnny's room, then waited for Seth. *No wonder the boy was so wild. He's never had any guidance in his life. Again, Roy felt guilty for criticizing his partner's parenting skills. Seth's words proved that Johnny's skills were just fine.*

I can't let him go after Pincher. No matter what.

The door of Johnny's room opened and Seth stepped into the hallway.

"Seth," Roy called, jogging the few steps to meet the boy. "It's been a rough morning. Why don't we go down to the cafeteria, get somethin' to eat, then come back and check on Johnny?"

Seth shook his head. "I'm not hungry, Mr. DeSoto," he mumbled. "If you wanna go in and see him, I'll wait out here for you."

I'm not gonna lie to him. He's had enough of that in his life. "Seth, I overheard what you said to Johnny," Roy admitted. "I wanna go after Pincher myself, but it wouldn't be right. It's a job for the police."

Seth ducked his head, but didn't say anything. Instead, he examined his shoes.

"Johnny wouldn't want you to get hurt," Roy continued.

Seth continued looking down at his shoes.

Now he's gotta see that I trust him. Roy motioned to the closed door of Johnny's room. "I'm gonna look in on Johnny, then we can get something to eat. Okay?"

Seth nodded.

Roy reached out and squeezed the boy's shoulder, then opened the door and stepped into Johnny's room. *Let him make the right decision.*



"Seth!"

He was trying to run, to climb the stairs. His body moved in slow motion, caught in some sort of heavy-limbed torsion that prevented movement. Fear only seemed to slow him down.

Johnny could barely make out the two figures high above his head, grappling furiously with one another. One of the figures twisted, lifting a hand menacingly. Johnny glimpsed a flash of metal, then the arm descended so swiftly he wasn't sure if the motion were imagined or not. The second figure jerked.

"NO!" Johnny's cry echoed bitterly in the darkness, and he watched helplessly as the boy's body tumbled lifelessly from the catwalk to the concrete below.



His attention still half outside the room as he opened the door, Roy missed the way his partner's body jerked, but there was no mistaking the strident screech of the alarm the motion set off. His head spun toward the bed.

Johnny's eyes were wide open, his gaze frantic but unseeing.

"Johnny?" Roy was at the bedside in two strides, one hand shooting out to the machine to silence the alarm, the other darting to Johnny's arm. "Hey, hey...easy!"

Johnny didn't seem to hear him. He made a few unintelligible guttural noises, and his eyes began to jerk spasmodically back and forth as if searching for something.

The door popped open and the duty nurse made her way to Johnny's side, her gaze expertly swarming across the array of monitors. "What happened?" she asked, reaching forward and, like Roy, calling Johnny's name quietly and firmly. "Mr. Gage? Mr. Gage, can you hear me?"

Roy shook his head. "I don't know. He was already seizing when I came in."

Johnny responded to neither, and his agitation seemed to be increasing. His head swung back and forth now.

"Dr. Brackett's on his way," said the nurse.

Even as she spoke the door slammed open once more and Brackett swept in.

"Roy?"

The paramedic shook his head. "No idea, Doc," he replied.

"Pulse is 90," murmured the nurse.

"Let's try 5 milligrams diazepam," Brackett ordered, pressing a hand against Johnny's chest as it heaved up and down in a desperate attempt to draw in air despite the ready supply of oxygen.

The nurse expertly prepared and injected the medication. Gradually, the frenetic movement slowed, then finally stopped altogether.

Brackett carefully inspected Johnny's incisions, then the tubes and wires that had, miraculously, remained in place. He glanced at Johnny's face, pale and sweaty, and retaining some remnant of agitation even in repose. "Cathy, I want vitals checked every 30 minutes," he said. He gestured to Roy to join him near the doorway.

"You say he was already seizing when you entered the room?"

Roy shrugged. "Not really....The monitor went off after I had opened the door."

Brackett glanced once more at the now calm patient, making a face. "Well, we'll monitor him a little more closely," he assured Roy. He noticed the pained look on Roy's face and clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Maybe it was nothing more than a dream," he smiled.

Roy nodded. *More like a nightmare...* "Keep me posted, huh, Doc?"

"Of course."

The pair left the room together. Roy scanned the hallway. Seth was nowhere in sight.



Seth looked miserably out the bus window at the buildings and people. He shifted slightly and felt a lump at his back. With surprise, he realized he was still wearing Johnny's backpack with a change of clothes in it. *Doesn't matter...after I do what I'm gonna do, I'll just keep on going....Nothing to go back for anyway....*

He roughly rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes; afraid someone would see the hot tears that threatened to fill his eyes. Not that anyone would notice. He'd been riding the bus for an hour or so, but it had seemed like forever. He'd watched people get on and off, people who ignored him completely, people who

didn't care a lick about him.

Seth's tortured thoughts kept turning back to Johnny, the only person who HAD cared about what happened to him. The last thing he'd told Johnny was that he'd take care of Pincher, and he was going to, but that wasn't why he'd run. When he'd heard the alarms in Johnny's room go off and seen the nurse and doctor run in, he knew what was going on. He'd watched enough TV to know what those alarms meant - Johnny was dying. But he couldn't face it. He was just a coward, he decided...a coward who made the wrong choices...who chose the easy way...*a coward, a worthless coward.*

The brakes on the bus squealed loudly as it rolled up to a bus stop. With a jerk, Seth realized he recognized the street. In fact, he knew exactly where he was. It was only about a couple of blocks from here to the park. And two blocks the other direction was Johnny's apartment. He shuddered, thinking about the bloody towels he'd thrown on the floor of the bathroom. He was never going back there, not after he'd destroyed his cousin's life.

Just as the bus was about to start up again, he impulsively pulled the cord above him, causing the bus to screech to a stop and open up the doors. He jumped up and ran down the steps of the rear side exit. The bus roared noisily off, leaving him alone on the sidewalk.

He stood like a statue on the pavement. Even though the day was warm, he felt cold inside, cold and hopeless. It didn't matter what happened to him anymore. But he was angry, too, and scared. He was angry at his mom, angry at Johnny for dying - angry at life in general for giving him such a bum deal. But he was scared spitless, too; scared of Pincher. *Any more scared and I won't have the guts to go through with facing Johnny's killer. I have nothing to fight him with, but it doesn't matter, it just doesn't matter. I'm gonna die anyway, nothing left to live for, that's for sure.* In total desolation, he started walking toward the park, his head down, not caring what or who he bumped into, or even what happened to him.



When Hank Stanley came around the corner to the crowded visitors seating area, he paused, looking for his senior paramedic. He spied him in the corner, his elbows on his knees, morosely staring at the Styrofoam coffee cup cradled in his hands.

"Roy?" he called softly across the room. Roy glanced up and immediately rose to meet him. They walked down the hallway to get away from the noisy waiting room. "How's he doing?"

Roy threw his half-empty cup into the tall trashcan beside them and leaned against the wall. "Not great, Cap. He's got a tube in his chest..." Roy paused and looked down the hallway, focusing on nothing in particular. "He's had kind of a bad time. Brackett's keeping him sedated."

Hank cocked his head to one side. "You said on the phone he'd been knifed? And hit by kids stealing his car? Who did it, Roy?" His dark eyebrows suddenly furrowed and his eyes burned with anger. "If it was Seth...."

Roy shook his head once. "No, it wasn't Seth, but...." He looked at the floor, then up at Cap, who was impatiently awaiting his answer. "Seth made some big mistakes, and Johnny was really trying to help him. I didn't know the half of it until Seth told me."

He suddenly slammed the wall beside his hip with his fist. "It's my fault!" he cried, anger in his normally quiet voice.

Cap held up a hand in front of Roy's chest, surprised by his outburst. "Hey! How could it be, Roy? You didn't pull a knife on him, or hit him with a car." Cap looked at the remorse on his friend's face. "Listen, let's go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat. You can start at the beginning and tell me the whole story."

"I...I can't leave," Roy answered, his anger dissipated, but his deep voice cracked slightly with emotion.

"Joanne is coming...and I want to go in and see Johnny again."

"She'll find you, Roy. And Johnny's not going anywhere. Come on." Roy was looking down at his shoes and not moving. "Do I have to make it an order?"

A slight smile drifted across Roy's face, and disappeared as fast as it appeared. "Okay, Cap. I guess I could use a fresh cup of coffee." He pushed himself off from the wall, and they walked silently down the busy hallway. But Roy stopped when he saw a policeman coming towards them, the same policeman who had interviewed him in Johnny's parking lot.

"Mr. DeSoto? I wonder if I might talk with you a minute."

"Uh, sure. But I don't think I can tell you anything more."

"We found Mr. Gage's car. It was in a ditch up in the hills to the east of here."

"So you caught the boys who stole it?" Hank asked, hopefully.

Roy caught the questioning look from the policeman. "This is Hank Stanley, the captain on my shift at Fire Station 51. Cap, this is the policeman who was there at Johnny's apartment."

The policeman and the fire captain nodded at each other. Satisfied, the policeman answered, "No, sir. There was no one in the area where the car was recovered. I'm here to interview Mr. Gage about the incident. And I'd like to ask Mr. Gage's cousin if he remembered anything more about the boys who stole the car."

"Johnny's sedated. He isn't able to answer you right now," Roy answered, dreading the next question.

"Then I'd like to talk to Mr. Gage's cousin, Mr. DeSoto. Where is he?"

Hank hadn't seen Roy look so miserable before, nor so reluctant to answer an officer of the law. "Roy? Where's Seth?"

"He's gone," Roy answered softly, ducking his blond head.

The young officer frowned, pulled out a little notebook and a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote something down. "As guardian, you should have reported it immediately. How long has he been gone?"

Roy sighed deeply and looked at his watch. "About an hour and a half, I guess."

"Do you know where he might have gone, Roy?" Hank didn't trust the boy at all, but Roy seemed to feel differently about him now.

"I don't know...maybe back to Johnny's apartment. I - I don't know..." he looked down the hallway at the nurses and doctors and visitors and patients, all with someplace to go. "I wanted to go look for him, but I didn't want to leave the hospital...."

Hank put an arm on Roy's shoulder, causing him to look at him. "I'm here now, buddy. Why don't you take off? Go see if you can find him."

"Mr. DeSoto, it might not be a bad idea if you go look for him. I believe you already have my card." The officer turned to Hank and gave him a small white business card. "If he returns to the hospital, please call this number immediately."

"Sure will," Hank nodded.

The patrolman looked at the both of them with an authoritative, slightly disapproving look and left the way

he came.

Hank turned back to Roy. "Go see if you can find the boy. Bring him back here. We'll sit on him if we need to so he won't run away again, but find him, Roy, and don't worry about Joanne. I'll let her know where you've gone."

Roy's eyes spoke gratitude beyond what he could say. "Okay, I'll, uh, I'll call you later if I can't find him, to see if he's come back here." Grateful for something to do, Roy quickly took off down the hallway.



Roy sighed as he got into his convertible. *I guess I was stupid in thinking Seth would come back on his own. He turned the key in the ignition. But, I had to give the kid a chance. Johnny would have. Seth's gonna get himself hurt or killed if he goes after this Pincher guy.* Roy shifted into gear and turned into traffic. *He mentioned the park near Johnny's. I'll try there, first. I just hope I'm not too late.*



Seth finally arrived at the picnic tables frequented by Pincher and the gang. A laughing young woman placed festive covered bowls onto the table. Three year-old twin boys ran in circles around the table. A five year-old girl stood beside a dark-haired man barbecuing on a grill. She patiently held a plate that the man forked charbroiled hot dogs and hamburgers onto.

Seth's stomach growled at the aroma emanating from the cooked meat. *A happy little family.* He wiped his eyes as the tears threatened to spill once more. *We had a picnic once, with Harvey. He drove a truck for the Highway Department. He tried to go on the swings with me, but the chain broke. Mom yelled at me like it was my fault.* Seth watched as the woman settled the twins on the bench and dished out macaroni and potato salads onto plates. *Johnny would've been a good father, but I screwed that up.* He kicked a small rock on the dusty path, then headed towards the play area at the opposite end of the picnic area. He sat heavily on the widest swing, and rocked. Tears streamed unabashedly down his cheeks. *I wish I could live the last few days all over again, but I can't.* He sniffed and wiped his nose with his arm. *I'll just sit here and wait. I have all the time in the world. Pincher'll get his, even if I have to die giving it to him.* Seth closed his eyes and leaned against the cool metal chains supporting the swing.

"Son?"

Seth opened his eyes. *Daddy? Johnny?* The slightly out-of-focus image of a dark-haired man stood in front of him. He wiped his eyes. The hope rising in Seth's heart turned to disappointment as Seth recognized the man from the barbecue. "Huh?"

"Would you care to join us?" The man gestured to the picnic table. "We have a lot of food."

"No...ah...thanks anyway," Seth shook his head sadly. "I'm kinda...waiting for somebody." His stomach growled loudly.

"Well," offered the man, "you could have a hot dog or two while you wait. My wife and I noticed you sitting here, and we'd love to have you join us."

"That's okay," Seth spotted a figure approaching from the distance. "I think my friend is here."

"Okay," said the man. He shrugged and returned to the picnic table.

Roy, thought Seth as he watched the paramedic. *I guess he came to tell me the bad news.* He shook his head sadly. *He'll probably chew me out for leaving the hospital, and tell me how disappointed he is in me for trying to find Pincher. I disappoint everybody I run into. That's just me.*

"I thought I might find you here, Seth," Roy strolled up beside the teen-ager.

"Save it," Seth wiped his eyes. "Johnny's dead. I already know."

Roy stopped in his tracks. "Johnny's not dead, Seth. What do you mean?"

"You're lying!" Seth said fiercely. "I was there! I saw the whole thing. All those people running only means one thing."

Roy scratched the back of his head. "Johnny had a rough time of it for a little while, but he's better. I think he was having a nightmare of some sort." He made patterns in the dirt with the tip of his sneaker. "Listen, Seth. They found Johnny's truck up in the hills. I don't think Pincher will be here anytime soon." He read the conflicting expressions that crossed Seth's face. "Why don't we get something to eat, then go see Johnny. That way you can see for yourself that Johnny's okay."

Seth paused for a moment. *That's it? A sense of relief washed over him. He's alive. Johnny's really alive.*
"Okay."



Roy stopped at a hamburger and hotdog stand near the hospital, in spite of Seth's denial of hunger and his eagerness to see Johnny. It was obvious he needed to get some food into the teenager, if for nothing else than to curb the rumbling sounds being emitted from the boy's empty stomach.

Seth gobbled the hotdog and french fries in no time flat, putting his cousin's record to shame, Roy speculated fondly.

Out of habit, Roy parked near the emergency entrance of the hospital. He opened the car door and got out, while Seth, choosing a more direct route simply hopped out of the convertible.

"Uh...sorry," the boy apologized with a sheepish smile, when he noticed the fair-haired paramedic's raised eyebrow.

Smiling, Roy placed an arm around Seth's shoulder as they walked in to the hospital. "I suppose if I can't train Johnny to use the door, I can't really expect that you'd use the door, either."

Roy spotted Dixie at the nurse's station and headed in that direction, hoping for an update on John's condition. "Hey Dix. How's Johnny doing?"

The head nurse looked up from the chart she was reviewing, with a sympathetic smile. "He's about the same as when you left, Roy." She patted his hand before turning her head to run an appraising eye over Seth. "There were a couple officer's here a few minutes ago looking for you. They think they've found the rest of your gang." Dixie was a caring, understanding and compassionate individual. Her tone made it clear that she had none of those qualities to spare for Seth at the moment.

"Thanks Dix." Roy guided Seth toward the elevator, anxious to check on his partner. They were making their way down the long hall leading to the ICU, when they were stopped by Joanne's voice.

"Roy! In here!" she called from a small waiting room.

"Hey Pal," Hank Stanley greeted with a smile, from just inside the door. "They're checking him out right now, kicked us out of the room."

"Is everything okay?" Roy asked concerned, as he and Seth entered the waiting room.

"He's pretty much the same. They're just keeping a close eye on him." Hank assured.

Roy nodded and then gestured toward an empty chair, for Seth to have a seat.

"Roy, the police were looking for you and...Seth," Joanne cautiously informed him. "They think they've found those other boys. There was an accident in the same vicinity that they found Johnny's car. It was a group of teenaged boys. They were driving another stolen car."

"Really?" Roy asked, hopefully. "Did the authorities get the boys' names?"

"Well..." Joanne moved closer to her husband, lowering her voice to almost a whisper. "Th-they couldn't."

Hank intervened. "The car went over a steep embankment. It caught on fire and...the kids...well, they didn't make it."



"Damn!" Mona swore, slamming the receiver back into its cradle. "Where the hell could they be?" She snatched a cigarette from the pack lying on the kitchen counter and rummaged through her purse for a book of matches.

"They're probably out having a great time, baby," Gerald attempted to placate her. He pulled a lighter from his shirt pocket, opened the lid and held the flame up for her.

Mona inhaled deeply and then blew out, making a hissing noise. "I...I know, I know. I...I just really wanted to talk to him. I haven't even heard his voice for over two weeks." She began pacing nervously around the kitchen.

Gerald, seated at the kitchen table, had resumed reading the newspaper. "I thought you were happy to have a little break from him?" he asked without looking up.

"Well...I was, but...I guess I kinda miss him," she admitted. "I know he can be a real pain sometimes, but he is my kid and well...I've never been away from him for this long before."

Surprised by the confession, Gerald looked up from his paper, eyebrows raised and took a sip of coffee. "No kiddin'!" He chuckled, watching her with obvious amusement.

"No kiddin'! I'd do just about anything to hear one of those smart remarks of his right about now!"



Seth sat in the lounge, his head in his hands. It had been two hours since Roy and he had returned to Rampart. *I can't believe Pincher's dead!* Seth kept picturing the wild boy and his friends and shuddering. *Could have been me....*

Roy sipped a cup of coffee as they waited. Johnny's condition was much the same. An officer had come and gone, taking a statement from Seth. After much intervention and pleading from Roy, Captain Stanley, and Dr. Brackett, it was decided that Roy would retain temporary custody of Seth until his mother could be located.

The officer issued a stern lecture to the distraught boy. Roy glanced at Seth. The boy had gone from sullen teenager to frightened child in a number of hours. Roy sighed. *I'd love to help this kid, Johnny. I just wish I knew how!* He felt guilty when he thought of how superior he had acted to Johnny when it came to discussing parental skills. *Well, I guess I learned a lesson here, too! Come on, partner. Wake up, so I can share it with you...and apologize.*

Joanne DeSoto walked into the lounge carrying a soda can. She smiled at her husband, then sat next to Seth. She put a hand on the distraught child's back. He looked up, his eyes rimmed red. She smiled gently. "I thought you could use this." She handed him the soda can.

Seth grinned shyly. "Thank you." He opened the soda and took a sip, pausing as the lounge door opened again. Kelly Brackett walked in, a smile on his face. "Roy, Johnny's awake. He's asking for you and for Seth."



Mona hurriedly threw some clothes in a suitcase, pausing only to light another cigarette. Gerald walked into the room. "I got us a flight out in an hour, baby."

She smiled distractedly, taking a long drag. "Thank you, sweetie."

Gerald came up behind her, massaging her shoulders. "Come on, hon...your boy is okay. That police officer said so."

Mona sighed. "But Johnny's in the hospital.... God, Gerald, I shouldn't have dumped Seth there. And that officer said there's some kind of trouble Seth's in. My kid must be scared to death."

Gerald hugged his wife. "I told you. 'Til death do us part. We're family now. You, me ...and Seth. We'll get through this. Your boy, too."

Mona swiped at unshed tears. She turned and smiled at Gerald. "You're too good to me."



Dixie McCall smiled as she recorded John Gage's vitals in his chart. "Well, you won't be running marathons anytime soon, but I think you're gonna be fine."

John smiled weakly at the head nurse. He struggled to stay awake. He pulled at the oxygen mask on his face. "Seth?"

Dixie's smile faded. "Kel went to get him. Roy, too."

Johnny nodded, sinking back into his pillow. He groaned as a wave of nausea overtook him.

Dixie put her hand on Johnny's arm, then placed the mask back on his face. "Nauseous?"

He nodded again. She reached over for the small plastic bowl on the bedside table, but Johnny shook his head.

She smiled. "Okay. But let's keep this here. Coming off that anesthesia can be tough."

The door opened and Roy and Seth entered the room. Johnny's face lit up.

Seth stared at his cousin. Johnny was very pale. A chest tube was coming from his side, draining into a plastic container that hung on the side of the back. Another container collected urine. Two IV's were hooked to his arm, their tubing snaking across the bed. Bulky bandages were taped to his incision and their stark whiteness contrasted with the huge purplish bruises covering his chest. His cousin tried to sit up in bed, groaning in pain. Seth's mouth hung open in shock and he trembled slightly. *I've caused this.* He looked into Johnny's face and was surprised to see his cousin smiling at him. Seth returned a tentative smile, his eyes welling up with tears of relief.

Roy grinned as he looked from Johnny to Seth. He squeezed the boy's arm. "Go see your cousin."

Seth nodded and headed to the bed, grabbing Johnny's hand. "I'm sorry," he cried.

Dixie nodded to Roy and quietly left the room.

Johnny stroked Seth's head. "'so'k. I'm glad you're okay."

Seth wiped at his eyes. "You...you've been really good to me. Not many people have been good to me. And I ruined your life." His voice crackled with emotion.

Johnny shook his head. "My life's not ruined, Seth. I'm gonna be fine. We'll both be fine."

Roy smiled at Johnny. "How are you, partner?"

Johnny grimaced, then answered groggily. "Been better."

Roy nodded at Seth. "Seth did a fine job of helping to save your life. He was a great help."

Seth glanced from Roy to Johnny, unused to praise. He shook his head. "If it weren't for me, you wouldn't need help. I'm the one who should've been hurt." The boy looked away. "I'm just trouble."

Johnny shook Seth's arm weakly. He pulled the mask off his face. "Listen," he rasped in a weak voice. "You are not trouble. You're a good kid, Seth. You just had...some bad breaks."

"You don't know-" Seth started, only to be cut off by Johnny.

"I do know!" Johnny paused, leaning into his pillow. Roy moved closer to the bed, but Johnny held a hand up, signaling him to stop. John looked at Seth. "When I was a kid, maybe a little older than you, I started hangin' with this gang. My older brother...well, he was the star of the family. My kid sister, the baby, she was the cute one. I just felt...kind of...lost." He looked at Seth, who nodded. Johnny took a deep breath and continued. "When I found this gang, I finally felt...like I belonged. So, I cut class, took up smoking, shoplifted little things. Whatever it took for them to like me."

He paused again. Roy watched his friend, knowing how this speech was stressing the tired man. "Johnny..."

"Lemme finish, Roy." Johnny continued. "One day, my old man got called to school. I had gotten hauled into the guidance counselor's office. For cutting, or cheating on a test. Something. Don't remember just what. Anyway, they decided I needed some discipline. My old man made me join the track team. At first, I hated it. It wasn't cool; I missed my friends. But, soon, I found out that I was good at it! I started winnin'. I liked the other guys. I got really into it. Didn't have time for that gang anymore."

Johnny placed the mask back on his face and took a few deep breaths. Both Roy and Seth watched him intently. He took the mask down and looked at Seth. "One afternoon, my dad shows up at one of my meets. He told me that the gang I used to hang with had tried to rip off a liquor store. Two of the kids got shot. The other one went to jail." Johnny looked at Seth. "It could have been ME...you know?"

Seth nodded, silent tears streaming down his face.

Johnny smiled tiredly, leaning against his pillow. "I was a good kid inside, Seth. Just like you. Track helped save me." He struggled to keep his eyes open. Loosing the battle, he slurred. "...just gotta find you...a track team." He succumbed to the pain medications, drifting to sleep.

Roy wiped his own eyes and approached Seth. "We better go."

Seth looked at Roy. "Mr. DeSoto?"

"Yeah?"

"I...I...don't run...I don't want to be on a track team."

Roy laughed with relief. "Seth, I think what Johnny meant is that we have to find something that you like to do. It doesn't have to be a track team." He studied the boy. "Is there anything, Seth? Something you really like?"

Seth thought for a minute. He looked down self-consciously. "I...I like to...draw." He glanced at Roy, who smiled encouragingly. Seth dropped to his knees, opening the backpack. He pulled out a small sketchpad and handed it to Roy. Roy opened the book, studying the sketches inside. He looked at Seth.

"Son, these are very good."

Seth beamed with pride. "Really?"

Roy smiled. "Really." He grinned at the boy. "I think we found your track team." He looked at the book again, marveling over a sketch of Johnny. Seth definitely had a talent.

The door to Johnny's room opened and Hank Stanley glanced in. "Roy? The police just called. They talked to Seth's mother. She's on her way."



"Well, this is the place," Mona announced uncertainly, gazing out the taxi window at the imposing structure of Rampart General Hospital. She seemed frozen to her seat, even though the vehicle had stopped a half minute earlier. The driver, patient for the time being, studied the reluctant woman in the rear view mirror.

"Come on, Baby...let's go in," Gerald coaxed as he squeezed Mona's hand.

Mona drew a deep breath and nodded. *Can't put it off forever.*

Mona and Gerald entered the main lobby of the hospital and approached the information desk.

"May I help you?" the white-haired volunteer in the striped blazer asked with a smile.

"We're looking for the cafeteria," Gerald explained. The arrangement had been made that Mona was to meet with Seth and Roy in the cafeteria.

"Take the corridor to the first bank of elevators," the volunteer instructed. "The cafeteria is in sub-level 1."

"Thank you," Gerald said gratefully. Mona only nodded. They walked toward the elevators.

As they rode the elevator down, Mona sighed, apparently exasperated with the cubicle's slow descent. Gerald knew, however, that her mock impatience was really a front for her nervousness over the impending reunion with her son.

The elevator settled and the door swished open. Mona's eyes darted about anxiously before she stepped off. Gerald followed, his fingertips gently steering her by her elbow. "It's this way," he said, nodding toward the sign down the hall.

In the cafeteria Roy sat with Seth, who twiddled with the straw in his drink, his knee bouncing ceaselessly. Roy sympathized with the boy's anxiety, but his every attempt at making conversation was met with distracted indifference. What he didn't know was that Seth couldn't shake the mental image of his cousin in that hospital bed, looking so sick and hurt, with all those tubes and wires attached to him. The sight had shaken him to the core. This was real, this wasn't some stupid shoplifting dare or joy ride. This is what happens to people who get mixed up with the wrong crowd. Or it happens to their loved ones, which was even worse.

Unable to draw Seth out, the paramedic contented himself with keeping him company and people watching. *He reminds me so much of Johnny when he's worried about something.*

Seth glanced at the clock at least every 30 seconds. It was a few minutes past the appointed meeting time, and Roy could almost guess that Seth suspected he was being ditched again. Roy knew, of course, that airline schedules were tenuous at best and that Mona and her husband would be relying on a taxi for their transportation, both conditions paving the way for a possible late arrival. But Seth was young and he'd been let down too many times to be so levelheaded about a few minutes' passing.

Roy cleared his throat. "You know, Seth, I wouldn't be at all sur—" But Seth had vaulted out of his chair suddenly, cutting Roy off.

The teenager embraced his diminutive mother in a tight hug and buried his face in her hair. Roy stood and approached the trio tentatively. Studying the striking brunette, he couldn't help noticing that Mona's eyes widened in either shock or surprise at Seth's enthusiastic greeting, and that she was a bit slow to return the embrace. Then he saw Seth's shoulders shaking as he sobbed into his mother's neck. Mona buried her jewel-laden fingers in Seth's thick mop of hair and squeezed her eyes shut, murmuring, "Sethie," which only escalated Seth's crying.

"Hello, I'm Gerald," the older man's deep baritone rumbled, jarring Roy from his reverie.

Roy grasped Gerald's outstretched hand and introduced himself. "I'm Roy DeSoto, Johnny's partner. Seth has been staying with me for a few days."

"Yes, I heard. We - Ramona and I -- really appreciate you looking after him," Gerald said congenially.

"Oh, it's...it's no problem," Roy said, smiling.

Gerald smirked slightly. "That's nice of you to say. I know Seth can be a handful, but I guess I don't have to tell *you* that, considering everything that's occurred."

Roy considered his words carefully. "Well, any child can be a handful. I have two children myself. I don't know any perfect children, even my own." He smiled. "And my two, Chris and Jennifer, have had a lot of advantages Seth hasn't."

Gerald's eyes crinkled with comprehension. "That's fair enough. I know what you're saying, and believe me, things are going to be different for Seth from now on. I know he's had it rough, but Mona and I are committed to providing the stability he needs and hasn't ever had."

Roy hid his skepticism behind a polite smile. "That's good to know. I've gotten to know Seth a little bit... *Hell, I probably know him better than you do...*" And one thing I'm certain of is he's basically a good kid, deep down. The trouble he's gotten into has been pure rebellion as far as I can tell. That and low self-worth. But he's not a bad kid."

"I wholeheartedly agree, Roy. I could see from the first minute I met the kid that he had a good heart," Gerald exclaimed.

Roy snorted softly. "Well, truth be told, I wasn't real sold on Seth in the beginning."

"Oh?"

"Let's just say that Seth and I got off on the wrong foot," Roy offered. "And Johnny was having a devil of a time controlling him those first few days, although I wasn't aware of just how bad it was until much later. My partner can be a tad proud at times, especially when he's been doubted. And, I'm afraid, I was the doubter. I thought Johnny was crazy to take on the responsibility of a teenaged cousin he barely knew."

"So, he wasn't about to let you have your 'I told you so,'" Gerald surmised.

"Exactly. Johnny kept a lot of the problems with Seth to himself, not wanting to admit that he might be in over his head. If I hadn't been so negative, he might have confided in me and I could have helped him." Roy shrugged. "Maybe."

"But he didn't."

"No. I had no clue what all went on. I'm not sure I ever will. But I'll tell you what: Johnny handled it. And whatever he did got through to Seth. I've seen a profound change in that kid from the time he showed up to now."

Both men looked at Mona and Seth, sitting facing each other, oblivious to the world around them. Seth was talking softly and sniffing occasionally, while Mona listened in rapt attention, her fingertips grazing Seth's tear-stained cheek.

"How is your partner - er, Johnny - by the way?" Gerald inquired.

Roy hesitated a few seconds. "He's improving, a little. He's conscious now; that's something new. The doctors seem optimistic."

Mona overhead Johnny's name mentioned, stood, and approached Roy. "I'm Ramona, John's cousin."

"Mom, this is Roy. I've been staying with him since J--...while Johnny's been in the hospital," Seth explained.

Ramona fixed Roy with an intense gaze that startled him with its strong resemblance to his partner. She pointedly asked, "What happened to Johnny? Seth said he was stabbed?"

Roy nodded. "That's right. He was stabbed in the chest, down around here." Roy illustrated the location on his own body. "He was also struck by his own car when the punks tried to get away."

"God..." Mona bit her lip and blinked rapidly. "Is he..." she sniffed and swiped a knuckle across the corner of her eye. "Can I see him?"

"I'll go up and see if he's awake and how he's feeling," Roy answered. *I don't know if he's ready to see you or not, to be honest.*

"Please. Please tell him I need to see him," Mona implored.

"I'll tell him," Roy promised. "Why don't you three wait here and get reacquainted? I'll check on Johnny now and let you know."

"Thank you, Roy. For everything."

Johnny's the one you should be thanking, Roy thought as he left the cafeteria.



Roy stood by the window of Johnny's room, staring out at the world below. Johnny was sleeping and Roy was in no hurry to rouse him. *He's only recently regained consciousness; now he has to deal with Mona's arrival. He has every right to be furious with her. Somehow, I don't think he will be, though. Family means everything to him. He's much more likely to blame himself somehow...even for what happened to him. He'll say he wasn't there for Mona when she needed him, and all this is his fault.*

Roy's mental meanderings were interrupted by a stirring sound coming from the bed. He turned to see Johnny slowly waking, grimacing in pain as he moved his leg. His eyelids peeled open slowly and he immediately spotted the figure silhouetted by the light of the window. He squinted, trying to focus.

Roy smiled and moved closer to the bed, out of the harsh glare of the window.

"How you feeling?"

"You're...still here?" Johnny rasped, his voice hoarse. "You better get home to that...family of yours." He grinned crookedly.

"Well, I think that family of mine is probably going to show up here."

Johnny depressed the button to elevate the head of his bed. As the bed rose with a hum, he tried to disguise the gasp of pain that slipped out by clearing his throat.

"Do you need some pain meds?" Roy asked.

"Mmm...uh, maybe. Gimme a minute." He squirmed to find a comfortable position, scowling through the effort.

Finally, he relaxed, took a couple of test breaths, and settled back into his pillow.

"You know, you don't have to endure this," Roy stated. "Brackett left orders for plenty of medication—"

Johnny held up his hand. "No...no. I jus' woke up. I don' wanna be knocked out again already."

Roy nodded. "I know what you mean." He reached behind him and pulled the visitors' chair forward with a scoot. "Johnny...someone's here."

"Mona."

"Yeah. She got here about an hour ago. She and Gerald are downstairs with Seth."

Johnny's eyes widened. "How is he? How's he handlin' it?" he asked with alarm.

"He's fine, he's just fine," Roy assured him. "They're getting reacquainted. He seemed really happy to see her, John."

Johnny sighed, staring at the foot of the bed. "Good, that's...good." He raised his dark gaze to meet Roy's. "And Mona? How'd she...?"

"I think she was a bit surprised when Seth ran up and gave her a big bear hug and burst into tears," Roy recounted.

"He did? Wow." Johnny's eyes roamed back to the thermal blanket covering the lower half of his body. He absently pulled at a small nubbin on the blanket. "I guess I didn' know what to expect, to be honest."

"That's understandable," Roy remarked. "Seth is...kind of a ball of contradictions."

"That he is," Johnny agreed. "I never know what he's gonna do next. I guess he's kinda mixed up."

"To put it mildly."

Johnny reached stiffly to his beside table and retrieved a cup with some water and a straw.

"Here, let me get you some fresh water," Roy offered. He stole a surreptitious glance at Johnny while he poured the iced water from the pitcher. Johnny appeared deep in thought as he stared, unseeing, at the opposite wall.

Johnny accepted the proffered water and took a sip. "You know, Roy, I have sort of a confession to make." He looked at his partner to confirm that he had his attention, then continued. "When Mona asked me to keep Seth, I really didn't want to, at first. I mean, I did and I didn't, you know?"

Roy didn't comment; he merely waited for Johnny to continue.

"But then, when I was telling you about Mona, and about Seth - that day back in the station - it sort of hit me that 'hey, here's your chance to right some of the wrongs. Try to make up for abandoning Seth when he was little.'"

"Johnny, you didn't aban—"

"No Roy, listen. It might seem strange, but I'd never really faced the fact that I dropped out of Seth's life the way I did. I mean, I was a big presence in his life when he was really little. He really looked up to me. And I...I *did* have an attachment to him. Maybe not like a parent, but almost. I probably took care of him as much as his own mom did." He turned shining eyes to his partner. "He was just a baby, practically...and I left him. I just...left." Johnny's chin trembled until he pressed his lips together. "He probably never understood what happened."

Johnny took another sip of water and composed himself. "Anyway...when I got to thinking about all that, I thought - foolishly - that maybe I could make it up to him somehow, in some small way. I thought that having him with me might help heal the hurt, you know? We could do things, really fill our time with great activities and togetherness. Trouble is, I don't know whose hurt I was looking to heal, his or mine." The last sentence was barely audible.

"Johnny, you have to remember, you were just a kid yourself when you took care of Seth the first time. You're being too hard on yourself!" Roy asserted. "You were *not* Seth's father! He wasn't your responsibility!" Roy shook his head. "Where the heck *is* his father, anyway? He's sure not sitting in some hospital room recovering from near-fatal injuries and blaming himself for it!"

"Roy, you don't understand!" Johnny gasped and clamped his hand against his bandage.

"Johnny, you okay?" Roy jumped out of his chair in a panic.

"Yeah," Johnny replied in a clipped tone. He breathed deeply a few seconds until the pain subsided. "Yeah. I'm okay."

"I'm sorry. I...got you worked up, I...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things," Roy apologized.

"No, Roy, it's okay. I understand your viewpoint, I really do. I realize how it must seem." Johnny rubbed his forehead deeply, but his expression stayed strained after he lowered his hand. "All I can see, though, is how much I've botched everything. I let him down all those years ago...and...I screwed up again this time. Who do I think I am, thinking I can do anything right by Seth?" He laughed scornfully. "Well. I guess this is my answer," he replied to himself, gesturing vaguely over his injured body.

Roy studied his friend's somber expression, and noted the slightly furrowed brow. *He's in pain, physical and emotional. I know that look.* "Johnny, I guess nothing I say is going to make any difference to you right now. But I'm going to say a couple of things anyway, because they're true and they need to be said. You did everything you could with Seth, considering what you had to work with, which was, 1) a mixed up, resentful teenager, and 2) your own inexperience. You took that kid in, and you supervised him, and you talked to him, and you were there for him, which is a hell of a lot more than anyone else has done in a long time. And you did a hell of a job."

"Oh, obviously," Johnny added sarcastically.

"Listen, Seth has been crying his eyes out over what happened to you. He feels responsible and he's been damn worried you weren't going to be all right. He knows, instinctively, what you've tried to do for him. Kids know when someone really cares and when someone's just pretending. And Seth realizes how much you care for him. That alone has turned his whole orientation 180 degrees. He wants to do the right things now, Johnny. He's turned the corner. He knows he has worth, and that's because *you* showed him."

Johnny tried to digest this information. It seemed to make sense, but he was losing his ability to concentrate and comprehend. He was tiring. He regarded Roy with pain-filled eyes. "I don't know, Roy."

He's exhausted and in pain and I need to give him a break. "Hey, I've talked too much and tired you out."

Johnny's snorted softly and smiled. His eyelids drifted to half-mast.

"Uh, Johnny...Mona wants to see you. I told her I'd let you know."

Johnny's smile faded. "Is...is she...does she..." He chuckled softly as his inability to form a sentence. "Um, yeah. Of course. I need to see her...of course."

"She's not upset with you, if that's what you're thinking," Roy assured him. "She's really worried about you, just like everyone else is. Would you like to see her this evening? If not, I can put her off for a day."

"No...don' put her off. Just give me a little time," Johnny said softly.

"Okay, good enough. Look," Roy rose from his chair. "I can see you need some rest. I'm going to go now and check on Seth, and my family." He laughed softly. "I've got a few balls in the air." Reaching down, he patted Johnny's shoulder, then gripped it gently as he went on. "I'll bring Mona up a little later, okay?"

"'kay," Johnny replied. He watched his partner heading for the door of his room to leave. "Hey, Roy?"

"Yeah?"

"I-I could use that medication now."

Roy nodded his acknowledgement. "I'll tell the nurse." He hesitated another moment. When Johnny didn't say anything else, Roy left the room.



After dinner, still thinking about the events of the day, Roy drove over to the hotel where Mona and Gerald were staying.

Apparently, Seth had filled Mona and Gerald in on all the events leading up to today, while Roy was checking on Johnny. After going back to the cafeteria, Roy had almost reached the table where they were seated and heard Seth finish his confessions. He stood silent, then watched as Mona hugged her son and started crying with him. Gerald also embraced Seth, and told him that things would get better from now on, that they loved him, that they were family now and how that meant they would always be there for Seth. Seth cried even harder in Gerald's embrace. Roy felt like he could almost start crying then too, after witnessing that scene.

After things calmed down somewhat, Roy informed Mona that Johnny wouldn't't be up to visitors until that evening. At his suggestion, Roy took Mona and Gerald back to their hotel to get settled in. Seth went with his mom, with Roy agreeing to bring Seth's things over to them later and then driving them back to the hospital for visiting hours that evening.

Roy reached the hotel, surprised to find Mona waiting outside for him by herself. He pulled over to where she was. Mona opened the car door and got in.

"Hi Roy," she said.

"Hi," he paused, "I thought Seth and Gerald were coming too?"

"They were... I asked them to wait until next time," Mona said hesitantly.

"Oh, ok." Roy put the car in gear and headed towards the hospital.

"It's just... I needed to see John alone," she continued. "To apologize and to say thank you."

Roy opened his mouth to say something, and then stopped. He wasn't sure what to say. Mona noticed his expression.

"I think the apology is more to make me feel better than anyone else, but it's the only place I could think to start," Mona said.

"I don't think Johnny expects you to apologize for anything," Roy told her.

Mona sighed. "No, he probably doesn't, but he deserves one. He deserves more." She paused. "Seth is the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm sure that's hard to believe coming from me, considering how I've been raising him. Sometimes, I find it hard to believe myself."

Another short silence ensued. "I'm sorry, Roy, I know you don't want to hear any of this stuff from me."

"No, it's ok." Roy looked over at Mona and smiled. "I don't mind."

Another round of silence filled the air.

"When I met Gerald, he was so different from the others. He wanted to be with both Seth and me, get the package deal, you know? He finally taught me to grow up."

Roy looked at Mona. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I loved Gerald, but I was jealous of him wanting to be with Seth. I was competing with my own kid, and Seth didn't even know it. Gerald knew it though. Every relationship I had ever had, I think I was doing that. Gerald finally made me realize it."

Mona paused again, then continued. "When Gerald proposed, he told me it was with a condition, that I go to some counselor he knew, one that dealt with anger management, otherwise he would have to walk away, because he couldn't stand to see all of us hurt anymore."

I never loved anyone like I did Gerald. The thought of him leaving made me wonder if all those theories he had were right. So I agreed to go."

Suddenly it all made sense to Roy.

"That's why you wanted the extra 10 days, isn't it?" Roy asked.

"Yes. The therapist thought it would be best to start with just Gerald and me, then bring Seth into counseling after. The idea was for me to get some kind of grip on my problem before I saw Seth again.

Mona let out a nervous laugh. "It's a shaky grip, but it's there."

"Does Seth know all about this?" Roy asked.

Mona nodded. "We talked about it some after we got back to the hotel. He's kind of confused about it all, but he told me before I left that he forgave me for my feelings. Gerald said he would talk to him more tonight, while they were alone."

"You know Roy, a month ago I would be all pissed off because Gerald wanted to spend time with Seth without

me. Now, I'm just glad that the two of them are together to do that."

Conversation stilled as they past a sign stating that the hospital was only 1 mile away. Mona looked out the window at it, then over to Roy, and then back out the window.

"I just hope John can forgive me as well," she whispered.



Dixie was just coming out of Johnny's room as Roy and Mona came down the hall. She walked down to meet them.

"Hi Roy," she said with a smile, "who's your friend?"

"Dixie McCall, this is Mona, Johnny's cousin and Seth's mother."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Dixie said.

"Thank you," said Mona. " Is John okay? She asked hesitantly.

"Well, why don't you ask him for yourself. He's awake, I just checked in on him. Come on, I'll show to his room." Dixie smiled, and then turned to go back down the hall.

"Thanks.... um, Roy...." Mona drifted off.

"Take your time. I'll be in the waiting room whenever you're ready," Roy said.

"Thanks Roy." Mona turned and followed Dixie down the hall.

Mona went to the door that Dixie gestured to. Taking a couple of deep breaths, she slowly opened the door and went inside the room.



Despite the fact Roy had given Ramona a rundown of Johnny's condition, the woman wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted her when she entered the paramedic's hospital room. Mona's normally vibrant cousin was pale and still. He had an IV in his right arm, its tube leading to a bag of clear solution hanging on a pole next to his bed. He was no longer wearing an oxygen mask, but did have a two-pronged tube clipped to his nostrils that Mona later learned was called a nasal cannula. A cup that was collecting drainage from Johnny's stab wound hung from the railing on the left side of the bed. A sheet and light blanket covered the paramedic to mid-chest, but that didn't prevent Mona from seeing the purple and blue bruises that covered his right side. The ugly bruises were interspersed with painful looking scrapes from where his flesh had made contact with the pavement.

Johnny turned his head toward the door when he heard it open. His voice was so quiet and weak Mona almost didn't hear his greeting.

"Hey, Mona."

For the first time in her life Ramona was shy with her favorite cousin. She gave him an uncertain smile as she stood rooted to the tiles.

"Hi, Johnny."

"Better not stand there. If a nurse comes in you'll get hit by the door."

"Oh." The woman glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, yeah. I see what you mean."

Despite her words Mona still didn't move. Using his right hand Johnny pointed to a chair in the corner of the room.

"Why don't you move that over here and have a seat."

"Um. . .um, sure. I'll do that."

Mona moved the chair to the right side of Johnny's bed. She sat down, perching on the edge of the seat as though she wanted to be ready to flee should Johnny tell her to get out. The woman wondered where that thought came from. Johnny had never been anything other than supportive of her, even when the rest of the family had turned its back on her for the foolish mistakes she'd made time and time again since Seth was born.

Ramona took a deep breath, then voiced what she was thinking.

"If you don't want me here I understand."

"Why wouldn't I want you here?"

The woman gave a snort of disgust aimed at herself. "Johnny, you're in that bed because of me."

"Because of you?"

"Because I pushed Seth off on you. He told me the whole story from start to finish. He told me about everything you've done for him these past few weeks, and then he told me about that kid. . .Pincher, that he got himself hooked up with. You were hurt because of Seth's friendship with Pincher. You were hurt because I left Seth with you."

"Mona, that's not true. When you asked if Seth could stay with me I had the option to say no."

"Yes, you did, but I knew perfectly well you wouldn't. I took advantage of you, Johnny, and I can never apologize enough for that fact. I. . .I dumped my son on you because I. . .well, because I've been shirking my responsibility where Seth's concerned almost since the day he was born. Hell, you know that better than anyone. God knows you changed enough diapers to last any sixteen-year-old kid a lifetime. When I was too busy runnin' around with my girlfriends you were the one feeding Seth, bathing him, playing with him. . .you were doing all the things I should have been doing until the day came when you couldn't be Mr. Mom anymore and you left."

"Mona. . .I'm--"

"No," the woman held up a hand. "Don't apologize. You don't need to apologize. You had dreams, Johnny. You had a goal. You wanted to be a fireman with a big city department, and because of that look where you are today. A paramedic. I'm. . .I'm so proud of you. I always have been. And I never blamed you for leaving. Seth wasn't your responsibility, he was mine."

"I know. But lately I've been doing a lot of thinking, and wondering if things might have been better for Seth if I'd stuck around."

Mona shrugged. "Who knows? We can't do more than guess at the answer to that question so why even bother

worrying about it."

A heavy silence lingered in the room until Mona smiled and reached out to run a hand up and down Johnny's forearm.

"That's quite a case of road rash you have there. It reminds me of the time when we were ten and you took your bicycle down Death Wish Hill at full speed and wiped out before you got to the bottom. You were so sore you couldn't move for a week."

"Yeah," Johnny smiled at the memory. "Not to mention that I couldn't *sit* for a week after my dad got finished with me. He'd told me about a million times to stay away from that hill."

"You were lucky, Johnny," Ramona said, "to have a father who cared so much. That's all I ever wanted for Seth. A man who cared about him. A man who could raise him right. Who could teach him things. . .show him things, that I can't. The older he gets the more and more I realize how important that is.

I. . .for too many years I let Seth raise himself. From the time he was as young as seven or eight he seemed so mature, so responsible, that I fooled myself into believing he didn't really need a mom. So I guess I spent too much time being his friend, or just plain not being there for him at all."

Johnny wasn't sure where Mona was going with all this, but he'd been doing a lot of thinking that afternoon and had reached a decision. He'd offer to let Seth stay with him if that's what the boy wanted, provided Seth agreed to a number of ground rules that included school attendance, good grades, and finding an activity or two he liked and could get involved in be it some type of sport, a school club, or a part time job. Johnny knew parenting a teenager wouldn't be easy, but he also knew that unless Mona planned to make some major changes in her lifestyle Seth was better off with him.

"Mona--"

"Johnny--"

The pair laughed at the way they'd spoken at the same time.

"Go ahead," Johnny nodded. "You first."

"Johnny, I know you haven't met my husband Gerald yet, but. . ." the woman laughed at her cousin's scowl. "Ah, but I can tell by the expression on your face my son may have mentioned him a time or two."

"Something like that."

"So what did he say?"

"What part do you wanna hear first? That the guy's sixty-two years old? Or that he left his wife for you?"

"I can't deny the first part. About Gerald's age I mean. The second part; however, is baloney."

Johnny raised a skeptical eyebrow. "No?"

"No. Gerald had already filed for divorce when he and I started seeing one another."

"Is that the truth?"

"Yes, Johnny, it's the truth. I've been a lot of things in my life, and most of them nothing to brag about, but I'm not a home wrecker. I wouldn't do that to another woman."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Johnny, I know it seems weird - that I would be attracted to and marry a man thirty-three years older than myself. But please, get to know Gerald before you judge him. He. . .he's helped me in so many ways. He's the first man who's found something about me to love that has nothing to do with sex. He's helped me grow up, Johnny. He's helped me to face where I've been, and he's helped me to figure out where it is I'm going."

"Does where you're going include Seth?"

"Yes, it does. Gerald won't have it any other way. He wants us to be a family."

"Then what about the extra ten days you left Seth with me? Do know how you made that boy feel? Mona, he was sure you didn't ever want him back in your life after that phone call."

Tears sprang to Mona's eyes.

"That's not how I meant to make him feel. I. . .Gerald made me agree to start counseling as soon as we returned from our honeymoon. He had known for a long time that I needed more help than he alone could give me. The counselor thought it was best if Gerald and I come to the first few sessions by ourselves, then bring Seth later. That's the only reason I left Seth with you. I thought it would be best if Gerald and I had a chance to get settled in his home while at the same time getting those first sessions out of the way."

Johnny gave a heavy sigh.

"I wish you would have told Seth all this."

"I wish I would have, too. Oh, Johnny, please believe me when I say that if I had known things would turn out this way Gerald and I would have picked Seth up as soon as we returned from the cruise."

"I believe you," Johnny said. The man clasped Mona's hand in his.

"Mona, I have no idea what's going to happen in the weeks or months to come with you, Gerald and Seth. I hope. . .well I really hope that it all works out. Seth deserves every ounce of love and guidance the two of you can give him. But if it doesn't work out. . .if Seth can't adjust to a stepfather and this new life you want for him, promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Don't abandon him, Mona. Don't assume he can just make it on his own. Please call me. I'll come get him. He can live here in LA with me until he finishes school and is ready to be out on his own."

Ramona wiped at the tears that spilled over to run down her cheeks.

"You'd do that for Seth? For me and Seth? You'd do that for us after all we've put you through?"

"In a heartbeat, Mona."

"Oh, Johnny, I don't deserve a cousin like you."

"No, that's where you're wrong. You deserve a helluva lot more than me. I just hope you've finally found it."

The woman smiled through her tears as she stood to kiss Johnny's forehead.

"Me too, John. Me, too."



Seth hadn't wanted to remain behind at the hotel with Gerald, but his mother said she needed to see Johnny alone. The teenager didn't know why he couldn't wait outside Johnny's room with Roy, but he lost that argument with his mother as well.

Ramona and Roy hadn't been gone more than fifteen minutes before Gerald was suggesting he and Seth walk down to the hotel's dining room for dinner. Seth had no desire to eat alone with this man, but he supposed that couldn't be anymore uncomfortable than sitting in a hotel room watching TV with his new stepfather.

Gerald pointed out a distant table in a quiet corner to the hostess, indicating that's where he'd like to be seated. Once Seth and Gerald were settled in their chairs the man picked up a menu and said, "Order whatever suits your fancy, Seth. Steak, lobster, shrimp. . .anything you prefer."

"I like cheeseburgers. Those are Johnny's favorite. I like 'em, too."

"Not a bad choice," Gerald nodded, as his eyes scanned the menu. "I like cheeseburgers myself. Cheeseburgers, french fries, and a chocolate malt. As a matter of fact I'm glad you mentioned it. I think that's what I'll have."

Seth was surprised that this rich old coot would want to eat a cheeseburger. But when the waitress came back that's exactly what Gerald ordered.

"Is that what you want too, son?" Gerald asked. "Or did you change your mind?"

"No. Um. . .that's what I'll have."

The waitress recorded Seth's order and said, "Thank you, Gentlemen," before scurrying away.

Gerald leaned back in his chair and smiled. Seth thought he had a nice smile in the same way Johnny's smile was nice, though Gerald didn't look anything like Johnny. He was a lot older for one thing, and his eyes were pale blue. At one time his hair must have been red because Seth could still see a few streaks of that color in it, but overall it was more gray than anything else. Gerald wasn't as tall as Johnny either, nor was he as thin, yet you wouldn't call him fat. Actually, Seth thought his mother's new husband looked pretty fit for a guy his age.

"So, Seth, I hope you're looking forward to moving into my home. Your mother and I got your room ready. Or by that I mean we had the carpet cleaned and bought a bedroom set for you. As far as the color of the walls, or wallpaper, or other decorations, that's up to you. We'll let you pick out what you want."

Seth tried to keep the look of disbelief off his face. He'd never had his own bedroom before. Their trailer had just one bedroom, and that belonged to his mother. For as long as Seth could remember he'd slept on the couch.

"It's. . .it's all mine? A whole room to myself you mean?"

"Certainly. It used to be the guest room, but I've got two other empty rooms to use for that purpose now that my daughters are grown."

"Daughters?"

"Kay and Marilyn. They're quite a bit older than you. One of them is married and lives in Connecticut, the other is single and makes her home in Atlanta."

"Oh."

"With the girls living so far away the swimming pool hasn't gotten a workout in years. So if you promise to do the maintenance, I'll have it filled again."

Seth couldn't keep his eyes from lighting up at the prospect of having his own swimming pool.

"Sure. Except. . .except I don't know how."

"I'll teach you. There's nothing to it as long as you're not afraid of a little hard work."

"I'm not. Johnny taught me how to work for things I want like spending money and privileges."

"Good for him. That's what life's all about, you know."

"Yeah, Johnny told me that, too."

"It sounds like Johnny is a smart man."

"He is. And. . .and nice, too. Though he can be strict sometimes. Real strict if you make him mad. At first I didn't like that, but after a while I just wanted to do things to please him. It made me. . .it made me feel good when I knew I'd made Johnny happy."

"Why was that?"

"I don't know," Seth said, not even realizing how easy it was to talk to Gerald. "At first I thought he was real corny. And kinda goofy, too. But once you get to know Johnny. . .well, he's just a cool guy. And he cares so much about me. No one's. . .no one's ever cared about me the way Johnny does. And when I did good stuff, like kept the apartment clean or did a good job washing his truck, he told me so. He told me he was proud of me. I. . ." Seth shrugged. "It was nice to hear that."

"It's always nice to be told when we do a good job, or when someone's proud of us."

Seth's eyes dropped to the white tablecloth.

"But I screwed up when it came to lettin' him know I appreciated what he'd done for me. Johnny was hurt real bad 'cause of the kids I was hangin' out with."

"We all make mistakes, Seth. Especially when we're fourteen. I'm sure Johnny understands that."

"I hope so." The boy didn't say anything further for a long minute, then finally met his stepfather's eyes. "Is this thing between you and my mother gonna last?"

"Pardon?"

"The marriage. Is it gonna last?"

Gerald chuckled. "I certainly plan on it."

"But she's so young and you're so--"

"Old?"

Seth felt his cheeks twinge red at the way Gerald had guessed the thoughts he didn't mean to voice.

"Yeah."

"Believe me, Seth, I didn't plan on falling in love with your mother. But she. . .she makes me feel so alive. Which is quite different from feeling young. A lot of people assumed I married your mother because I'm trying to recapture my youth. Well, that's hogwash. I know perfectly well that I'm sixty-two years old, and the father of two daughters in their thirties. But I do think age is irrelevant. Unfortunately, my ex-wife didn't."

"Huh?"

"Reba, my ex, she thought we should 'act our age.' Now what exactly that meant I'm not certain, but the last ten years of our marriage she wanted nothing more out of life than what a lap robe and the television could offer. I thought we'd spend our golden years traveling and enjoying pursuits we hadn't been able to afford, or didn't have the time for, when we were younger. But she didn't want anything to do with that, and had a fit when I learned to water ski, or wanted to sky dive, or go camping, or hiking, or--"

"You camp and hike?"

"You bet. As often as I can."

"Johnny likes to do those things, too. He took me hiking a few times. We were going to go camping next week."

"I'll take you camping. You and your mother both. I plan on that being something the three of us get away and do at least once a month."

Seth absorbed this news, then thought a moment before asking his next question.

"So my mother didn't break up your marriage like the kids at school said?"

"No, Seth. Your mother didn't break up my marriage. My marriage was long over by the time I started dating your mom."

Seth gave a tight nod. He had no idea why he believed this man, there was just something in Gerald's blue eyes that told Seth his stepfather wouldn't lie to him.

"She's tried hard," Seth said quietly. "My mom, I mean. She's tried to do a good job raising me, but she's had

it pretty tough. The kids at school. . .they don't understand. They call us trailer trash. But she was only fifteen when I was born."

"I know. And she wants to make all the tough times right by you now."

"Whatta ya' mean?"

"Your mom is trying very hard to change for the better, Seth, and I vowed to help her make those changes. For so long she thought she'd missed out on a portion of her youth because she had you at such a young age. Now don't get me wrong, she's never blamed you for that, but it prevented her from being the mother to you she should have been. She realizes that now, and wants the opportunity to rectify it. The day I asked her to marry me was the day I made a deal with her."

"What deal?"

"I told her she'd left you alone enough to fend for yourself, and that's not how anyone raises a child. I her told it was time she grows up and starts acting like your mother instead of like your sister. I told her I'd help her in anyway I could, but that she had to take the first step toward making that happen. And she did."

"She did?"

"Yes. We started attending counseling sessions as soon as we returned from our honeymoon. That's why we didn't come pick you up from Johnny's right away. Your mother wanted us to get started with the counselor first."

"Oh. I thought. . .I thought--"

"You thought what, son?"

"I thought she didn't want me anymore."

Gerald leaned across the table and laid a hand on Seth's arm.

"No, Seth. No. Never. That was never the case. Nor will it ever be the case. I knew when I married your mother that you were part of the package. I wouldn't have it any other way. I promise I won't abandon you like my father abandoned me."

"He did?"

Gerald nodded. He removed his hand from Seth's arm and sat a little straighter in his chair, as though he had a long and difficult story to tell.

"You see, Seth, I'm not much different than you. A lot of people would say I came from the wrong side of the tracks."

"What do you mean?"

"I was three months old when my father walked out of our lives. He left my mother alone to raise four children by herself. The oldest amongst us was only six. Throughout my growing up years we lived in a two-room shanty with a dirt floor. My three sisters and my mother slept in one tiny room, and like you, I slept on an old lumpy sofa in the main room. My mother, God rest her sweet soul, worked herself into an early grave in

order to provide for us. As soon as my sisters and I were old enough to take on odd jobs we did. We didn't earn much. You have to remember this was over fifty years ago. But whether it was just a couple pennies, or maybe as much as a dime, we turned all the money we earned over to Mother. By the time I was your age I was too busy working to go to school. I was also mad."

"Mad?"

"Because of the way we were forced to live. The expression, 'dirt poor' didn't even begin to describe us. My sisters and I would have been desperate for clothing if it hadn't been for the charity of a church down the street. As it was I was often forced to wear a pair of my sisters' shoes when I'd outgrown my own. Trying being a ten year old boy and having to live with that humiliation."

A sympathetic smile touched the corners of Seth's mouth.

"So I started getting into trouble. Running with the wrong crowd of kids. I was caught stealing a few times, caught breaking into the homes of rich people, but I didn't care. My poor mother. She'd practically be in tears when she'd say, 'Gerald, you have to stop behaving this way. Do you know what it will do to me if you end up in jail?'

"Of course I knew what it would do to her, and I felt terrible each time I hurt her, but there was a larger part of me that didn't care. I was so angry over everything that was lacking in our lives. A warm house with real floors. Closets filled with new clothes. Cabinets spilling over with food. A father who provided for us the way fathers should provide for their families. I'll tell you, Seth, I was headed down one bad road after another. I'd no more than be in trouble for one incident, when I'd get caught doing something else. My mother was right. I would have ended up in jail if it hadn't been for Mr. Ellingstad."

"Mr. Ellingstad?"

"Harlan Ellingstad. A man I was hired by to clean out his horse stables and do yard work. He was one of the wealthiest guys in town, but you would have never guessed it by how he acted. He lived a quiet, unassuming sort of life. Though he and his wife had a nice home, it was not nearly as fancy and luxurious as what they could have afforded. As the years have gone by I've often wondered what Mr. Ellingstad first saw in me that made him take me under his wing. Maybe it was just because I showed up on time for work each day. Or maybe it went deeper than that and he saw a kid who had a wealth of untapped potential slowly dying inside of him. Whatever it was, Mr. Ellingstad became to me what Johnny has become to you."

"What's that?"

"The man who taught me right from wrong. The man who told me he was proud of me. The man who said, 'Good job, son,' at the end of a hard day's work. The man who told me I could go far in life if I finished school. As a direct result of Mr. Ellingstad's influence I did just that. After I graduated he hired me to work at the factory he owned. He promised me that if I put in two years learning everything I could about the business and financial world he'd pay for my college education. That was a promise he kept. It was because of Mr. Ellingstad I'm the success I am today. Without him. . .well without him I just might be rotting in a prison cell somewhere. He envisioned for me what Johnny envisions for you."

"What?"

"A bright future, Seth. Johnny looks at you and sees a bright young man with a bright future provided someone helps you keep your life on a steady course. Johnny did a heck of a job getting you started down the right path. Now I hope you'll let me finish that job."

Seth thought a long moment, then slowly nodded his head.

"I'd like to give it a try. I . . .I don't know what I want to be yet. I mean what I want to go to college for. Until a few weeks ago I never thought much about my future. But I like to draw. Roy says I'm good, too. And . . .and I think I might be interested in being a paramedic, like Johnny."

"Those both sound like excellent places to start. But there's no rush, Seth. You've got some time yet to reach that decision. Right now I think we should concentrate on getting you through high school."

"Will I have to go back to my old school?"

"No. My house. . .our house, isn't in that district. I'd like to send you to the same high school my daughters went to. It's a private school, but I think you'll like it. There's a lot of opportunities there, including a wide variety of art classes you can take."

Seth didn't voice any objections. He was a little nervous at the thought of starting a new school, yet he had no desire to return to his old one. Maybe a fresh start where no one knew him or his mother would be a good thing.

"I . . .I think I'd like to try it."

"Good for you. I know new situations are always difficult, but you'll never get anywhere in life if you try to bypass them."

"How soon do we have to leave here?"

"As soon as your mom gives the word. In a day or two I suppose."

"I . . .I need to see Johnny before we go. I have to tell him goodbye and . . .and thank you."

Gerald smiled. "I wouldn't have it any other way. I'd like to tell him goodbye and thank you, too."

Seth sat back in his chair, able to relax for the first time since Johnny had been hurt. He wasn't certain how this new life would work out, but he did know one thing. It sure felt good to have someone call him 'son.'



Seth pushed open the door to Johnny's hospital room, quietly peeking inside. Johnny's face was turned toward Seth, and he appeared to be sleeping. The boy wasn't sure what to do. His mother and Gerald had given Johnny their final thanks and good-byes. They were waiting in the cafeteria for Seth to do the same, then all three of them had to head for the airport. Their flight back to Montana left in two hours.

Seth didn't want to leave without telling Johnny goodbye, but he didn't want to wake him either. The man was still pale and battered. Though Doctor Brackett had assured Seth and his mother Johnny was on the mend, Seth didn't think Johnny looked very healthy.

The boy stood half in and out of the room, chewing on his lower lip with indecision. Maybe he needed to ask a nurse if it was okay to wake Johnny. If she said no then he supposed he could leave the man note, though that's not what Seth wanted to do.

Before Seth made up his mind regarding his course of action Johnny's eyes opened. He gave the teen a weary smile.

"Hi, Seth. Come on in. I've been waiting for you. Your mom said she was sending you up."

"Hi," Seth said with uncharacteristic shyness as he stepped into the room. "I. . .I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. I was just dozing. The meds. . .medications they have me on are fairly strong. They make me tired."

"Oh."

Johnny pointed to the right side of his bed.

"Sit down in this chair. Your mom left it here for you."

"Okay."

Seth did as his cousin requested. He perched on the edge of the seat, bouncing his legs up and down in a way that indicated his unease to Johnny.

"Are you all right?"

"Huh?"

"You seem a little uptight."

"Oh...uh, no. No, I'm okay," Seth assured, though if the truth be known he was nervous. Johnny had been pretty out of it yet when Roy had brought Seth to see him the other day. Now that Johnny was more coherent Seth knew he had some heavy apologizing to do.

"It's just that...that..." Seth had no idea where the tears came from that started running down his face. "I'm so sorry, Johnny. About everything. Stealing money from you. And...and your camera. Pincher took your camera 'cause I let him in the apartment and I shouldn't have. And I'm sorry for causing trouble for you...for you with Roy. And then you got hurt 'cause of me. And your Rover got totaled. And. . .and you didn't deserve to have any of that stuff happen to you. You...you were nothing but good to me. You taught...taught me so many things. You told...told me you were proud of me and I don't...I don't deserve to have anyone be proud of me."

Johnny reached toward the crying boy with his right hand. "Seth, come here."

That's all the invitation the teenager needed. He leaned forward in his chair, buried his face in Johnny's blanket, and sobbed with more force than he could ever remember crying in all his fourteen years.

"I just...I wanted to be good for you, Johnny. You made me want...want to be someone besides a dumb ole' loser."

"I never thought you were dumb," Johnny assured while stroking a hand through Seth's hair. "Nor a loser. You were just a boy who needed someone in your life to show you right from wrong. I might have been the one who pointed you in the right direction, Seth, but you're the one who chose to walk the path I indicated."

"But...but sometimes I didn't stay on that path."

"No, sometimes you didn't. But believe me, you're by far not the first person who's veered off the right the path. Most of us have a time or two in our lives."

Seth looked up at his cousin. "Even you?"

Johnny chuckled. "Believe it or not, kiddo, even me."

The paramedic watched as the boy collected his emotions and sat back up. Seth wiped an arm across his face, doing his best to get rid of any evidence that would suggest he'd been crying. Johnny pointed to the box of Kleenex on his nightstand.

"Use one of those."

Seth gave a grateful nod. He plucked two tissues from the box, using one to wipe his face and the other to blow his nose. He stood up to toss them in the garbage can, then reclaimed his chair.

When Johnny had Seth's full attention again he said, "Seth, if you remember anything as you go through life remember this. Veering off the right path is bound to happen now and again. It's rarely the end of the world as long as you know how to get back on."

"I...I don't know if I will. Know how to get back on I mean, without you around to help me."

"Don't you think Gerald might do a good job of helping you? He seems like a nice guy to me. And he really cares about you, Seth."

The boy nodded. "Yeah. I...yeah, I think he cares about me. He told me this morning at breakfast that he's always wanted a son."

Johnny smiled. "And he'll have a great one in you."

Seth glanced at his watch. He knew time was running short before he had to meet his mother and Gerald at their rental car out in the parking lot.

"I've...I've got to go. Our plane leaves pretty soon."

"I know."

"Johnny..." Seth took a deep breath. Everything he'd been rehearsing to say to his cousin seemed to have left him. "I...I...thank you for everything."

"You're more than welcome."

The boy stood. He shuffled his feet back and forth three times, shoved his hands in and out of the pockets of his blue jeans four times, took five deep breaths, then carefully leaned over the man in the bed. Johnny felt the boy's arms come around him in the best imitation of a hug Seth could manage considering Johnny's bandages and IV.

"Thank you. I...I love you, Johnny. I...I love you like a kid loves his dad."

Johnny was surprised by the stuttered proclamation. He well remembered what it was like to be a fourteen-

year-old boy and knew how difficult these words must have been for Seth to say. He brought a hand up and pulled the boy's forehead down far enough to give him a kiss.

"I love you, too, Seth. You're a good kid, and don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. You go with your mom and Gerald now and you make me proud, you hear? I expect at least one letter every few weeks, and a phone call once a month."

Seth let go of his cousin and stood. "Okay."

"And Seth?"

"Yeah?"

"If you ever need me for anything, anything at all, you call me. I'll be there for you no matter what."

Seth gazed down at the pale man swathed in bandages. He had no doubt Johnny's words were true.

"I know. Thank you."

Seth held out his hand to his cousin. Johnny took it and give it a firm shake.

"Have a safe trip home."

"I will."

"Tell your mother and Gerald I said goodbye."

"Okay."

Johnny tossed the boy a teasing grin when the last thing he said was, "And remember what I taught you."

Seth laughed. "I know, I know. No mumbling, speak when spoken to, and don't roll my eyes."

"You got it, kid." Johnny waved his right hand toward the door. "Now scoot. You'd better get a move on so you and your folks don't miss your flight."

Seth said a final goodbye, then did as Johnny instructed. As his hand reached for the door he turned around.

"Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"I just want you to know that I hope. . .well I hope I'm like you when I grow up."

"What?" The paramedic questioned with a smile. "Accident prone?"

"No. I. . .I think I'd like to be a paramedic. And I hope. . .well I hope someday I have a chance to help a kid the way you've helped me."

"That's nice of you to say, Seth."

"It doesn't matter if it's nice or not. It's the truth." The boy gave his cousin a smile and a wave. "I gotta go. Bye, Johnny."

"Bye, Seth."

And with that the teenager was gone.

Johnny wasn't sure how long he was left alone with his thoughts before his door was quietly pushed open again. He turned his head and saw Roy entering the room.

"Hey, partner," Johnny greeted.

"Hey yourself. How are you feeling today?"

"All right. Or at least all right after a good dose of pain meds. If nothing else I'm beginning to be more sore than anything else."

Roy nodded as he sat in the chair Seth had so recently vacated. Sore was better than the intense pain Johnny was feeling prior to this point.

"I saw Seth leaving on my way in."

"Yeah, he was just up here. They're headed for the airport."

"That's what he said. So, did everything go okay?"

"I think so. He. . .he seems to be ready to give his new life a try. That's really all anyone can ask of him. I'm sure it won't always be easy. God knows Mona hasn't given him much guidance up to this point, so having a father around day in and day out to lay the law down when necessary will be a big change for Seth. A real big change, but a good one. I just hope he realizes that as time goes on."

"I'm sure he will."

"What makes you so certain?"

"You laid the foundation for that, Johnny. You showed Seth that discipline isn't a bad thing, but rather an act that speaks of nothing but a parent's love."

"I thought you said I didn't know how to be a parent," Johnny teased half in jest, yet with a serious note to his tone.

"You're right. I did," Roy readily acknowledged of the argument they'd had in his driveway the day Seth had broken into Chet's car. "But I was wrong. Your methods may have differed from mine somewhat, but that doesn't mean they were wrong. As a matter of fact from the changes I've observed in that young man in the three short weeks he's been here I'd say your methods weren't wrong at all."

Johnny shrugged. "I just played it by ear, Roy. Pretty much copied what my dad used to do with me as much as I hate to admit that."

Roy chuckled. "When you have kids of your own someday, Junior, you'll find out just how *much* you end up copying what your dad did. And you probably won't like it any better then than you do now. Especially when

you start hearing his words come out of your mouth."

"I've already experienced that with Seth. A couple times I had to look around to see if Dad was standing in the room with me."

"Believe me, I know what you mean." Roy relaxed in the chair and grinned. "So, partner, does all this experience with Seth mean you're ready to settle down and be daddy to say. . .oh, about six little Gages."

Johnny voiced his astonishment in one word.

"Six?"

"Sure. You're great with Chris and Jennifer. And I figure Seth was the work of at least four kids. So six ought to be right up your alley."

"Well. . .I. . .no, I don't think I'm ready for six kids. Heck, Roy, I've got to find a wife first who--"

Johnny's words were interrupted by a young woman in white. The most beautiful young woman in white the paramedic had ever seen.

"Hi, Mr. Gage. I'm Amanda. I'll be your evening nurse."

Johnny sat up a little straighter. Roy couldn't help but smile at the color that suddenly seemed to find its way to his partner's face.

"Hi, Amanda. Call me Johnny, please. I don't think I've seen you around here before."

"I'm new. This is my first day."

"Oh, I see," Johnny said as the woman picked up his wrist to take his pulse. "So. . .huh. . .how long have you been a nurse? Where did you work before? Do you like it here? Do you live close by?"

Amanda laughed. "Boy, you sure do ask a lot of questions."

"Well, I'm just a naturally curious type of guy."

As the conversation between the two continued, and soon bordered on flirting, Roy rolled his eyes and headed for the door. There was no point in continuing his visit. It looked like Johnny was in good hands.

Roy's partner looked around Amanda's body.

"Where you goin'?"

"Home. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Oh. Okay. See you then."

"Yep. See you then."

"Hey, Roy?"

Roy turned around before his hand reached the door knob.

"Yeah?"

Johnny held up all five fingers on his right hand and juttred out his thumb on his left. He mouthed 'six' with a big grin while raising an eyebrow and indicating it to Amanda.

Roy laughed at his partner's escapades as he stepped out into the hallway. He sure hoped Amanda knew what she was getting herself in for. As Roy walked toward the elevators he thought of the many facets to Johnny's personality.

On the other hand, no one ever really knows what they're getting themselves in for when they hook up with John Gage.

Thinking of himself, and then of Seth, Roy acknowledged with a smile that wasn't a bad thing.

No, it really wasn't a bad thing at all.

The End

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