

Variation of Life

By Kate Simon

John Smith looked into the mirror and adjusted his gold tie against the burgundy shirt. He was supposed to meet Mr. Ryan in an hour. It was unusual for Mr. Ryan to go on jobs but apparently, he took this one personally. John could handle the job himself. He'd collected from this guy before. He didn't mind going after deadbeats. It was their own faults they couldn't pick a winner or knew when to quit. They pissed him off. Most of them had homes and families and they were willing to throw it all away on a ball game or a horse. Now Fred Burke was deep in again, and late to pay again. He should know by now not to cross Michael Ryan.

John had spent most of his life around Michael Ryan. He'd been taken in by Ryan when he was a twelve-year-old runaway. Abandoned at birth, he was given the name John Smith by some dull-witted bureaucrat. John went from foster home to foster home. Some were okay, some were bad. Some still gave him nightmares. He'd finally had enough of his last foster father beating the crap out of him so he took off. He guessed they didn't look for him very hard. It was easy to get lost in New York. Even sleeping in a bus or train station was better than going back. Some of the waiting areas had TVs. He could watch whatever was on while he waited for people to toss what was left of their food. Half a bagel, some leftover fries, he was pretty good at scrounging. One time he spotted a guy throwing out an entire cheesesteak because his train was called. He smiled at the memory. The sandwich had still been warm.

Michael Ryan spotted him scrounging for food at Grand Central and approached him. At first, he thought he was a creep when he offered to buy him lunch but he was hungry. Michael was dressed sharp in a suit even John could tell was expensive. He had a fancy watch. Michael told him John reminded him of himself at that age. He'd worked hard and made his way in the world. He offered John the same chance. By the time he was finished with lunch, John had a safe place to live and food to eat. Michael moved John into his house. There was a live-in housekeeper, Rosa, who cooked real dinners and made sure he had clean clothes.

All he had to do in return was run errands. It was no big deal to John; he was happy to do it. He found out pretty quickly that being under Michael Ryan's protection meant no one messed with him. Once he hit his teen years, he started getting cocky about his

position. He'd been running a side hustle, selling some weed and pills. Michael found out and broke his arm. Michael wasn't mad because of the drugs. He was mad because of the money. Nobody profited from Michael Ryan's territory without his approval. He never made that mistake again.

John looked into the mirror as he tugged on the brass colored jacket. He looked into the mirror and ran his hand through his goatee. He was starting to get gray; despite the fact he was only thirty-two. Twenty years of living this life was taking it's toll.

John pulled his non-descript sedan next to Michael's BMW. John had purposely chosen a car that had tens of thousands of duplicates in the city.

"You ready?" asked Michael as he got out of his car.

They were standing in the parking garage of Fred Burke's office. John had been there several times to collect from the guy. Sometimes he had to strong arm the guy. Occasionally he'd break shit but he'd never had to beat on the guy. John was sufficiently intimidating and Fred wasn't a complete idiot. "I can handle this, Mr. Ryan. You really don't need to come with me."

"He and I need to have a conversation."

John didn't like the look on Michael's face. He'd seen it before and it always meant trouble. They waited for Fred to come through the garage door. When Fred saw them walk out from behind his car, the color drained from his face.

"Oh, Mr. Ryan. I wasn't expecting you."

"I bet you weren't."

"I'm sorry I'm a bit late..."

"Save it. You've been talking to the police."

John and Fred were both stunned at the comment. John thought if this was true, Fred really was a complete idiot. Nobody crossed Michael Ryan.

"I've given you every opportunity. You've been late with your payments and I've been so patient with you."

John thought to himself, patience and Michael Ryan were not speaking terms.

"This is how you repay me!" Michael shouted. He pulled a revolver from his jacket.

John saw a look in Michael's eyes that terrified him. Michael Ryan on a rampage could not be stopped. Fred looked at John with eyes of a man who knew he was about to die. Michael fired. Fred fell to the concrete floor, a bloody mess where his face used to be. They had never heard the garage door open.

“Dad!”

They looked over and saw a boy standing in the open doorway. Michael aimed at the boy. Everything in that moment froze. John saw the terrified boy. He saw the look in Michael’s eyes. He was going to kill this child for having the bad luck of being the child of a bad gambler. Everything he’d seen, everything he’d done over the last twenty years came crashing in on him.

John reached his hand over Michael’s gun. “I’ll take care of this. You need to get out of here before anyone else shows up. I’ll drop them in the Pine Barrens. No one will ever find them.”

Michael smiled at him as if John had just handed him his favorite box of cigars. He slapped John on the shoulder. “I can always count on you.”

John saw the boy was about to bolt. He scooped up the boy hand covered his mouth with his hand and opened the trunk of his car. Michael nodded his approval at John as he got in his car and drove away. As soon as Michael had pulled away he put the screaming boy in the trunk and leaned over him. “You have to be quiet. I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. But you need to be quiet for a few minutes.”

“Where are you taking me?” the boy sobbed.

“Someplace safe.”

John pulled into the parking lot and turned off the engine. He looked around to see if anyone was watching. This was a visitors parking lot and it didn't seem too busy. He hadn't been this scared since he was that twelve-year-old runaway. He looked at the entrance to the building and took a steadying breath. He knew what he had to do. He got out of the car and opened the trunk. He looked at the scared boy whose eyes were swollen from tears.

"Give me your hand," said John.

"Where are we?"

"The fourteenth precinct. They will get you back to your Mom." He helped the boy out of the trunk and brushed some dust off his slacks.

"I don't have a Mom."

John was riddled with even more guilt. He hadn't killed the boy's father but he hadn't stopped it. Now the boy had no parents. "What's your name?"

"Bobby."

"Bobby, I'm going to make sure your safe."

"That guy was going to kill me, like he killed my Dad."

John sighed and nodded.

"You said you would."

"I said that so I could get you out of there. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you." Bobby broke down and began to shake and weep. John didn't know what to do, so he picked Bobby up and let him cry on his shoulder. As he headed toward the door he looked up at the sunset. It was likely it would be the last one he'd see for quite a while.

John walked up to the desk sergeant who look him and Bobby up and down. "What can I help you with?" asked the woman.

"I need to speak with Detective Becker."

"Detective Becker is busy. I can take a report."

“Tell Detective that John Smith is here to see her. She’ll see me.” Five minutes later he was sitting in an interrogation room with Bobby sitting on his lap. He tried to set him in his own chair but he wouldn’t let go.

“John Smith, this is a surprise.”

John looked up to see Susan Becker standing in the doorway. She had short dark hair and heavy black glasses. She looked more like a librarian than a cop. But Susan Becker had been a thorn in Michael Ryan’s side for a more than a year. She’d been trying to get something on the Ryan organization but Michael had been too careful. That is until now.

“First things first. This is Bobby. He’s going to need protection.”

“No, don’t leave me,” Bobby cried as he buried his head on John’s shoulder.

He patted the boy’s back. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

Becker took the seat across from him. “What’s going on, Smith?”

“Michael Ryan just murdered Bobby’s father.” Becker’s mouth dropped open as Bobby sobbed. “Shush,” he said as he patted the boy’s back. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Smith, you’re Ryan’s right hand man. Are you telling me you’re ready to flip on him?”

“I’m here to give you my statement. But first you need to send a team to the parking garage in Fred Burke’s office building. You’ll find his body next to his car.”

“This is Burke’s kid?”

“Yes, and I’m assuming you were the one talking to Burke about Ryan. He heard about it so you have a leak in your department.” John watched the red rise on her cheeks. The woman was pissed.

“Was he present?” she asked.

“He saw.”

“Christ.” She took a breath and sat back. “Bobby, I’m not supposed to talk to you about this unless you have a parent present. Do you know your Mom’s phone number?”

Bobby shook his head. “My Mom died when I was born.”

“Do you have a grandmother, or aunts and uncles?”

Bobby shook his head again.

“Okay, I’m going to make a call. I need to have a child advocate present.” She stood and walked to the door. She turned and pointed at Bobby clinging to John. “Then you can explain how this happened.”

John looked down at Bobby. “Are you okay?”

“Did you know that man was going to kill my dad?”

“No, I didn’t. Your father owed him money and I thought he was just mad at him. I didn’t know he was going to do that.”

Bobby looked at him with huge sad eyes. “Why didn’t you hurt me?”

“Because that’s wrong.”

“But you worked for that man.”

“Yeah, I did. Not any more.”

“That lady said your name is John.”

“That’s right. John Smith.”

“Thank you for not hurting me, John,” said Bobby as he kissed John’s cheek. He rested his head back on his shoulder as John patted his back. He had seen a lot of things in his thirty two years, including the cold blooded murder of Fred Burke. But nothing surprised him more than Bobby Burke.

Becker came back into the room with a young man in shirt sleeves. “This is Tom Stevens. He’s a child advocate. He’s here to make sure your interests are protected.”



“Hello, Bobby,” said Tom as he extended his hand. Bobby looked scared but John nodded. Bobby shook his hand but quickly pulled it back.

“Do you want to sit next to me?” asked Stevens.

Bobby shook his head. “No. John will protect me. He promised.”

Becker looked at John like he had two heads. “I promised.” He moved Bobby so he was further away. “Give me a second, buddy.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out his 9mm. Becker and Stevens moved back. “Take it easy.” He slid his gun across the table toward Becker. “I assume you’ll want to check ballistics on this.” Becker checked the gun to see there was no bullet in the chamber. She pulled an evidence bag out of her jacket pocket and sealed it inside. Her phone rang as she was securing the gun in a drawer.

“Becker.” She looked at John while she listened to the caller. She was hearing what John said was true, at least the part about Fred Burke being dead in the parking garage. “Secure the scene. I’ll be there when I can.” She disconnected the call and looked at John. “Obviously, I need to talk to you both but it has to be done separately.” She looked at John for help. She would need Bobby’s statement but it couldn’t be tainted by sitting through John’s.

“Bobby, buddy. Will you go with Mr. Stevens? Maybe he could get you a soda?”

Bobby held him tight. “No, I don’t want to.”

“It’s important. You will have to tell them what happened but I can’t be in the room with you.”

“You won’t let them take me anywhere?”

John managed a small smile. “I promise.”

“Okay,” he said quietly.

He looked up at Stevens. “Go easy with him,” he said, half plea, half warning.

John watched Bobby walk out of the room and gave Stevens a last, warning look. He'd spent twenty years perfecting a look that told people he should not be crossed. He'd learned it at the foot of a master. Stevens understood this boy was under his protection.

"Tell me what happened," said Becker.

"Fred Burke owed Michael twenty thousand. I was going to collect. I'd done it before. Burke was a lousy gambler. He always owed and he was always late. It was supposed to be a regular collection but Michael called. He said he would meet me there."

"Was that unusual?"

"Very unusual, but you don't question Michael Ryan. He met me at the garage. I told him I could handle it but he said he needed to have a conversation with Burke. I knew that couldn't be good. He never handles anything personally. He doesn't like to get his hands dirty. Burke knew he was in trouble. Michael said he knew he'd been talking to the police. He didn't give him a chance to deny it. He shot him. That's when we heard Bobby yell. He was going to shoot him too." John looked away, remembering the pure evil in his eyes. "I told him I'd take care of it. I told him he needed to get away before anyone else came in."

"What did you say you'd do?"

"I said I would drop both of them in the Pine Barrens. I picked Bobby up and put him in my trunk. Once he saw that he assumed I'd follow through."

"You put a terrified and I'm assuming crying child in the trunk of your car and now he won't let go of you. Explain that to me."

"When I put him in the trunk, I told him I wouldn't hurt him but he needed to be quiet. I would take him someplace safe. I brought him here."

"You say you collected from Burke before. How did you collect? We're you ever violent with Burke?"

"On occasion."

"So why should I believe you weren't the one who killed Burke?"

“Because if I was, I would have never brought Bobby here. I would have gone through with it and you would have never found either of them.”

“Why now?”

“Why now what?”

“Why are you turning on Ryan? I know your file. He took you in as a kid. You’ve been working for him your whole life. He gave you money, a nice apartment, anything you could want. You’ve never had a problem with what he did before. Why now?”

“Does it matter? You’ve been trying to take him down for a year. Now you can. Murder one. What more do you want?”

“I want to know why you’re turning on the man who gave you a life?”

“Because I’m done. I’m done doing what I’m told.”

“Bull.”

John looked at Becker. “He was going to kill Bobby, without a second thought. That little boy was just a loose end to him. I spent most of my life thinking Michael Ryan was a hero. He saved me from a life on the streets. In that moment I knew he could have just as easily killed me.” He leaned back and chuckled. “He’s going to now. It doesn’t matter what prison you put me in, he has connections everywhere.”

Becker’s voice softened. “Then why do it?”

“Bobby’s safe. I kept my promise. That’s enough.”

A knock on the door interrupted them and a sandy haired man walked in. John recognized Christopher Donnelly as Becker’s partner. He’d spent enough hours over the last year listening to Michael alternately railing against Becker and Donnelly and bragging they’d never touch him.

“What have you got?” asked Becker.

“The former Fred Burke in the parking garage of his office.” Donnelly showed Becker a picture on his phone.

“Damn it.”

Donnelly nodded toward John. “Are we charging him or what?”

“He didn’t do it.”

“What? He’s Ryan’s right hand. Of course, he did.”

“No. He’s a witness, as is Burke’s son. I’m going to question him now.”

Donnelly pointed at John. “What do we do with him?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he smiled. “I wouldn’t mind a soda.”

Becker looked at Donnelly as she reached for the door. “Get the man a soda, then join me in interrogation two.”

Donnelly came back a few minutes later with a can of soda. “Thank you.” John took a little satisfaction in Donnelly’s stunned look. “What? You think I can’t have manners?” Donnelly looked confused as he set the can in front of him. He grabbed his wrist and held it tight. “Go easy on the boy. He just saw his father killed. He’s a victim. He’s not me.” John opened the soda and took a sip. He wondered how long it would take Michael Ryan to kill him.

Bobby sipped his soda and stared at the table. He didn't want to look at the people. He didn't trust anyone. Everyone lied. His father lied. His father said everything would be okay, but he lied. He fired Christine. She looked after him and made him do his homework. She was nice to him and she played with him after he'd done his homework. Dad said she quit but Bobby knew that was a lie. He'd seen Dad talking to her and she was crying. Then the cable went off. Dad said it was a mix up but Bobby knew what it was. Dad like to bet on stuff. A lot. It was more important to him than anything. More important than him. He never paid attention to him. The only reason he was with Dad today was because he had a fever and the school called him. He was really mad at Bobby for that. Dad usually left him at home alone. He said he was old enough to look after himself.

Nobody cared what happened to him anymore. Nobody but John. John said he'd keep him safe and he did. He took him to the police. John kept promises.

"Bobby, are you okay?" asked the man.

"What?"

"I asked you are you okay?"

"I guess."

The woman came into the room with a man he hadn't seen before. They sat on the other side of the table.

"Bobby, do you remember me? I'm Detective Becker."

"I just saw you a couple of minutes ago. I'm not stupid."

"Of course, you're not."

"Where's John? What did you do with him?"

"John's fine. He's still in the same room. You seem very attached to him. Did you know him from before today?"

"No."

“This is my partner, Detective Donnelly. We’d like to ask you about what happened today.”

“Okay.”

“Why were you with your father and not in school?”

“I wasn’t feeling good. The nurse called my Dad.”

“Was he taking you home?”

“Yeah. I left my homework in his office. I went back to get it. When I got back...I saw.”

“Did you see who hurt your father?” asked Becker. Bobby just nodded. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“The man was yelling at my Dad. He said ‘This is how you repay me.’ Then he shot him.”

“Was there someone else in the garage?”

Bobby rolled his eyes. These people really thought he was stupid. “Yeah. John was there.”

“What was John doing?” asked Donnelly.

“Nothing. He was just standing there. He looked scared.”

“What do you mean, scared?”

“Scared! Like he was afraid of what the man was going to do.”

The guy sitting next to him spoke. He’d almost forgotten he was there. “Take it easy, Detective.”

“What happened after the man hurt your father?”

Bobby was getting sick of these people. “He didn’t hurt him. He shot him in the head and killed him.”

Becker put on a sweet voice. "I'm sorry Bobby. What happened after the man shot your father?"

"They didn't know I was there until I screamed. The man pointed the gun at me. He was going to kill me too. John stopped him."

"How did he stop him?"

"He put his hand on the man's gun. He told the man he should leave and he would take care of it. That's when John picked me up and put me in the trunk of his car. I was really scared but he whispered to me that he wasn't going to hurt me and he would take me someplace safe. He promised. He brought me here."

Becker put a sheet of pictures in front of him. "Can you tell me if the man who hurt your father is any of these men?"

He looked down at the pictures and his head felt funny. He only saw the one face, the face of the man who killed his father. He pointed to the picture. "This is the guy. He killed my father." He looked at the detectives and they were smiling, like his father's death was a good thing. "I want to see John."

"Not right now," said the guy next to him.

"I want to see John now! Take me to see him!"

Becker nodded and Stevens took him back down the hall to the room he'd in before. John was still sitting there. He'd never been happier to see anyone. "John!" He ran to him and John pulled him into his lap.

"Are you okay, buddy? You're all red." John put his hand to his forehead. "You've got a fever."

"I told them the nurse sent me home because I was sick. That's why I was with my Dad."

John looked really mad. "He told you he was sick and you did nothing about it? Get him a doctor, now!" He held him real tight. "It's okay, buddy. They'll get something for you."

Bobby put his head on his shoulder and closed his eyes. John would keep him safe.

John was pissed that Bobby was sick and they hadn't done anything about it. He'd made their case for them but they didn't think about this little kid. Bobby had fallen asleep on his shoulder. He wanted to yell for someone to come help him but he didn't want to wake him up. Becker walked into the room.

"Finally! Bobby has a fever. He needs a doctor."

"We're going to move him to our break room. There's a cot in there."

"You need to take him to the doctor."

"We'll bring in a doctor. We can't risk Ryan finding out where he is until we get a warrant for his arrest."

"I'll go with him."

"That won't be necessary."

"Yes it will. Do you want him to wake up and not see me?"

"Fine. It will be easier to protect the both of you in one place."

"Protect both of us? I thought you would be charging me."

Becker shook her head. "Like I said, I know your file. You may be guilty of a lot of things, but you've never risen to the level of Michael Ryan. He's been running gambling, drugs and prostitution in this town for years. With your help, we can put him away for life and dismantle his organization."

"Once he realizes I flipped on him, he's going to come after both of us."

"I know. I'm working on that. For now, let's get Bobby comfortable."

John followed Becker into a small room. It wasn't much but it was better than sitting in interrogation. Bobby stirred as he put him on the cot.



“What’s going on?” he whispered.

“Lay down and close your eyes. They’re getting someone to look at you.”

“You’re not leaving me, are you?”

“No, buddy. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

John covered Bobby with a light blanket. He didn’t know what was going to happen to this kid. He hated the idea he’d wind up in the system, like he did. Becker tapped him on the shoulder and nodded toward the other side of the room.

“What’s with you and the kid?”

“What do you mean?”

“He said he didn’t know you before today.”

“He didn’t.”

“So why are you so invested in this kid?”

“I told you. I promised to keep him safe.”

Becker studied him like he was a problem she didn’t understand. “Okay, fine. I’ll go find the doctor and I’ll see about getting you two something to eat. It’s getting late.”

John looked at her and nodded. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He moved a chair next to the cot and sat down. He didn’t want Bobby to get scared when he woke up. He thought about Becker’s question. Why was he so invested in this kid? No one had ever looked at him the way Bobby did. This kid just lost everything but he looked at John with such trust. He hadn’t done much that really meant anything with his life, but he would keep this boy safe. Even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Thirty minutes later Becker came back with lunch and a guy with a leather bag. She set the bag on the table as the doctor sat down next to Bobby. He stirred under the blanket.

“What’s going on?” he murmured.

“It’s the doctor,” said John.

Bobby looked at him and smiled. “You’re still here.”

“Of course, I am.”

“Bobby, I’m Doctor Hammond. I’d like to examine you.”

Bobby looked at John. “It’s okay. Let him take a look at you.”

“Okay.”

“Bobby, how old are you?” Hammond asked as he ran a device over his forehead.

“Seven.”

“How do you feel?”

“I have a headache and my stomach feels funny.”

“I think you have the virus that’s going around. I’m going to give you something that will help with your fever and headache. I know you feel lousy now but you’ll feel better in the morning.” Hammond looked at Becker. “What did you bring for him?”

“A couple of cans of ginger ale, some chicken soup and some rolls.”

“Perfect. Give me the soda.” He popped the soda and gave Bobby a pill. “Take this.” Bobby took the pill and a sip of the soda. “His fever is 103.”

“What?” asked John. “Shouldn’t he be in a hospital?”

“No. It’s not unusual for kids.” He pulled a small box out of his bag. “These are some disposable thermometers. Check his temp every few hours. If it goes up, call me. I’ll leave some more med. Give him another dose in eight hours. He shouldn’t be alone.”

“He won’t be,” said John.

Bobby woke up and looked around. He wasn't in his room. Then he remembered. He saw John leaning back in a chair with his eyes closed. "John?" He opened his eyes and looked at him. He even smiled.

"Hey, buddy. How are you feeling?"

"Better, I think. I'm hungry."

"That's good." He grabbed something off the table and tore it open. "Let me check your temperature." He put a strip on his forehead and for a minute, then took it off. "Your temp is down to 100. That's good." He took a pill from a bottle and handed it to him. "It's time for you to take another one of these. He handed him the pill and a can of soda. Bobby took it and the soda felt good on his throat.

"I'm hungry."

"There's soup and some bread. I'll heat it up." He put the soup in the microwave and set out the bread. "Can you sit at the table to eat?"

"Yeah, I think so." Bobby got up from the cot and sat down at the table. He took another sip of soda and then a bite of the bread. John set the soup in front of him. He took a taste of the soup and it was pretty good. "Why are you still here?"

John looked surprised. "Because I promised."

"Lots of adults make promises."

"Like your father?"

"Yeah. He promised he'd stop betting on stuff, but he didn't."

"I'm sorry about what happened."

"Why? You didn't do it."

"I didn't stop it."

Bobby looked at John and he seemed really upset. "I don't think you could have stopped him. He looked like..."

“Looked like what?”

“It looked like he was enjoying it.”

John reached for his hand. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Bobby closed his eyes against the image of his father’s face blowing apart. “It’s okay. You saved me.” He ate some more of the soup. He was starting to get tired again. “Do you know what they’re going to do with us?”

“Not yet. They’ll need to arrest him first. Then they’ll need us to testify. They’ll have to take care of us so we can do that.”

“What’s testify?”

“We have to go to court with a judge and a jury. Then we tell them what happened.”

“Will the man be there?”

“Yeah, probably.”

Bobby put down his spoon. He thought he was going to be sick. “I don’t want to see the man again.”

John came to his side and knelt down so he was looking him in the eye. “I’ll be with you. I promised to protect you. I won’t let him hurt you.”

He threw his arms around John’s neck. He believed him. He saved him from the man, he promised to stay with him. Now he was taking care of him. John kept his promises.

John smiled. “Hey, I have an idea. Do you want to watch a movie. I can pull it up on my phone.”

“That’d be good.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

“Not really.”

“Have you ever seen Doctor Who?”

“What’s that?”

John smiled as he hit some buttons on his phone. “Oh, man, it’s really cool. It’s got monsters and space travel and this guy, The Doctor, and he goes around the universe helping people.”

Bobby smiled. “Sounds good.” He laid back down on cot and John sat in a chair next to him. They watched a blue box spin around and fly through space. Bobby rested his head on John’s arm. For the first time in a very long time, he felt safe.

John looked at his watch and wondered if the police had arrested Michael yet. He hadn't heard anything since Becker brought them dinner. He'd checked Bobby's temperature and it was almost normal. At least he was sleeping peacefully. Becker came into the room and John put his finger to his lips and pointed at Bobby. He stood and walked to the

"Ryan is in interrogation with his lawyer."

"He's here? He can't see Bobby."

Becker looked at John for a moment. "No, I realize that. He's on another floor. We're going to put you in a safe house until the trial."

"Us? Both of us?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No, of course not. I'm just surprised you'd put us together."

"You've both given your statements which have been corroborated by CCTV."

"What?"

"The video showed Ryan coming and going from the garage. There's nothing of the actual shooting but we got the warrant and have his gun in ballistics. Once we match the bullets, it's going to be a slam dunk."

"Are you sure. I'm not exactly a model citizen. A jury might not believe me."

"True."

John chuckled. "You didn't need to agree with me that fast."

She managed a smile. "Sorry. What we have is Bobby. He's a believable witness."

"I hate that he'd have to testify."

"I doubt it will come to that. I know Ryan's lawyer. Once he realizes what he's up against he'll try to convince Ryan to take a deal. I'm guessing twenty-five to life. While he's in we can build the case against his other crimes."

“What happens to Bobby after all this?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean, you’re not sure? You can’t leave him exposed.”

“There’s no procedure for putting a minor child in witness protection on his own.”

“I want to stay with John.” They looked at Bobby sitting up on the cot.

“Buddy, I don’t know if they’ll let that happen. I’m not exactly their idea parent material.”

“Yes, you are! You protected me. You look out for me. You don’t lie to me.” Bobby started to cry. John sat down next to him and put his arm around his shoulders.

“It’s okay, buddy.”

Becker walked toward them. “Bobby, we don’t have to think about that just now. We’re going to move you and John to a safe place.”

“Together?”

“Yes, together and now. Get your stuff. You’re coming with me.”

They drove for hours. The city turned to suburbs. The suburbs turned to trees. They went up a long road and headed up a mountain. They finally stopped at a cabin. Bobby had fallen asleep in the back seat as soon as they’d started driving. John got out of the car and shook Bobby’s shoulder.

“Hey, buddy. We’re here.”

“Huh?”

“We’re here. I’m betting there’s a bed in there for you.”

“Okay.” Bobby sat up and got out of the car.

Becker went in first, checked all the rooms, then turned on the lights. She grabbed the bags of groceries she picked up at the small grocery in the last town they'd past. "It's a two-bedroom cabin. You get Bobby settled and I'll get the groceries put away."

John grabbed Bobby's backpack and led him down the hall to his bedroom. "Why don't you use the bathroom and I'll get you a glass of water. It's time to take your medicine." He went into the kitchen and grabbed a glass and filled it from the tap. "It's time for his medicine." He noticed Becker staring at him. "What?"

"You surprise me."

"What do you mean."

"You don't seem the type."

"Type of what?"

"The type to look after a kid, especially one that's not yours."

John shrugged. "Yeah, well, maybe no one ever needed me to before now." He walked down the hall with the stunning realization that it was true. And why the hell had he told Becker? Despite everything that had happened today, it was true. He felt a connection to Bobby, not just because of what they had witnessed. Maybe because he remembered what it was like to be a little kid on his own. He stopped himself. He shouldn't think about stuff like that. All he was doing was protecting the kid who he helped make an orphan. Bobby came back into the bedroom and John grabbed one of the disposable thermometers. He touched it on his head and waited. "Your temperature is back to normal. That's good." He handed him the glass of water and the pill.

"Why do I still have to take this?"

"Because the doctor said so. You want to stay better." Bobby took the glass and swallowed the pill. "I think you can sleep in your underwear. Do you need help?"

Bobby looked at him like he was stupid. "I'm seven. I dress myself."

John hid his smile. "Sorry."



Bobby pulled off his jeans and shirt. John folded them, noticing the size. If they were going to be here awhile, he would need some clothes. Bobby got into bed and John covered him up. "Get some sleep. I won't be far."

"John, did they get the guy who killed my dad?"

"They'd brought him in for questioning."

"Is he going to come after us? You, know, because we saw what he did?"

John sighed. "That's why they moved us here. We're far outside the city, in the mountains."

Bobby's eyes welled. "I'm scared."

He took his small hand in his. "I know you are but I'm going to be here. Detective Becker is here too. You're not going to be alone. I promise. Now, lay back and get some sleep."

John checked the window and made sure it was locked. "I'll leave your door open. We won't be far." He walked down the hall toward the kitchen. Decker had put away the groceries and put on a pot of coffee.

"How's Bobby?"

"Scared. He knows Ryan will be after him."

"What did you tell him?"

"What could I tell him? He's a smart kid. I told him the truth. He's been around his gambler father long enough to know about how these things go. I told him he wouldn't be left alone. You're staying, right?"

Becker pulled her jacket aside and showed off her gun. "Me and my 9mm will be in on the couch all night."

"Good, because mine is in an evidence bag in your station."

"Donnelly will be here tomorrow."

“Bobby’s going to need some fresh clothes. He wears a size 7.” He grabbed a mug and poured himself a cup. He saw that same strange look on Becker’s face. “What? You keep looking at me like I’m an alien.”

“You might be. I’ve been following you and your boss for a year. Everyone from Bay Ridge to Bushwick knows your reputation, and it’s not Mary Poppins.”

John sipped his coffee and looked out the window into the night. “I know. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of. That’s why I expected you to arrest me.” He set his cup down and looked at Becker. “You say I have a reputation, that’s true. It’s one built on implication, not fact.”

“I’ve never found evidence to implicate you in anything more than some assaults.”

“My profession had its downsides. Can you get your partner to bring some things for the kid?”

Becker smiled. “Yeah, sure. I’ll have him bring some stuff for you too. You may be here for a while.”

John didn't sleep that well last night. All he wanted to know was Michael Ryan was behind bars. He knew he could still get to him from jail but once he was convicted they could get Bobby somewhere safe. He poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot that was already made. He looked out the back window. Through the trees he saw a path to a lake. Bobby would enjoy that. He sighed and set down the mug. What was he thinking? They were hiding out from a very bad guy, not on vacation. Becker walked into the kitchen from the back porch.

"You're up early."

"Yeah, well. All this mountain air is messing me up."

She snickered as she refilled her cup. "How's the kid?"

"He's still asleep. I was able to take his temperature without waking him up. It's normal."

"That's good. Between being sick and what happened yesterday, I'm not surprised he's still asleep. He'll probably nap a lot for the next day or so."

"How do you know?"

"It's what my kids do."

"You're a mom?"

Becker smiled. "Yeah. They're ten and eight."

"Wow. What do you tell them about work, like not coming home last night?"

"They understand Mom's a cop. My husband is good with helping them through the times I can't be with them." She took a sip of her coffee. "Now you're the one staring."

"I guess I don't think about a cop being anything more than a cop."

Becker looked at him and smiled. "Ditto." She opened the fridge. "You want some eggs?"

"Yeah, that'd be good."

“Put on some toast and pour the juice.”

“Are you this bossy with your kids?” he smiled.

“Absolutely, so hop to it.”

John began to set the table for breakfast as Becker cracked the eggs. “I assume you’ve been in touch with your partner.”

“I have.”

“And?”

She looked at him and smiled. “Ryan was charged with first degree murder.”

John felt weak in the knees and sat down. “That was fast.”

“We’ve been after for Ryan for a long time. You and Bobby gave us what we needed to move on him. Everyone was more than happy to expedite warrants and ballistics. He was so confident that you’d cleaned up after him, he didn’t feel the need to ditch his gun. Ballistics proved it was the murder weapon. He’ll be arraigned today. The prosecutor is asking for remand.”

“He knows I flipped on him.”

Becker dished the eggs on the plates. “Yeah, he does. You should know, threats were made. His lawyer tried to shut him up but he swore he would make you pay. It’s one of the reasons we feel confident we’ll get remand.”

“You know that won’t stop him from reaching out.”

“I know. That’s why you and Bobby will be staying here until the trial. You’ll be under twenty-four-hour protection. This place may look like any other cabin but it has motion sensors, touch pads at the front and back. We’ll have to show them to Bobby so he doesn’t accidentally trip them.”

“We’re an hour from anything and anyone. If the alarm goes off, who’s going to respond to it?”

“Our office is alerted and the locals are twenty minutes down the mountain.”

“Twenty minutes? We’ll be dead by then.”

“One of us will always be here.”

“You should give me a gun.”

“I can’t do that.”

“I may not have used it in my work but I am a good shot. I can protect Bobby.”

“Honestly, I have no doubt that you can and would, but if I give you a weapon my chief will have my shield. Now let’s have some breakfast while it’s still hot.”

“I want to check on Bobby first.” He walked down the hall knowing Becker was right, but it still didn’t make him happy. He didn’t like feeling dependent on anyone, especially the cops. He knew they needed him and Bobby. They had to keep the both of them safe until the trial. After that was anybody’s guess. He opened the door and saw Bobby staring out the window. “Good morning.”

“Hey.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay, I guess. Is there a lake out there?”

“I think so.”

“Could we go swimming?”

“I don’t know maybe. I think we should probably wait until you’re over the virus. Get dressed. Detective Becker made breakfast.” He walked back to the kitchen as Becker was buttering toast. “Can you ask Donnelly to get Bobby and me some swim trunks?”

“Excuse me?”

“He saw the lake out the window. He’s going to want to swim and I can’t let him go in alone.”

“It’s warm enough. I guess so.”

“And maybe some stuff kids like to do. You’d know about that stuff better than I would.”

Becker smiled. “Sure. Now eat before it gets cold.” Bobby walked into the kitchen. “Hey, how are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.”

“Good. Sit down. Have some breakfast.”

“You sound like Christine.”

“Who’s Christine?” asked John.

“She was my nanny. She used to take care of me.”

“Used to?” asked Becker.

“Dad got rid of her. He said she quit but I know he fired her. He didn’t have the money to pay her. He got a lot of phone calls from people wanting money. The cable got cut off.”

“There’s cable here,” said Becker.

“There is?”

“Yeah, it’s not bad either. If I’m not mistaken there’s a PlayStation and some games.”

“Seriously?” he grinned.

“Do you have a lot of kids up here?” asked John.

“No, just men who act like kids.”

John nodded at her and finally ate his eggs.



Bobby ate his eggs and sipped his juice. This cop lady seemed nice. But she had to be nice to him. He knew they wanted him to say what he saw in court. He was scared of that. He didn't want to see that man, Ryan, again. He nibbled on his toast and listened to John and the detective talking. She was telling him about what cable channels they got and how they might be able to swim in the lake. He knew they were making conversation so he wouldn't get scared. Too late.

John had told him he'd protect him. He had so far. He didn't know why, but he believed him. He figured John probably had beaten people up for Ryan but Bobby wasn't afraid of him. John looked up from his breakfast and smiled at him.

"Are you done with your breakfast?"

"Yeah."

"Good. You can help me with the dishes. Detective Becker did the cooking."

"Okay," he said picked up his plate.

"Thank the Detective for breakfast."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Bobby."

Bobby loaded the dishwasher as John started washing the pans. "Is he coming after us?"

John stopped washing and dried his hands. "I'm sorry. I should have told you this earlier. They arrested Michael Ryan and charged him for killing your dad. He figured that I turned him in and he's really mad. That's why they're going to keep us here until the trial. I don't want you to worry. There are alarms and keypads." John took him by the hand. "Come with me." John led him out to the living room where Detective Becker was just hanging up her phone. "Detective, I think it's time you show us the security."

"Of course." She pointed to the pad next to the front door. "Can you reach the pad?" Bobby reached his hand up and he could touch the top. "Good. This button here is



a panic button. If something happens and we need to call for help, you push that. It will alert the police. There is a code which one of us will put in when we're inside."

"John said the guy knows about us."

Becker shot John a look. "The kid deserves to know the truth," he said.

"John's right," she said. "He does know but we are going to protect you. There will be a detective with you at all times."

"You're staying?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes my partner will be here."

"I don't like him," said Bobby.

John snickered. "I told you the kid was smart."

"You don't have to worry about Chris. He's a good guy. We'll both take good care of you." She smiled and put her hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you go check out what's on TV."

"We still have dishes to finish," said John.

John turned the TV down. He'd found a cartoon station for Bobby but he'd fallen asleep on the couch. He walked out onto the porch and sat down next Decker. "Bobby fell asleep."

"That's good. He can use the rest. Chris should be here soon."

He looked out at the water. "What are the odds we're going to make it out of this alive?"

"Well, we've jumped the first hurdle. Ryan was held without bail."

"I guess that's good."

"We've got a really strong case. He might take a plea. Then we'd skip the trial."

"What about after that?"

“The FBI is ready to charge him on racketeering. You’re going to need to give them what they need to take him down. You do that and they’ll get you into witness protection.”

“What about Bobby?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. He’ll probably go into the system.”

“No. You can’t let the happen.”

“There are procedures.”

“You tell the FBI I’ll give them everything they need to bury Ryan, but Bobby comes with me.”

“You’re talking about a lifetime commitment. Are you ready to be a parent?”

“I promised him I’d keep him safe.”

“Forever?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“John?” Bobby was standing in the doorway.

“Hey, buddy. I’m sorry. Did we wake you?”

“Do you mean it? Do you want me to stay with you?”

John smiled and nodded. “I don’t know if they’ll let it happen, but yeah, I do.” He was surprised when Bobby threw his arms around his neck. John put his arms around him. “I guess this means you like the idea.”

“Yeah,” he smiled.

“Then I’ll do what I can to make it happen.”

Becker smiled at him. “I’ll see what I can do to make it work.”

Bobby let go of John and put his arms around her. “Thank you, Detective.”

She smiled and patted his back. “I think you can call me Sue.” She smiled at John. “Both of you.” Bobby was startled by a knock at the door. “That’s just Chris.” They walked

to the front door and unlocked it. Donnelly came in carrying several bags from a superstore. "There's some more in the trunk."

"I'll get it," said John. Donnelly gave him a curious look. "I'm not the enemy, Donnelly. Not anymore."

"It's okay, Chris," said Sue. John grabbed the bags from the trunk and brought them into the living room. "Do you have an update?" Donnelly looked at Bobby. "It's okay. He knows what's going on."

"Fine, but can I get a cup of coffee? It was a long drive."

Sue poured him a mug and they sat at the kitchen table. Chris registered surprise when Bobby slid into John's lap. He tightened his grip around Bobby's waist.

"Go on."

"You know the judge denied Ryan bail. Everyone from the Mayor on down are anxious to set a trial date. They've set it for six weeks."

"Six weeks?" said both John and Sue.

"That long?" asked John.

"Six weeks in the courts is warp speed," said Sue.

"What does that mean?" asked Bobby.

"That means you and I will be hanging out here for a while."

"What about school?"

"I think Detective Donnelly could get some books. I'll help you."

"You?" asked Donnelly.

John smiled. "Don't look so surprised. Ryan made sure I finished school."

The next few weeks went faster than John expected. He gave the FBI everything they needed to build their case against Ryan via FaceTime connections. Sue promised no one knew where they were save for her, Chris and their chief. What the FBI didn't understand was why he would only talk to them in the mornings. He'd reserved the afternoons for time with Bobby. First was school work. Chris had gotten some work books for him and they went through them together. He spent the hour before Bobby's bedtime reading Harry Potter to him. Sue said it was too advanced for Bobby but he was into it. After a week they were reading it together. Besides, he thought the books were cool too.

John closed the door to Bobby's bedroom and walked down the hall. Sue was on the phone, probably with her kids. He got himself a bottle of water from the kitchen and looked out the back door toward the lake. He'd promised to continue Bobby's swim lessons tomorrow. He was doing really well. The truth was John enjoyed it even more than Bobby did. Ever since he'd been taken in by Michael Ryan, he thought he knew what it meant to be an important man. The truth was he'd had no clue until now.

"Is he asleep?" asked Sue.

"Yeah, we only made it through one chapter before it was lights out. How about your kids. Are they okay with all this?"

"Honestly, they're getting a little tired of my not being there. My husband can only do so much."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I'm taking bad guys like Ryan off the streets to make them safer for my kids."

"Guys like me?"

"Honestly, a few weeks ago I would have said yes."

"Not now?"

"No. Not after the way I see you are with Bobby. He doesn't just trust you; you've earned that trust. Kids are good judges of character."

“I wasn’t.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she smiled. “He took you in as a street kid when you were twelve. He groomed you, trained you, but you never became him. Not really.”

John took a sip of water and smiled. “Why, Detective. I think you may have given me a compliment.”

Sue laughed. “God forbid.”

Bobby put on his swim trunks and grabbed a towel. John said he could have another swim lesson after he finished his last workbook. He'd given him the book to correct before he got changed. He was pretty sure he got everything right. Living at the cabin was a little weird. He couldn't go outside without Sue or Chris. They had the guns and they were always watching. But other than that, it wasn't that bad. John helped him with his schoolwork and read to him. He was teaching him how to throw a baseball. Most of all, Bobby loved the swim lessons. When they were in the water it felt good. It was almost like they were a normal family.

He was happy when he was with John. He made him stop playing video games too long when he was supposed to be doing schoolwork. But he never yelled. He just told him what to do. He didn't hit. When Bobby figured stuff out on his own, John smiled. He really liked when John read Harry Potter to him. He could imagine being a wizard and casting a spell that would protect them.

"Hey, buddy." John was standing in the bedroom doorway. "You missed a few of the questions."

Bobby set down his towel. "Okay."

"It's only a couple of them. We'll go over them later. The weather is too nice and I feel like a swim."

"Cool!"

They went outside to the dock with Sue following them. She was a nice lady. She said she was a mom, but it was kind of weird to picture a mom with a big gun like hers. She stood on the dock while John climbed down the ladder. It was only as deep as John's waist but it was up to Bobby's neck so John held on to him as he climbed down the ladder.

"Hold on to my hands and kick your feet." Bobby floated out from John and kicked his feet. "Good job. Okay, now the try moving your arms like I showed you." John held him around the waist and he moved arms and kicked his legs. "That's great, Bobby. Now let's try swimming to the ladder." He looked up at John. "It's okay, buddy. I've got your

back.” Bobby nodded and moved the few strokes until his hand hit the ladder. He grabbed hold of a rung and looked up.

“I did it!” he yelled.

“You sure did, buddy!” said John.

“Sue, did you see?”

“You were great Bobby!”

That’s when Bobby heard a noise. Sue looked surprised as she looked down at the red mark getting bigger on her shoulder. She pulled the gun from her holster and turned around. “John, Bobby, stay down!”

John grabbed Bobby and pushed him under the dock. “Hold on to the ladder and don’t move. Don’t come out!” They heard another noise and saw Sue fall down. John moved up the ladder.

“Don’t leave me!”

“I’ll come back. I promise.”

From where he was under the dock, he saw John run up the hill. He picked up Sue’s gun and he fired at a man running toward them. The man fired back. Bobby screamed when he saw John get hit. Blood was running down his leg. He fell to his knees as he looked at the man. John held the gun in his hands and fired. Bobby saw the man fall down. Then he saw John fall down.

John opened his eyes. At least he thought he did. Everything was white, the walls, the ceiling, the floor. He didn't hurt. He should hurt. He touched his chest. No wound.

"It's not there."

He turned and saw someone standing in the white. He was wearing black jeans and boots. The only thing his black t-shirt was missing was a cigarette box rolled up in his sleeve. His brown hair was slicked back. John looked closer and his heart raced. He was looking at a younger version of himself.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ezekiel. You can call me Zeke."

"Why do you look like me?"

"Because if I appeared to you in my true form, your brain couldn't handle it."

"Why are you dressed like James Dean?"

"Hey! Jimmy's a good dude."

"Is? Present tense?"

"My present, not yours."

"Who are you?"

"I'm your guardian angel."

John snorted a laugh. "Yeah, right."

"Guardian angel, that's me. First things first." Zeke walked up to him and slapped him upside the head.

"Hey! What was that for?"

"Do you know how hard it is being your guardian angel? Some assignments are a piece of cake. My buddy Gabriel is assigned to this sweet girl in Van Nuys. She works as a nurse in a hospice and brings home baked cookies to her coworkers. That's an easy



gig. You? Running all over New York City, using your fists for the benefit of an evil man. Watching over you has been a nightmare.”

“So why did you?”

Zeke shrugged. “It’s the job.”

John nodded. “Same here.” He looked around the white room. There was nothing but him and a black booted angel. “Am I dead?”

“Well...kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Nearly.”

“What do you mean? Am I dead or not?”

“You haven’t decided yet?”

“Excuse me? I thought that was an either or kind of thing.”

“Usually, it is.” Zeke waved his hand and the white room disappeared. They were standing in a hospital room. He was laying in a bed, with tubes and wires running from him to a bunch of machines. Sue Becker was leaning up against the wall, her arm in a sling. Sitting at John’s side was Bobby. He was holding John’s hand and crying. “You promised, John. You promised to protect me.”

“That’s exactly what he did, Bobby, He protected both of us,” said Sue.

“He promised he wouldn’t leave me.” Bobby leaned his head on John’s chest and wept.

John turned away. “Why are you making me look at this. If I’m going to die, let’s get on with it.”

“I told you, you have a choice to make.”

“What choice?”

“You are being given the choice to come with me or to stay here.”

“What happens if I go with you?”

“You go to heaven.”

“Why would I go to heaven? Even you said, I used my fists for the benefit of evil. Why would you let me into heaven?”

“Oh, that’s not my call. It’s the boss. He thinks you deserve the choice.”

“Why?”

Zeke nodded toward Bobby. “Because of the choice you made for him. You protected him. You turned your back on everything so he could be safe without asking for anything for yourself. Because of you, Bobby is going to grow up to be a good man, with a good life.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m an angel. We know stuff.”

“How do I know it? How do I know he’s going to be okay?”

“Faith.”

“That’s not easy for someone like me to believe.”

“I get that.”

“What happens if I go with you? What’s it like?”

Zeke smiled. “It’s everything you need it to be.”

“And if I stay?”

“You will feel all the pain and suffering of life. Now and in the future.”

“Geez,” he snickered. “You make it sound so appealing.”

“You’ll also know the joys. You will have a normal, human life.”

“Will I get to see Bobby? See how he grows up?”

“That’s up to you. You’ll have a long fight ahead of you. It won’t be easy.”

John watched Bobby whisper in his ear. He was far away, but he heard.

“I’ve made my choice.”

Zeke looked at him and smiled. “Yeah, I figured. Close your eyes. The next time you wake you won’t remember me.”

“Thanks, Zeke.” Zeke raised his hand but John stopped him. “One question.”

“Okay.”

“I was fourteen. There was this big kid, Jake. He was ready to knock the shit out of me for talking to his girlfriend. I was running away from him. I shouldn’t have been able to run faster than him but I did. He took a swing at me just as I slipped on the floor and fell. He missed me but connected with the brick wall. He broke his hand.” John smiled. “Was that you?”

Zeke smiled. “You’re welcome. Now close your eyes.”

John tried to move but the pain stopped him. "Shit," he whispered.

"John?"

"Bobby?"

"John, you're awake!" He tried to climb up on the bed.

"Easy, Bobby," said Sue.

"Sue?" John saw her smiling at him, "Are you okay?"

"I will be, thanks to you. Actually, thanks to you and Bobby."

"Bobby?"

That gave John a big smile. "I pressed the button."

"The what?"

"The button on the key pad. The bad guy wasn't moving and you and Sue were really hurt so I ran into the house and hit the button. That's when the police came."

John squeezed Bobby's hand. "I told them you're a smart kid."

"I was really scared."

"I'm sorry, buddy. You did it anyway. That's real courage."

"Yes, it is," said Sue.

Chris walked into the room. "Hey, look who's decided to join us."

"Chris, would you take Bobby to the cafeteria. I think he could use some lunch."

"Come on, kid. They have a half decent burger."

"I don't want to leave John."

"It's okay, buddy. I'm not going anywhere."

"You better not."

John managed a smile. "I promise." He waited until Bobby had left the room. "Fill me in."

"You've been out of it for a few days. You took the shooter down, but you didn't kill him. He is singing his lungs out and Ryan has been charged with multiple accounts of conspiracy and murder for hire. He's decided to take the offer of life without parole rather than risk the needle. His lawyer convinced him the courts would not look kindly on someone who hired a hit man to kill a child. We also found the leak. It was the one place everything goes through, accounts payable. There was a clerk with access requisitions, to our travel records. It was how he knew where we were. He could see the mileage."

"Let me guess, he owed Ryan money."

"Big time. Once he started feeding him information, he was on the hook forever."

"You know Ryan can still get to us from prison."

"We realize that. The Feds are going to put you and Bobby in witness protection."

"Together?"

"Together," she smiled.

"Will it be legal?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does he have any relatives? Someone who would come after him?"

"You mean someone who'd fight you for him? No, there's no one. Are you talking about a legal adoption?"

"I guess I am. Can you make that happen?"

"I'll see what I can do," she smiled.

"Now I just have to ask Bobby."

Six weeks later, John and Bobby were sitting in a federal courthouse. The room was locked and guarded by guys in suits. They weren't nearly as friendly as Sue but they were okay. John was holding Bobby's hand.

"Are you ready for all of this?"

"Yeah, we're getting new names and a new life." Bobby looked at him and smiled. "And you'll be my dad."

"That's right," he smiled. A door opened and a tall man in a judge's robe walked in with a familiar face.

"Sue!" yelled Bobby as he ran toward her for a hug.

"Hi, honey. It's good to see you again."

John stood and shook her hand. "I didn't think we'd see you again."

"I couldn't miss this. Besides, you'll need these." Sue handed him an envelope. He opened it up and found new birth certificates for both him and Bobby. He looked at Bobby's and smiled. "Did you pick this?"

"I thought he'd like it."

"What is it?" asked Bobby.

"Your new name." He showed it to Bobby.

"Cool!"

John looked at his and then back at Sue. "Really?"

"It felt right," she grinned. They sat down at the conference table. "After this is over the agents are going to take you to your new home."

"Will you come visit?" asked Bobby.

"No, honey. I can't know where you are."

"I explained that to you, buddy. New names and a new life mean we can't have contact with anyone else we knew."

"It'll just be you and me?"

"To start. But you'll go to school and you'll make friends. It's going to be good."

"If we can proceed?" asked the judge.

"Yes, your honor," said John.

"Okay, the minor child is to be legally adopted. Is that what you wish, young man?"

"Yes, sir." he smiled.

"And you sir, are ready to accept the responsibility of the minor as your legal child."

"Yes, sir," John smiled.

"Everything is in order. From here forth the minor child, Harry will be the legal son of Ezekiel Tyler."

Bobby threw his arms around John's neck. "You're my Dad!"

"That's right. You're now my son, Harry Tyler."

"Congratulations, Mr. Tyler," said the judge. John extended his hand.

"Thank you, your honor." He looked at his new son. "Harry, thank the judge."

"Thank you, judge."

"You're very welcome, young man."

Sue gave them both a hug. "As much as I hate to say it, it's time for the two of you to go." She hugged them both. "Thank you, for everything, Ezekiel," she smiled through watery eyes.

"Call me Zeke."

Somewhere in the mist, an angel laughed.