

*Author's Note: This story is a sequel to The Barbecue, originally posted on Roo's Fan Fic page and subsequently posted at Tigger's Emergency Fan Fiction. It follows the events in A Fine Mess, a challenge entry originally posted on Mary's Code Red Page. The story takes place somewhere between the episodes Virus and Snakebite. Loosely. Enjoy!*

## **THE PARTY**

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

"GIVE IT BACK!" Erin DeSoto's strident demand penetrated the closed windows of the house, momentarily drowning out the soothing hum of the air conditioner, "DADDY!"

Roy DeSoto missed the nail he was hammering into the wall and struck his thumb, "Ah!" he exclaimed, dropping the hammer on a nearby chair and stepping down from the step ladder. *Hanging that new family portrait'll have to wait.*

Sticking the injured digit in his mouth, he stalked to the back door and pulled it open. *Joanne's only been gone an hour. Couldn't they wait for her to get home? First they fought over Erin playing with them. Then they fought over whether or not there should be a tunnel in the road Tommy built. Then they fought over who would play with what car. What's left to fight over?*

Shaking his left hand, he walked around the house and over to the sandbox in the back yard, "What now?" he asked tiredly, eyeing his three children, who were supposed to be playing quietly.

"Daddy, I was playing with the Mustang and Tommy took it away from me," 8-year old Erin informed, "When we picked, he said he wanted the Beetle."

"I changed my mind," 10-year old Tommy argued, "They're my cars."

"You agreed to share them with your sister," Roy said tiredly, "Let Erin play with the Mustang."

"She only wants it 'cause it's like the car Uncle John drives," Tommy griped, "She's in love with Uncle John-ny."

"Am not," Erin argued.

"Are so," Tommy returned, "Uncle Johnny, Uncle Johnny, Uncle Johnny," he chanted, voice high.

"Stop it, Thomas!" Erin yelled, face reddening.

"Enough," Roy said, voice raised, "Tommy, quit teasing Erin," he ordered, "All right, all three of you

in the house. I'll check your homework before your mom gets home."

"But Dad," 12-year old Chris moaned, "It's Saturday."

"You were supposed to finish your homework last night," Roy returned, "Come on."

Roy ushered his three charges into the house, "Get your school bags," he ordered, looking forward to a few minutes of peace and quiet while the kids were upstairs. *How does Joanne do it day in and day out? She deserves combat pay.*

Erin was the first to return, setting her bag on the table. She climbed up and knelt on the chair next to Roy.

"Your butt goes on the seat, not your knees," Roy said.

"Sorry, Dad," Erin said, unfolding her legs and sitting in the chair.

"Okay, where's your little notebook?" Roy asked.

"Assignment book," Erin corrected, "Right here," she opened the bag and pulled out a small notebook, which she handed to her father. She then pulled out three spiral notebooks.

"Suck-up," Chris muttered, smacking the back of his sister's head as he passed.

"Christopher!" Erin yelled, punching her older brother in the upper arm with all her strength.

"Dad! She hit me!" Chris said indignantly.

"You hit her first," Roy returned, "What'd you expect her to do?"

"Cry to you," Chris returned petulantly.

"Then I'd stop hitting her, 'cause she's takin' the law into her own hands now," Roy advised, "Have a seat, guys."

"Geek," Chris muttered.

"Nerd," Tommy chimed in.

"Dirtbags," Erin returned.

"No name calling," Roy said firmly, "All right, Erin, you were supposed to do the even problems at the end of Chapter 5," he read from the assignment book.

Erin opened on of the notebooks, "Right here, Daddy," she said, sticking her tongue out at both

brothers.

Roy checked the problems, then turned back to the assignment book, "Math done," he said, checking off the assignment, "Did you read Chapter 4 in Social Studies and answer the questions?"

"Yes," Erin replied, opening the second notebook.

Roy checked the assignment off, "And the spelling words at the end of Chapters 6 and 7?" Roy continued.

Erin opened the third notebook, "Mommy checked them already," she informed, "They were all right," she added, flashing a smug grin at Chris and Tommy.

Roy checked off the assignment, then returned the small notebook to Erin's school bag, "Okay, Tommy, your turn."

Tommy handed his assignment book to his father, "This is bogus," he muttered.

"Humor me," Roy returned, opening the notebook, "History, read Chapter 2 and answer the odd questions at the end."

Tommy silently slid a notebook to Roy.

"Done," Roy said, checking off the assignment, "Did you do the Math problems at the end of Chapter 5?"

"Yes," Tommy sighed, sliding the second notebook to Roy.

Roy checked off the assignment, "That's it?" he asked, "Are you sure you didn't forget to write something down?"

Tommy rolled his eyes, "The teachers check before you leave class," he informed.

"Just asking," Roy returned, winking at his second son, "Trust me, Tommy," he began.

"We'll thank you for this when we're older," the three children recited in unison.

"I've gotta get some new material," Roy joked, "All right, Chris, you're up."

Chris silently slid his assignment book to Roy, not making eye contact.

*He didn't do something.* "What didn't you get to, Chris?" Roy asked.

Chris took a deep breath, "Algebra. I don't understand it, Dad," he said plaintively, "It's all these word problems and they don't make any sense."

"Do you have your Algebra book?" Roy asked.

Chris nodded.

"All right," Roy began, checking his watch. *I was supposed to pick Johnny up 20 minutes ago.* "I've got to run over to John's and pick him up," he informed, "Give the problems another shot while I'm gone. I'll work on them with you when I get back."

"I've gotta watch Tommy and Erin," Chris tried.

"You do not," Erin returned petulantly.

"Erin and Tommy will be upstairs cleaning their rooms," Roy said, staring pointedly at the two younger children.

"May I go with you, Daddy?" Erin asked.

"Brown nose," Tommy hissed.

"No, Erin," Roy responded, "Your room is a disaster."

"Dad, I share a room with Chris. It's not fair making me clean it," Tommy whined.

"Then just pick up your junk," Roy returned, "I'll be back in about an hour," he advised, "No matches. No cooking. No playing ball in the house. No throwing your sister out the window. No sledding down the stairs. Nothing that might in any way involve physical injury, or death," he put one hand on Tommy's shoulder and one hand on Erin's shoulder, "Upstairs. Let your brother do his homework."

Roy guided the younger children to the stairs, then exited the house through the front door.

*I think I'll take the long way to John's place.*

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*Roy's late. That's unusual.* John Gage limped out of his kitchen, carrying his fourth cup of coffee. When he reached the couch, he carefully set the cup down on the coffee table, then limped across to the television. He switched the set on and flipped the dial. *Cartoon Star Trek. Okay.* He then limped across to the couch and dropped onto the center cushion, propping his casted right leg on the coffee table.

The phone rang and he reached over to the end table, "Morning, Aunt Helen," John answered.

A woman's voice on the other end laughed, "How'd you know it was me?"

"You call me every Saturday morning at 11," John informed, "You're too predictable," he teased.

"Smart aleck," Helen's voice responded with a laugh, "How're you doing?"

"Fine," John answered, "I'll be out of the cast and back to work next week," he added.

"You push yourself too hard, Johnny," Helen began, "The Fire Department can survive without you for another two weeks."

"It can survive. But I can't," John snorted, "I've been cooped up in my apartment for six weeks."

"You should've let me come out there," Helen pouted.

John laughed, "I can take care of myself," he informed, "Uncle Howard, on the other hand, can't."

Helen laughed, "This is true," she allowed.

"Besides, I've got people looking out for me," John continued, "The guys came by every day. Joanne, Beth and Marie took me to doctor's appointments. Made sure I had food."

"I worry about you all alone in California," Helen returned, "How do I know you're not making these people up to make me feel better?"

*I had an imaginary friend when I was six. Guess she thinks I haven't outgrown that. Better change the subject before she accuses me of shaving Roy's dog.*

"How're you and Uncle Howard doing?" John asked, "Keeping out of trouble?"

"Of course," Helen laughed, "We leave that to you, Johnny," she added, "Your Dad asked about you."

John sighed quietly. *Ever since I told Chet about leaving Florida, I've been thinking about Dad. Of course, she always tells me he asked about me. Whether he does, or not.*

He leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling, "Tell him I'm fine. And that I said `Hi'."

"Why won't you call him, Johnny?" Helen asked, "It's been almost nine years since you left home. He misses you."

"The phone works both ways, Aunt Helen," John argued, "I'm sure you've given him my phone number."

"John Roderick Gage, you are so stubborn," Helen said, clearly exasperated with her nephew, "Just like your father."

"I didn't cut him off when I left," John said quietly, "He told me I wasn't his son," he paused, "I'm

surprised he didn't do it right after Mom died."

"How can you say that, Johnny?" Helen returned, "Your father loves you. He always will."

"That's not how I remember it," John said cynically, "He had to stay on the rez because of me. He had to drive all the way across the state to work because of me. I was a burden."

"He did those things because he loved you," Helen replied, "As much as he loved your mother."

John closed his eyes, "Somebody's at the door," he lied, "I've gotta go. I'll talk to you next weekend," he paused, "I love you, Aunt Helen," he concluded, gently replacing the handset. He then picked the phone up and threw it across the living room.

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In the hall, Roy heard a crash, followed by a ding. He knocked on the door, "Johnny, are you okay in there?" he called.

"Yeah," John's voice called back.

Roy stepped back and waited. Two minutes passed, then the door opened, "What was that crash?" he asked as John stepped back.

"The phone had . . . an accident," John said quietly, "I'll be ready in a minute."

"Are you okay?" Roy asked. *Something's up.* "Is your leg bothering you?"

"I'm fine, Roy," John returned, shutting the television off. He disappeared down the hall.

Roy heard the water in the bathroom running, "You know, Johnny, if you don't feel like coming over to the house," he began.

The water shut off, "I need to get out of this apartment," John's voice called back. A minute later, John limped back into the living room, "Ready," he announced.

*He's got the same look he had when I called him a nut. Eyebrows furrowed. Jaw set. Great. The kids are nuts and so is Johnny. Oh, yeah, today's gonna be lots of fun.*

"Johnny, if there's something you want to talk about, I'll listen," Roy offered, as they stepped into the hall.

"Thanks, Roy," John replied, locking the door.

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By the time they reached the DeSoto house, Roy had no doubt that something was bothering his partner. *Whatever it is, it's serious. If it were something little, he'd talk about it. Something big, he clams up. You'd think he was Stoker.*

"I've got to help Chris with his Algebra," Roy informed as they stepped into the house, "Erin and Tommy are up cleaning their rooms."

"Okay," John returned, limping into the living room and flopping down on the couch.

*Maybe I should call Erin and Tommy downstairs. One look at John's expression changed Roy's mind. He's not in the mood right now.*

John leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling as Roy walked through to the kitchen.

"How's it goin', Chris?" he heard Roy ask.

"Terrible," Chris responded, "I just don't get it, Dad," he complained.

The sound of a chair scraping on the floor, then, "Let's have a look."

"Why do I have to take Algebra anyway?" Chris's voice whined, "I'm never gonna use it."

"You'll need to understand Algebra to take higher math later on," Roy's voice answered, "Like Geometry and Trigonometry," a pause, "Johnny and I use Algebra all the time."

Johnny frowned. *For what?*

"For what?" Chris's voice asked.

"Like figuring out how much medication to administer to a patient," Roy's voice answered.

*Oh, yeah, I guess we do. I never thought about it that way.*

"I'm not gonna be a paramedic, Dad," Chris returned, "And I don't wanna take Geometry, or Trig."

Roy laughed, "The State of California says you have to, son," he chided, "Okay, problem 1," he began, "A lawn mower uses 3 tanks of gas to cut 10 acres. How many tanks of gas would be needed for 30 acres?" he read aloud, "You did really well with proportions a few lessons back," he said, "That's all this is," he paused, "You know 3 values, you just have to find the 4<sup>th</sup>."

"Okay," Chris' voice said, "3 over 10 equals x over 30," he recited, "That's easy," he laughed, "9."

"See? You knew how to do these problems all along," Roy said proudly, "Try the next one."

*Hate to disagree with you there, Roy. You showed him that he knew it all along.* John closed his eyes.

Chris laughed, "It's a medical one!" he informed, "8 ounces of medicine must be mixed with 20 ounces of water. How many ounces of medicine must be mixed with 50 ounces of water," he paused, "8 over 20 equals x over 50," another pause, "400 divided by 20 is 20," he laughed, "Thanks, Dad," he said.

"You're welcome," Roy returned, "Did your mom call while I was gone?"

Chris snorted, "She's shopping with Mrs. Stanley, Dad," he said, "We'll be lucky to see her before next week."

John smiled at the comeback. *Good one, Chris.*

"I guess that means I'm fixing lunch," Roy informed him.

"I'm not hungry, Dad," Chris teased.

"Do your homework," Roy growled back.

"Can't we order pizza?" Chris asked plaintively, then laughed.

*I'll second that.* John opened his eyes. *Maybe I should just stop eavesdropping.*

"Matt and Greg are coming over for a sleep-over," Roy responded, "You're having pizza tonight."

"I like pizza," Chris returned.

"Homework," Roy repeated.

Johnny sighed at the ceiling. *My dad would've knocked me across the room for mouthing off the first time. I wouldn't have tried it a second time. Helping me with homework? Ha! I was lucky to have any time to do it at all with all the chores he shoved off on me. Cap's a pussycat compared to Dad.*

"Earth to John," Roy's voice interrupted.

John blinked, "Sorry." He waved his hand in the air. "I was thinking."

"I'm fixing soup and sandwiches for the kids," Roy informed, "There's plenty."

John shook his head, "I'm not very hungry right now. Thanks," he responded.

Roy sat in the easy chair across from the couch, "Is there something you want to talk about, Johnny?" he asked, "I might not be any help, but I'll listen."

"It's okay, Roy," John returned, "You've gotta fix lunch for your kids."



"They won't starve," Roy said with a grin. *Maybe if I guess, he'll tell me.* "Have you started having nightmares, or something?"

"It's nothing to do with getting hurt again, Roy," John said flatly, "Really, it's nothing," he repeated.

*Yeah, right. I've got one more guess, then I'll just have to wait 'til he's ready to say something.* "Is something wrong back home?" Roy tried.

John examined the cuticle on his left thumb, "Nope."

Roy watched John go from examining his left thumb to examining his ring finger. *If he was Chet, I'd think he was doing this just to get a rise out of me. He knows it drives me nuts when he goes off the deep end about something, gets me riled up about it, then dismisses it like it wasn't a big deal. Johnny does that a lot, but never on purpose. Something's really eating at him. Guess he'll tell me when he's ready.*

Reluctantly, Roy stood and went back into the kitchen. John leaned his head back and tried to think about something other than his father. He hadn't been very successful over the past several weeks, so he wasn't holding his breath.

John had just closed his eyes when he felt the couch shift.

"Are you okay, Uncle Johnny?"

John opened his eyes and smiled at Erin. "Hey, Erin. What? I don't get a hug?"

Erin smiled and hugged him, then pulled back. "You look sad."

John tweaked the little girl's nose. "That'll change now that you're here. What've you been up to?"

Erin rolled her eyes. "Cleaning my room. Dad made me."

John chuckled. "Did you finish?"

Erin grinned. "Sort of."

"Wait, don't tell me. Everything's in the closet now."

Erin's eyes widened. "How'd you know?"

John laughed. "That's how I used to clean my room, too."

"Used to?" Roy had stepped into the living room. "You still clean your apartment that way."

"Roy!" John exclaimed. "I'm tryin' to set a good example for Erin."

Roy laughed. "Back upstairs, Erin. Straighten your closet."

"But, Dad, you just said clean my room. I cleaned my room."

"And messed up your closet." Roy grinned at his daughter.

Erin got up from the couch. "Aww, Dad."

Roy stepped over and swept Erin up from the floor. "Aww, Dad?" He held her up and nuzzled her face. "Aww, Dad?"

Erin giggled. "Daddy! Put me down!" Her giggles turned to laughter.

"Will you go straight upstairs and straighten your closet?" Roy asked.

Erin was laughing too hard to answer. "Yes." She finally managed a breathless response.

"No more moaning?"

"Yes! Yes!" Erin continued laughing. "Daddy!"

Roy nuzzled Erin's cheek again. "Rotten little girl."

"But I'm your rotten little girl." Erin nuzzled back.

Roy set her down. "Upstairs." He gently swatted Erin on the butt.

Erin ran past Tommy, who was just walking into the living room.

"Is your stuff picked up?" Roy asked.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Yes, Dad." He waved to John. "Hey." Then he disappeared into the kitchen. "Dad, I'm hungry!"

Roy shook his head and followed his son into the kitchen. "I'm fixing soup and sandwiches for lunch."

John rose from the couch and hobbled into the kitchen behind them. Tommy was standing in front of the open refrigerator door. Roy had returned to the stove to stir the soup.

John leaned over the boy's shoulder and surveyed the contents of the refrigerator. "Slim pickins, huh?" He hobbled over to the table and sat down in one of the chairs.

"Yeah." Tommy snorted.

"Well, if there's nothing you want in there, close the door," Roy ordered.

Tommy groaned, then released the door and let it swing shut. He went to the table and sat down next to Chris.

Erin appeared and sat down at the table with Chris, John and Tommy.

"Did you finish your closet, Erin?" Roy was still at the stove.

"I can't, Daddy. I can't reach the shelves to put stuff away." Erin paused.

"All right, I'll give you a hand after lunch." Roy turned the stove off. "Soup's on."

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Two hours later, lunch was finished, the dishes were washed and the DeSoto children were in the backyard. John sat at the table, watching through the window as the kids played what looked like a game of keep away from the DeSoto's German Shepherd. Roy returned to the table and set a cup of coffee in front of John.

John looked up briefly. "Thanks." He put a hand around the cup, turning it on the table.

Roy sat down, taking a sip from his own cup.

"You're a good dad, Roy," John commented.

"Thanks." Roy chuckled. "You nominatin' me for an award, or something?"

John took a sip of coffee. "It was nice of you to let Erin out of straightening up her closet so she could go outside with the boys."

Roy looked out the window at Rascal, romping from Chris to Erin to Tommy, barking happily as he did. He smiled. "It's Saturday. And I promised to help her."

"Yeah." *You'd never leave Erin to just figure it out on her own.* John looked down into his cup, then back up and out the window. *It looks like fun. Wish I could get out there and run around with 'em.*

"Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't we go sit outside?"

"Good idea." John stood, cup in hand and hobbled out behind Roy.

Outside, the two men went to a picnic table and benches and sat. Roy turned to watch the kids play for several minutes, then turned back to John. *How could he watch that and frown?* Then the answer came to him. *He's still thinking about whatever was eatin' at him this morning.* "So, you gonna tell me

what's been eatin' at you today?"

John looked away from the kids, then frowned and looked down into his cup. "It's . . ."

". . . nothing. Yeah, so you say." Roy grinned. "The look on your face says it's something."

"Okay." John took a deep breath. "My dad and I had a . . . a falling out when I left home." He paused and shrugged. "I've just been thinking about that and a lot of stuff lately." He smiled self-consciously. "Not particularly happy stuff."

*That explains Johnny's comments about my dad-skills. I know he doesn't like talking about growing up. So, how do I get him to talk about this? "How old were you when your mom died?" I know the answer, but sometimes that gets him to open up.*

"15," John said quietly. "Even before then, he was never around. From the time I was 9, I had to go home right after school and take care of my mom until he got home. Which was always way after dark." He paused and shook his head. "I don't wanna bore you with that, though."

"Hey, I said I'd listen," Roy began. "For whatever reason, the falling out with your dad is really bothering you."

"I know the reason," John returned. "Chet." He practically spat the word out. "Who else?"

Roy bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from laughing at the remark. "The only advice I can give you is from my experience," he began cautiously. "My dad died when I was 13. I never got to tell him good-bye. I wish I'd had the chance."

John's frown deepened. "Man, I'm sorry." He paused.

"ERIN!!!" Tommy's shout interrupted the discussion. "You let Rascal have the ball. Now we'll never get it back."

"If we keep teasing him, he'll get bored and quit." Erin's hands went to her hips, daring either brother to argue with her.

"C'mon, Rascal. Give me the ball." Chris patted his thighs. "C'mon, boy."

Rascal trotted toward Chris, veering out of reach as the boy grabbed for the ball firmly gripped between the dog's ivory teeth. The dog hopped around, growling playfully as Chris and Tommy chased him. The shoe was on the other paw and it was Rascal's turn to tease Chris and Tommy with the ball.

"Erin, make him give the ball back," Tommy ordered.

Erin laughed and shook her head. "He's not gonna give it back."

"Well, we can't play with the ball, or Rascal," Chris began. "Guess we'll have to think of something else." He swept Erin up from the ground. "Keep Erin away from Tommy!"

Tommy made a grab for Erin's leg and Chris agilely swept her out of reach. Erin squealed as Chris turned her again, then threw her over his shoulder.

"Sorry. I've gotta go break this up." Roy stood and strode across the yard. "All right, Chris. Put your sister down. You're not playing Keep Erin Away."

"Aww, Dad." Chris whined, setting Erin down.

Laughing, Tommy swept Erin up, eliciting another squeal from the little girl as he turned her upside down.

"Tommy, put your sister down," Roy ordered.

"But, Daddy, we're having fun," Erin argued, peering at her father over Tommy's hip.

Roy laughed. "You won't be having fun when one of them drops you, or scratches you."

"Oh, I didn't think of that." Erin giggled. "Tommy, put me down."

Tommy obediently set Erin down.

The gate scraped and Rascal forgot about the ball, dropping it on the grass. The dog growled, then ran around the side of the house, barking furiously at the intruder.

Roy turned his eyes heavenward. *What now?*

"Take it easy, Rascal." Hank Stanley's voice struggled to rise above the dog's barking. "I'm friendly."

*Johnny'll never talk to me in front of Cap.* Roy walked around the side of the house and grabbed the dog's collar. "Can it, Rascal," he ordered. "Sorry, Cap."

Hank laughed. "I knocked, but nobody answered the door."

Rascal transformed from guard dog to puppy, whining and happily wagging his tail.

"Nutty dog." Roy let go of the dog's collar.

Hank laughed as the dog bounded over and jumped on him. "Oh, so you like me, now, huh?" He scratched Rascal behind the ears, then gently shoved him away.

"Lookit what I've got, Rascal!" Chris called, triumphantly holding the forgotten ball.

Rascal dashed across the yard, reaching Chris just as he tossed the ball to Tommy. The game picked up where it left off.

Roy and Hank walked over to the picnic table and sat down.

"I heard from the wife and Joanne," Hank began. "They're on their way back here."

"That was short for a shopping trip," Roy commented. *Well, once Cap and Marie head home, and Joanne's here to watch the kids, Johnny and I'll have more time to talk. Maybe Cap's timing isn't so lousy after all.*

"Lucky for our wallets." Hank chuckled. "How're you doing, John?"

"Great." John smiled. "The cast comes off next week. Then I'll be back to work."

"Really?" Hank grinned. "And I really like Dwyer's cooking."

John frowned. "If that's how you feel, maybe I should transfer to 110s."

Hank laughed. "I'm kidding, John." He reached across the table and playfully punched John's shoulder. "Dwyer's a terrible cook." He expected the usually good natured John to laugh at the lame joke. When that didn't happen, he looked to Roy to explain John's foul mood.

"I could use a beer. And the kids have gotta be thirsty by now." Roy stood. "How about you guys?"

Hank stood. "A beer would hit the spot. I'll give you a hand."

Once they were inside the house, Hank stopped at the window, watching John, who rested his chin on his right hand and solemnly watched the DeSoto children play.

"What's with John?" Hank turned from the window and followed Roy into the kitchen.

"He's just got some stuff on his mind." Roy set three beers on the counter, then pulled a pitcher of juice from the refrigerator.

Hank uncapped the beers while Roy opened cabinets looking for paper cups. "Stuff you can tell me about?"

Roy smiled. "Sorry, Cap." He opened another cabinet. "There they are!" He pulled the package out. "I don't know why Joanne puts these in a different place every time."

"The kids probably find 'em and waste 'em." Hank picked up the beers, leaving the cups and pitcher for Roy.

"That explains it." Roy laughed as he followed Hank back out to the yard. "All right, you guys come on and get something to drink!"

"In a minute, Dad," Chris called back.

Hank sat down across from John and slid a beer across to him.

"Thanks." John picked up the bottle and took a sip.

Roy poured three cups of juice. "Minute's up! Come on!"

"All right, all right!" Chris tossed the ball to Rascal, then ran to the table.

"Hi, Cap." Erin climbed onto the bench next to Hank and quickly hugged him.

"How's it goin', Erin?" Hank smiled, returning the hug. "Guys." He reached over and ruffled first Chris' hair, then Tommy's.

"Hi, Cap," Chris mumbled, smoothing his hair.

"Hey," Tommy returned.

Erin walked around the table and climbed up to sit on the bench next to John. She picked up one of the paper cups and took a sip, then grimaced. "Daddy!"

Chris sniffed. "Dad, you didn't use enough water."

"Yeah, Dad, it's sour!" Tommy chimed in.

Roy poured a cup, then took a sip. His own face puckered. "I followed the directions." He picked up the pitcher. "I'll go add some water."

He was at the sink experimentally adding water to the pitcher, then tasting the result when he heard the front door open.

"We're back!" Joanne's voice called.

"In the kitchen!" Roy called back.

"What're you doing?" Joanne laughed when she saw Roy at the sink.

"I made orange juice after lunch." Roy stirred the juice, then tasted it. "The first batch was too strong."

"The can says add two cans of water, but you really need to add three." Joanne stood on tiptoe and kissed Roy's cheek, then turned to Marie Stanley. "Coffee?"

Marie smiled. "Thanks." She looked out the window. "I see Hank has settled in with a beer."

Roy smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Marie."

Marie laughed, then winked at Roy. "I'm not in a hurry." She took the cup of coffee Joanne handed her and went to the back door.

"How'd it go?" Joanne asked.

Roy picked up the pitcher. "I didn't think I'd make it in the first hour," he began as they walked out of the kitchen. "But they've settled down." He turned to Joanne and grinned as he pulled the back door open. "They finally decided to torture Rascal instead of me."

"You." Joanne laughed, following Roy to the table. She took over pouring the juice when Roy set the pitcher down.

"Thanks, Mom." Erin grabbed the first cup of juice and took a sip. "Much better."

"Give the rookie a break, guys." Joanne laughed.

"Erin? What happened to your hair?" Marie asked.

Erin looked over and rolled her eyes. "Tommy got gum in it. Mom tried everything, but she couldn't get it out." She shrugged. "I like it shorter. It doesn't get in my way."

Marie laughed. "It looks very nice." She winked at Joanne.

Joanne sat down next to Erin. "Thanks for helping Roy with the kids, John."

John smiled, then shrugged. "No problem." He drained the last of his beer and stood. "Anybody need anything while I'm inside?"

After a chorus of "no," "no thanks" and "I'm fine", John shrugged, limped over to the back door and disappeared inside the house. When he was gone, Marie and Joanne both looked at Roy, who had pulled a chair over to the head of the table.

"What?" Roy asked. "Why does everybody expect me to know what's going on with Johnny?"

"Because he talks to you all the time." Hank chuckled.

Roy shot a glare at Hank, then rolled his eyes. "Okay. Okay. Johnny's got some things on his mind." He held up both hands. "And that's all I'm sayin'."

"What kind of things, Daddy?" Erin asked.



Joanne laughed. "Nothing you need to worry about, Erin."

"But he's sad about something, Mom," Erin argued.

Joanne pulled Erin over to sit on her lap. "It's probably grown-up stuff, sweetie." She smoothed Erin's hair, then kissed the top of her head. "Daddy will handle it. Okay?"

Erin sighed. "Okay, Mom."

"Okay, Mom," Joanne mimicked, kissing the top of Erin's head again.

Chris and Tommy had finished their juice. "C'mon, Erin," Chris called as he and Tommy ran across the yard, where Rascal lay on his back, sunning himself.

Erin scrambled off Joanne's lap. "I think we wore him out!" she called, following her brothers into the yard.

"He'll wake up when we start playing with the ball," Tommy informed. He scooped the ball up from the grass and tossed it to Chris, who caught it.

Marie laughed at the comment. "I miss having kids this age," she said wistfully.

"Where's Brad?" Roy asked.

"Too cool to go with his dad to pick up his mom." Hank laughed. "At least he doesn't spend 24 hours a day on the phone like his sisters did." He looked at Roy. "Enjoy this while you can."

Roy laughed.

"Girls are calling Tommy, now," Joanne informed. "Can you believe it?"

"Really?" Marie asked. "He's only . . . 10?"

"He'll be 11 in January." Joanne shook her head. "Chris'll be 13 in November and Erin will be 9 in September."

Roy laughed. "Joanne makes a big deal out of it. They're just kids."

Joanne looked at her husband. "Oh, yeah." She turned to Hank and Marie. "He's so proud of his sons having girls calling them at all hours of the day and night."

"That's 'cause they take after their mom," John commented, sitting back down at the table.

"Thank you, Johnny." Joanne laughed. "Let's see how he feels when Erin's calling boys at all hours of

the day and night." She cast a smug look at Roy.

"She won't," Roy said simply.

"The boys will be calling her." Hank laughed.

Roy grinned. "And Chris and Tommy will deal with 'em."

Marie turned from the table just as Chris ran into Erin, knocking her down to the grass, then tripping over her. "Uh-oh."

Joanne looked over, laughing as Erin picked herself up, brushed herself off and went right back to the game with her brothers and Rascal.

"She takes a licking and keeps on ticking." Roy laughed.

Marie turned back to the table. "I don't think I can watch." She laughed.

"She's not even your kid," Hank teased, putting an arm around Marie and hugging her.

"You should've seen her earlier, Marie," Roy began. "Chris tapped her on the head as he passed her. She hauled off and whacked him."

"Roy!" Joanne exclaimed.

"What?" Roy laughed. "I bet he won't do it again."

Joanne laughed. "Don't brag about it, Roy."

"Oh, sorry." Roy managed to look contrite for all of two seconds, then broke into a huge grin.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two hours later, John limped into the house to claim the last beer from the DeSoto's refrigerator. The beer buzz he had going had improved both his mood and his appetite. *Well, the door's open anyway.* John rummaged through the contents. Removing the foil cover from a cereal bowl yielded a bowl of spaghetti sauce. He took the bowl out and set it on the counter. He finally let the door swing shut when he found nothing else worth eating. The ends of a loaf of bread took the place of spaghetti, since John was too hungry to boil water for the real thing.

The back door opened and Joanne walked in carrying the now empty juice pitcher. "Just make yourself at home, Johnny." She laughed.

John froze in mid-bite, blushing furiously. He'd just stuffed one sauce soaked end of bread into his mouth, so he covered his mouth before attempting to explain himself. "Ummmm . . ."

*And Roy says John always talks with his mouth full.* Joanne laughed. "I can fix something else for you."

John finished chewing the bread, then took a swallow of beer. "Thanks. This'll hold me until dinner." He tore off a piece of bread and dipped it into the spaghetti sauce. "You're still using Mike Stoker's recipe." He put the small piece of bread into his mouth.

Joanne turned on the water and rinsed the pitcher. "It is better than mine." She winked.

John had just put another bite into his mouth, so he covered it before saying, "This is better than Stoker's."

Joanne laughed, then went to the freezer and took out a container of concentrated juice. She opened the container and dumped the contents into the pitcher. She was trying to coax the last bit from the bottom of the can with a spoon when the door bell rang.

"I'll get it." John wiped his hands on his jeans, then hobbled out of the kitchen and through the living room to the front door.

Mike Stoker, his wife Beth and their sons, Matt and Greg, with sleeping bags in hand, were out on the porch when John opened the door.

"Hey!" John smiled. "C'mon in." He stepped back, looking down at the two boys. He furrowed his brow. "You're Greg?" he began, pointing to the taller of the two boys. Then he pointed to the shorter boy. "And you're Matt. Right?"

The tall boy rolled his eyes. "I'm Matt." He pointed to the shorter boy. "He's Greg."

John laughed. "Sorry, I just can't keep you two straight."

Matt rolled his eyes. "That's okay. Roy."

"Matt!" Beth exclaimed. "Don't be disrespectful."

"Mom," Matt whined.

John laughed. "It's okay, Beth." He ruffled Matt's hair. "I was joking, Matt."

Mike laughed. "Matt finds that about as funny as you would somebody calling you Chet."

"Ahhh, I see." John drew an X over his heart, then held his hand up, palm out. "Won't happen again, Matt." He grinned. "Chris, Tommy and Erin are in the backyard."

The two boys went into the living room, tossed their sleeping bags and headed out, calling "hello" to

Joanne, who was still in the kitchen.

"Just leave your sleeping bags in the living room. I'm sure Joanne won't mind." John called after them.

Without being asked, Mike picked up the sleeping bags and brought them to the stairs.

"Thanks, Mike." Beth smiled, then followed John through the living room.

"Look who I found," John announced as they entered the kitchen.

Joanne smiled, still stirring the pitcher of juice. "Hey, guys!"

Beth walked over and quickly hugged Joanne. "How was your shopping trip?"

"Shhh . . . you know we can't talk about things like that in front of . . ." she paused, dramatically nodding toward John and Mike. ". . . them."

"We know when we're not wanted, don't we, Mike?"

"I do." Mike grinned.

John laughed, then pulled two more slices of bread from the loaf, picked up his bowl of sauce and his beer and headed for the back door.

"I don't think they really shop," Mike commented as he followed John into the yard. "I think they get together to cook up some evil plot to overthrow the world."

John laughed, crossing to the table.

"What've you got?" Roy asked.

"Spaghetti sauce and bread." John tore off a bite, dunked it in the sauce and stuffed it into his mouth. *Why're the three of them looking at me like that?* "I'm a bachelor. So sue me."

Hank chuckled. "Ahhhh, the good old days."

Marie playfully nudged him. "I'm sitting right next to you, Hank."

Hank put on an astonished look. "Oh! Sorry." He winked at Marie, who nudged him again, then laughed.

"So, what do you and Beth have planned for your night of freedom?" Roy asked.

Mike shrugged. "Don't know. Beth wouldn't plan anything." He shrugged again. "Says we do enough of that with the boys."

"Oh, but you miss them when they're not around," Marie said wistfully. "Don't you, Hank?"

"Whatever you say, Sweetheart." Hank chuckled. "Your wife misses them." He stage-whispered.

Marie shook her head, laughed, then stood. "Does anybody need anything while I'm inside?"

Hank tilted his empty beer bottle. "I could use another beer."

"Did I say `anybody'? I meant `anybody, but Hank'." Marie laughed.

"Johnny took the last beer," Roy informed.

John turned to Roy, looking first surprised, then guilty. "How'd you know that?"

"You slumped your shoulders when Cap asked for a beer." Roy grinned.

John laughed. "I'd offer to make a beer run, but I can't drive."

"Even without the cast." Roy grinned.

John rolled his eyes.

Marie nudged her husband. Hank jumped up. "C'mon, Mike, let's make a beer run."

Roy stood. "That's okay, Cap. We can drink coffee, or juice."

"As long as Roy doesn't make it." Johnny laughed.

Hank held up his hands. "We killed a six pack, we'll replace it."

"I just got here," Mike muttered, ducking his head when Hank raised his eyebrows. He followed Hank toward the back gate. "We're making a beer run," he called to a perplexed Beth, who had just stepped out of the back door with Joanne.

"Okay, hunny." Beth laughed and crossed the yard to the table. "Sorry I couldn't make it this morning, Marie." She hugged the older woman, then they both sat down.

"Mike said you don't have any plans. Do you guys want to stick around a while?" Roy grinned. "We can call Marco and Chet and have a little A-Shift get together."

Beth laughed. "That sounds great." She looked at Joanne. "If it's okay with you."

Joanne shrugged. "I don't know why we didn't do it sooner." Then she frowned. "Although I'll have to run to the grocery store. The cupboards are bare."

Roy put his arm around her shoulders. "We were gonna order pizza for the kids. We can just order two extra." He looked over at Johnny. "And two for Johnny."

John stood and picked up his empty bowl. "You're just jealous." He patted his abdomen. "I'm not the one sporting a spare tire." He wagged his eyebrows, then grinned and limped into the house.

"I swear he has a tape worm," Roy muttered, laughing when Joanne patted his middle. "Stop that!" Then he followed John into the house.

While John washed his bowl, Roy called Marco Lopez. Still hungry, John returned to the refrigerator, then the freezer.

Roy pressed the switch, then let it up. "Well, Marco'll be here in half an hour. And he's bringing a cake his mother made for him."

"All right." John grinned. "I love these things." He pulled a fudgesicle from the freezer, tore off the wrapper and stuck half the fudgesicle in his mouth.

"Fudgesicles and beer?" Roy shuddered. "You've definitely got a tape worm." He laughed. "Not you, Chet. Johnny," he said into the phone. "Well, Cap and Marie are here. And Mike, Beth and the boys. Marco's on his way over and I was calling to invite you, too." He frowned. "No, we didn't plan a party." He laughed. "That's why I'm calling you at the last minute." He listened for a minute. "Well, okay, if you have things to do . . ."

John pulled the fudgesicle out of his mouth. "Gimme the phone." He held his empty hand out, wagging his fingers.

Roy shrugged and handed John the phone. *Chet's on a roll. But if he thinks he's gonna get anywhere.*

"Chet, it's John." He paused. "Awww, quit bitchin' and get your butt over here." He paused again, listening. "Oh, yeah. What're you gonna do? Sit at home and count the hairs in your mustache?" He paused again. "All right. All right. Miss the fun, then." John leaned over and set the handset on the cradle. "He'll be here."

Roy laughed. "Sure didn't sound like it to me."

John stuck the fudgesicle back into his mouth. "E'll be 'ere." Then he hobbled to the back door.

"Care to put your money where your mouth is?" Roy called after him.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chet made his entrance an hour later. He came in through the back gate, guessing that the laughter and voices coming from the back meant no one was inside to answer the door. He'd made it two steps

through the gate when Rascal raced across the yard, growling and snarling at him.

"Stop it, Rascal!" Erin's voice called. She ran across the yard and hugged the stocky fireman's legs. "Hi, Uncle Chet." She smiled up at him.

Chet smiled and put a hand behind Erin's head. "Hi, Erin." *Wow, she likes me now.* He knelt and Erin hugged him again.

"Thanks for saving Uncle Johnny." Erin whispered in his ear, then kissed his cheek.

Chet looked over at Roy, Joanne and the others. They weren't paying attention. "I'll tell you a secret, Erin."

Erin grinned. "I like secrets."

"I tease your Uncle Johnny 'cause I like him." Chet whispered in the little girl's ear. "But don't tell him, okay?"

Erin drew an X over her heart. "Promise," she said solemnly. "Do you tease my daddy, too?"

Chet grinned. "Yep." He held out his right hand. "Do you know what a pinky swear is?"

Erin rolled her eyes. "Chris and Tommy say it's for girls." She wrinkled her nose. "Boys are supposed to spit and shake, but that's gross."

"Chris and Tommy are wrong. A pinky swear is a solemn oath. Never to be taken lightly," Chet informed. "Pinky swear?" He extended his right hand, pinky hooked toward Erin.

Erin laughed, linked her right pinky with Chet's. "Pinky swear," she said seriously. She took his hand to lead him across the yard, then stopped and looked up at him. "You won't tell anybody I like you, will you, Uncle Chet?"

Chet frowned.

Erin grinned. "Got'cha!" She laughed.

Chet grinned, then chuckled, then laughed. "You've got a bit'o the imp in you, Erin DeSoto." He picked her up, eliciting a delighted squeal.

Rascal crouched and growled at Chet, who quickly set Erin down and held his hands up.

"Take it easy. Nice dog." *That dog is gonna mess me up, but good!*

"Quit bein' a jerk, Raz," Erin scolded the dog.

Rascal trotted over to Erin, then went around to her left side and followed her across the yard, where she returned to play catch with her brothers and the Stoker boys. Rascal plopped down beneath one of the trees.

Chet crossed the yard. *I swear, that dog's still lookin' at me.* He missed the smug look John flashed at Roy.

"Told ya."

"2,038." Chet plopped into an empty chair.

John frowned. "What?"

"Hairs in my mustache. There are 2,038."

Mike and Hank snickered. Marco shook his head. And Roy grinned.

"2,038?" John repeated. "Hairs in your mustache?"

Roy reached into the cooler and pulled out a bottle of beer. "Have a beer, Chet."

"Don't mind if I do, Roy." Chet leaned toward the table, set the bottom of the cap on the edge and popped the cap off by smacking the bottle. He took a long drink, then wagged his eyebrows at John. "Wanna check, John?"

John rolled his eyes. "No." He leaned over to the cooler and pulled out a beer. He looked from the table to the bottle, then opted for the church key hanging from the side of the cooler.

"Aww, Gage, don't you know how to uncap a bottle the old fashioned way?" Chet laughed.

"Kelly," Hank growled.

"This party needs some music," Marco announced. "Roy, mind if we move your stereo into that back window?"

"Back window?" Chet repeated.

"Sure, that's what my parents and my cousins do," Marco informed.

Roy shrugged. "Go ahead."

"C'mon, Chet."

Chet stood. "It was your idea? Why're you pulling me into it?"



"Just help me move the stereo." Marco and Chet disappeared into the house.

"Roy, Beth, Marie and I are gonna run to the grocery store," Joanne informed.

"What happened to pizza?" Roy asked.

Joanne laughed and wrinkled her nose. "I don't wanna feed everybody pizza." She shrugged. "Besides, we'd probably spend less if we bought hamburgers and hot dogs and cooked them on the grill."

"And I can make potato salad," Marie chimed in.

Roy stood and kissed Joanne's cheek. "Works for me."

"Can you guys watch the kids, or should we take them with us?"

Roy counted heads. "We're not outnumbered." He grinned, then leaned forward and kissed her cheek again. "And I'll lay off the beer," he whispered.

Joanne smiled, patted his stomach. "We'll be back in an hour."

The three women disappeared into the house. Roy sat down and pushed his beer to the middle of the table.

John stood and crossed the yard. "Yo, Tommy, toss that over here."

"What're you doing, Johnny?" Roy called.

"I'm tired of sittin'." John caught the ball, turning to Matt. "Head's up, Matt."

Mike stood. "I didn't wanna be the first one." He grinned at Roy.

Hank turned to watch them. Matt tossed the ball to his dad, who tossed it to Erin. "Good catch, Erin!"

Apparently rested, Rascal began showing interest in the game, too. He crept into the middle of the circle, making a snap jawed jump for the ball as Erin tossed it to Chris. He missed again when Chris tossed the ball to Greg.

"Head's up, Dad!" Greg hummed the ball at Mike, who intercepted the ball as Rascal made another leap for it.

"You want this, Rascal?" Mike teased, waving the ball in front of the dog.

Rascal wagged his tail and whined. The kids laughed.

"This old thing? You sure you want it?" Mike continued.

Rascal barked, tail now wagging furiously.

"Johnny!" Mike hummed the ball at John.

Roy winced, thinking that John was going to leap without thinking.

"Get it, Tommy!" John laughed as the ball sailed over his hand.

Tommy dashed, sweeping the ball up a second ahead of Rascal's jaws. He hummed the ball back to Mike.

Mike caught the ball, then hid both hands behind his back. "Where'd it go?"

Rascal trotted over to Mike, jumping and whining. Mike backed up and Rascal followed him. He passed the ball off to Matt, then drew his hands out.

"Where'd it go?" Mike asked again.

Rascal cocked his head, then sniffed the ground at Mike's feet. Mike reached down and ruffled the dog's fur.

"It's not there." Mike ruffled the dog's fur again. "Where'd it go to?"

Mike shoved Rascal away and Rascal bounded back, yipping and growling playfully as Mike roughhoused with him. The roughhousing went on for several minutes, to the delight of the children and adults watching. Rascal growled and nipped at Mike, yipping every time Mike drew away. After another few minutes of play, Rascal's growls became less playful, as did his nips at Mike.

Then Mike growled back. Rascal reacted by crouching down, his bushy tail dropping between his hind legs. When Mike moved toward him, he slinked away, finally taking shelter behind Erin.

Still growling, Mike advanced on Erin. With a snarl, Rascal jumped on Mike, knocking him to the ground. Roy was out of the chair and across the yard, pulling Rascal off the stunned engineer.

"Are you all right?" Hank asked, helping Mike to his feet.

"I think so. What the heck happened?" Mike brushed absently at the blades of grass and dirt that were now all over him.

Rascal yelped as Roy dragged him toward an enclosure at the back of the yard.

"Erin, no!" *If Rascal turns on her, he'll kill her!* Johnny grabbed Erin, sweeping her up as she ran toward her father and the dog.

"Daddy's hurting him!" Erin shouted back. "Put me down!" She struggled and squirmed.

*Man, she's strong!* John held on to the struggling girl. *I hope she's as tough as she looked when Chris knocked her down. I don't wanna hurt her.* "It's okay. Your dad's just gonna put Rascal some place quiet."

"BUT HE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" Erin sobbed, renewing her struggle to get down.

"Erin, sweetie, it's okay." John soothed, speaking quietly. "It's okay."

"He . . . didn't . . . do anything." Erin hiccuped, sobbing and burying her head in John's shoulder.

Roy came back and John gently set Erin down. She immediately ran to Roy, grabbing his hand.

"Daddy, let . . . him . . . out . . . please?"

Roy knelt. "Honey, he could've hurt Uncle Mike." He smoothed Erin's hair. "He's better off by himself right now."

A pitiful howl echoed across the yard.

"He . . . hates . . . it." Erin hiccuped.

Chet and Marco had stepped out of the house. "What happened?" Chet asked.

"Rascal went nuts and tried to kill our dad." Matt sounded both awed and angry.

"He didn't!" Erin insisted. She took a deep breath, then looked at Roy. "He was just scared, Daddy. He thought Uncle Mike was gonna hurt me."

"What he did was still wrong, Erin," Roy smoothed the strawberry blond hair again. "Why don't you go into the house and put some cold water on your face?"

"C'mon, Erin." Tommy put an arm around Erin's shoulders and led her into the house.

"Man, what a baby," Matt muttered.

Chris turned on his friend. "Take that back," he demanded, shoving Matt.

"Whoa! Christopher, in the house." Roy took the boy by the shoulders and led him into the kitchen.

"Where'd you learn that? I know it wasn't from me, or your mother."

"He called Erin a baby, Dad," Chris said petulantly.

"And you and your brother call her that every day," Roy returned. "And twice on Sundays." *But she's*

*their* sister. He tried not to smile, but he was so proud. "It's just a name, Chris."

"You wouldn't fuss at Erin if she'd shoved Matt," Chris muttered.

"Where'd you get that idea?" Roy said, then winced. "If Matt hit her first, I wouldn't. But if she shoved Matt, she'd be in trouble with me." He knelt. "Look, I've always told you and your brother and sister that if somebody hits you and you hit 'em back, that's one thing." He paused. "It's not okay to hit ~~fst~~."

Chris took a deep breath, then sighed. "I know," he admitted. "Sorry, Dad."

Roy smiled. "Well, I'm kind of proud of you." He winked. "You were sticking up for your sister." He stood. "But you're gonna go out and apologize to Matt."

Chris nodded as Roy put a hand on his shoulder and led him out of the house.

Everybody was sitting at the table. Mike nudged Matt, who stood and met Roy and Chris halfway.

"Sorry I called Erin a baby," Matt muttered.

"Sorry I shoved you," Chris returned.

"You guys gonna shake hands and be friends again?" Roy prompted.

The boys shook.

"Just don't call my little sister names, okay?"

Matt nodded.

"Erin was right, Roy," Mike began as Roy and the boys sat down at the table.

"Huh?" Roy frowned.

"I scared Rascal, then I moved toward Erin." Mike paused. "Most dogs attack out of fear, not viciousness."

"Your dad tell you that, Mike?" Chet chuckled.

"Kelly, shut up," Hank growled.

"It's called fear-aggression," Mike continued, ignoring Chet.

*I've gotta get Mike to teach me how to do that.* John took a sip from his beer, then grimaced. *It's hot.*

Roy sat back in the chair, then held up his hands. "It's your call, Mike."

Tommy and Erin walked out of the house. Tommy sat next to Chris on the bench, leaving Erin to stand.

Roy patted his lap. "C'mere, Squirt." He picked Erin up and set her on his lap. "You okay, now?"

Erin nodded, then looked up at him. "I'd be better if you let Rascal out."

Roy laughed. "That's up to Uncle Mike."

Erin looked at Mike, who smiled and stood. "Wanna go see if Rascal is still scared of me?" He held out his hand.

Erin nodded and Roy set her back on the ground. She took Mike's hand and they walked back to the enclosure. Rascal was lying down, staring forlornly through the chain link fence separating him from the world.

Erin knelt when she reached the fence, pulling Mike down next to her. "C'mere, Raz."

Rascal stood and slowly approached the fence.

Erin nudged Mike. "Tell him you're sorry," she whispered.

Mike frowned, then he shrugged. "Sorry, Rascal."

"Are you gonna be good, Rascal?" Erin asked. Rascal wagged his tail. "Promise?"

Rascal wagged his tail again, then yipped.

Erin looked at Mike. "Can we let him out, now?"

Mike smiled. "Sure." He stood and opened the gate.

Rascal scooted out of the enclosure, then went to Erin, excitedly licking her face. The little girl laughed and hugged the dog. Mike left them and went back to the table.

"Awwww, Mike." Chet sniffled and wiped his eyes with the hem of his shirt. "That was so . . . so . . . sweeeet."

Mike sat down next to Hank. *I'll have to remember to tell Chet to kiss my ass when the kids aren't around.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Two hours later, the kids moved inside to watch an afternoon monster movie. Joanne, Beth and Marie

were back from their trip to the grocery store and the barbecue pit was out of the garage and in the yard.

"Where ya goin', Chet?" Johnny called as Chet headed to the back door.

Chet pointed. "Inside. To keep the kids out of trouble." He disappeared into the house.

John snorted. "That's like puttin' the fox in charge of the henhouse." He laughed.

Roy chuckled. "Maybe he wants to watch the movie." He stood. "I'm gonna go give Joanne a hand."

"Could you send Chet out here for a minute?" Hank called. "I forgot to ask him something."

Roy waved to signal that he'd heard the request before disappearing into the house. Chet ambled out a minute later.

"What's up, Cap?"

Hank pulled the grocery receipt he'd found on the kitchen counter. "The tab was 65 bucks. I figure if we each put in 10, it won't leave Roy and Joanne strapped."

Mike pulled his wallet out and handed a 10 over to Hank.

"Good idea, Cap." Marco handed a 5 and several ones to John, who passed them to the captain.

Chet had his wallet out, but hadn't opened it. "It's a good idea, Cap, but why 10 bucks a piece?" He went on without waiting for an answer. "I mean, Joanne and Roy have 3 kids and they're gonna eat. Mike and Beth have 2 and they're gonna eat." He paused. "I don't think it's fair for me and Marco to put in as much as you and Mike." He grinned over at John. "And we all know Gage isn't gonna have a date showing up."

John reached over, snatched the wallet from Chet and opened it, pulling out two 5s before the Irishman could snatch the wallet back. "There ya go, Cap." He then pulled his own wallet out and handed Hank a 10.

"Thank you, John." Hank folded the money inside the receipt, then stood. "I'm gonna go stick this in a drawer in the kitchen."

Chet stood there, gaping and looking from his wallet to John, then back again. "Gage," he began, teeth clenched.

"Kelly." John waggled his eyebrows, then laughed. "It's only money, Chet."

"My money!" Chet turned and stalked back into the house.

"Good one, Johnny." Mike snickered.

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Beth and Mike left after an early dinner to go home to an empty house. An hour after sunset, the party moved into the house. Working together, the four boys managed to get permission to sleep in the back yard. They were setting up tents and sleeping bags in the yard, ready to brave the elements. Joanne and John stayed out to help them set up. Chet and Marco were putting the stereo equipment back where they'd found it.

When Hank, Marie and Roy joined the two in the living room, they found a tired little girl crashed on the living room couch. Marco and Chet were arguing over something, apparently oblivious to the sleeping child.

*That kid can sleep through anything.* Roy walked over to the couch and gently shook Erin's shoulder. "C'mon, Squirt. You're takin' up too much room."

Erin mumbled sleepily, but didn't show any sign of waking up, or moving. Roy bent to pick her up.

Hank cleared his throat. "You mind, Roy?" He nodded toward Erin.

Marie smiled. "You do miss the girls."

"All right, all right. I admit it. Are you happy?" Hank blushed.

Marie laughed and kissed his cheek. "Ecstatic."

Hank looked at Roy, who stood back and gestured to Erin. "Be my guest, Cap. Erin's room is the first one on the left." It wasn't easy, but he managed to keep a straight face.

Hank picked Erin up from the couch. She made a noise, then mumbled. "It's okay, sweetie."

Marie watched him walk out of the living room, then turned to Roy. "One of these days, we're gonna sneak her out to live with us."

Roy laughed. "The boys wouldn't like that." He grinned. "And she's kind of grown on me and Joanne." He winked. "But we might be able to let you borrow her. If it's okay with Erin."

Marie winked back. "We'll take you up on that."

"We're gonna head out, Roy." Chet hugged Marie and kissed her cheek.

"It's still early, guys."

"I'm taking my mamma to Mass tomorrow, so I've gotta be up early." Marco hugged Marie. "Thanks

for invitin' us over, Roy." He patted Roy's arm.

"Yeah, thanks, Roy." Chet slapped Roy's shoulder, then he and Marco went to the front door.

Roy followed them, stepping out onto the porch. *I'll thank Johnny for you, Chet.* When they'd both driven away, he went back inside.

"The boys are settled." Joanne looked around the living room. "Where's Erin?"

"Check the treehouse," Johnny muttered, flopping down on the now empty couch.

Joanne laughed. "Now, Johnny," she began. "Erin was the center of attention for most of the day."

"Cap took her upstairs," Roy informed.

Hank returned to the living room. "Erin's tucked in," he announced. "Is it okay for Rascal to sleep on her bed?"

Roy laughed. "Try and move him."

"After he went after Stoker?" Hank chuckled. "I like both of my arms, thanks."

"Rascal went after Mike?" Joanne frowned.

*Time to get the heck out of Dodge.* "You about ready, Marie?" Hank looked hopefully at his wife.

"Sure." Marie hugged Joanne, then Roy. "You can tell me about it in the car." She walked over to the couch.

John sat up, then stood. "Night, Marie."

Marie hugged the lanky paramedic. "Get some sleep, Johnny. You look tired." She kissed his cheek, then went back to Hank. "Now, what happened with Rascal and Mike?"

"Mike was roughhousing with him . . ." Hank began, explaining as they walked to the door.

Roy and Joanne followed. The rest of the explanation was lost as the Stanleys walked down the street to their car. Roy and Joanne waited on the porch until the Edsel pulled away from the curb.

Joanne looked expectantly at Roy. "Mike was roughhousing," she prompted.

"And he scared Rascal, then Mike made a move toward Erin and Rascal jumped him." Roy blushed. "It happened just like that." He snapped his fingers to illustrate.

"Do you think he's sick? Do we need to take him to the vet?"



Roy smiled. "Erin seems to think he was just scared." He grinned. "And she knows more about animals than either of us."

Joanne laughed, put her arm around Roy's waist. "Are you gonna take Johnny home, now?"

Roy raised his eyebrows. "You gonna make me a better offer?"

"Well, the boys are in the back yard. And Erin's a heavy sleeper . . ."

"I'll convince him to sleep on our couch." Roy kissed Joanne. "I'll meet you upstairs in 5 minutes."

"That long?" Joanne winked. She took his hand and led him into the house. "Hurry." She let go of his hand and headed up the stairs.

*If he's already out, I can just toss a blanket over him.* Roy quickly turned the lights off, then returned to the living room. John sat up as he walked in.

"I'm kind'a tired. Do you mind staying here?"

"It's been a long day," John agreed. "I think that last beer did me in."

Roy looked at his watch. *Joanne's got to check on Erin. She'll have to wrestle her into pajamas. That'll take more than five minutes.* He sat down in the easy chair. "You doin' okay?"

"Yeah, fine." John shrugged, then grinned. "I had fun today. Except when Rascal scared the crap out'a me."

Roy chuckled. "Thanks for lookin' out for Erin, by the way."

John smiled shyly, then laughed. "She's stronger than she looks." He grinned. "Then again, she's your kid."

*Joanne's probably just finished with Erin. Then she'll brush her teeth and wash her face.* Roy cleared his throat. "We were right in the middle of a discussion when Cap got here."

Johnny snorted, then stretched out on the couch, resting his head on one arm and his feet on the other. "This couch is kind'a short." He looked over at Roy. "And we were in the middle of the discussion when Chris tried to play keep away with Erin." He sighed. "I didn't know about your dad before." He paused. "If you don't wanna talk about it."

"It's not like that." *How do I explain it?* "Maybe it is. I still miss him. But it was a long time ago."

"Yeah, that's why I don't go around telling everybody my mom died when I was a kid." John paused. "My dad got really angry when I told him I was leaving the reservation. He thought I was throwing

away this great life." He paused and took a deep breath. "We fought about it for weeks. But you know me. I'd made up my mind and I was gonna do it.

"I saved my money and finally managed to buy a bus ticket out of Clewiston. The day I left, he looked me right in the eye and said, `If you walk out that door, Johnny, you're not my son anymore.'" He paused and sighed. "The whole time, I'd been hoping that he'd realize I was just doing what I had to do.

"I wasn't a kid, either. I was almost 21." John stopped and took a deep breath. "I sure felt like one when he said that, though."

"You don't think he's . . ." Roy fumbled for the right words. "Maybe he's changed his mind. Realized he was wrong."

John snorted. "Where do you think I got this stubborn streak of mine?" He sighed. "I guess that's what's been bothering me since Chet and I were down in that elevator shaft. I'd managed not to think about it for all those years, then Chet asks me one question and it all comes back." He looked up at the ceiling.

"Call him, Johnny," Roy urged. "The worst he can do is hang up on you. But at least then you'll know for sure."

"That's what bothers me the most, Roy. I know."

*You think you know. But that's not gonna change your mind.* Roy looked down at his hands. *I just hope you don't lose the chance forever.* "What if you're wrong?" His voice was so quiet, he wasn't sure John heard. He cleared his throat. "Is it worth the regret if you miss the chance?"

John sat up. "No, I don't s'pose it is." He ran a hand through his dark hair. "Thanks, Roy. I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories for you, though." He stood. "I'm gonna grab a pillow and blanket and get some sleep."

"I'll get it," Roy offered.

"Nah. Joanne's waiting for you." Johnny grinned. "I know where everything is."

Roy laughed, then led the way up the stairs, opening the linen closet in the hall before heading to the master bedroom. He stopped with his hand on the knob. John pulled a blanket and pillow down, then closed the door. Roy turned the knob to open the door as John headed down the stairs.

"At least one of us is gettin' lucky." John's voice floated back to him.

*I'm so glad he can't see me blushing right now.* Roy stepped into the master bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him.

*Another Author's Note:*

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