

AUGUST 7, 2006

The driver of the unmarked police car slowly weaves his way through the early evening traffic. Even with the occasional blast of the siren, the other drivers don't seem to care that he has somewhere important to be. Why should they? Everyone has somewhere they want to be and this traffic is preventing them from getting anywhere.

He's usually an easy-going guy, but at times like this, when people simply choose to ignore a siren, even the smallest things seem to grate on his nerves. Right now the small thing bothering Detective Jake Stalb is the fact the department's mechanics haven't yet gotten around to repairing the air conditioning in the car he's driving. For two weeks he's been after them to get the thing fixed. In a way, he only has himself to blame for being so hot. After all this time, he still hasn't opted to ditch the idea of wearing a suit during the summer. Department regulations only require more relaxed attire, no jacket or tie required. His partner is the sensible one, wearing lightweight, short sleeved shirts and dress pants; probably much cooler than he is in his suit. Some things never change. Since the day he was promoted from street beat to homicide, unless he was undercover, he has always worn a suit on duty and probably always will. He reaches up, loosens his tie, and unbuttons his shirt collar.

As he turns the car into the parking lot of the shopping plaza, he immediately knows the scene of the crime. The number of people gathered on the sidewalk and overflowing into the lot in front of the small, covered bus stop is, to him, as clear as a neon sign flashing the message "Someone died here". The crowd shifts slightly and he can see the yellow crime scene tape moving in the slight breeze. Jake steps from the car, readjusts his holster, and heads toward the scene. He shoulders his way through the crowd, his partner following in his wake.

They duck under the tape. Jake stands there a moment looking over the crime scene. A uniformed officer approaches them.

"Jake." Officer Goldman shakes Jake's hand.

"Abe. Good to see you." Jake hasn't seen his old street patrol partner since he made detective and Abe had transferred to the downtown precinct. "My partner," he introduces. "Cheryl McCoy."

They shake hands. "Nice to meet you, Detective."

Never to be one to waste time, Cheryl asks, "Were you the first one on the scene?"

"Actually, I was here when it happened."

Cheryl brightens. "Then we have a reliable witness."

"Not really. I stopped by to pick up a few things on the way home from work," Abe explains, nodding toward the grocery store. "When a woman ran into the store screaming about someone being shot, I called it in and then secured the scene."

Jake is once again scanning the scene while listening to Abe's report.

"Have you questioned any witnesses?"

"Yes ma'am. But you know how it is," he shrugs. "Most of them either didn't see anything or they're too afraid to get involved in a gang related crime."

Abe's comment gets Jake's full attention. "Gang related?"

"Yeah. A Mrs.," he flips open his notebook, "Perry said she heard a gunshot and then saw a light blue sedan speeding away from the scene."

"Did she get a plate number?" Cheryl is taking her own notes.

"Just the first two letters. We're trying to run a trace on it now."

"Call us if you get anything," Jake orders, which Abe acknowledges with a slight nod of his head. "Any ID on the victims?"

"Nothing on the kid but a few dollars and a baggie of pot. If the woman had anything on her, someone took advantage of the confusion before I got here and snagged it. All of the witnesses say they only heard one shot. My first thought is ricochet."

"Thanks Abe. See what you can do about clearing some of this crowd." He looks at Cheryl. "There's a lot of uniforms just standing around. If they're not helping, they're just in the way. Find out who knows what. If they don't know anything and aren't interviewing witnesses, get them back out on the street."

Jake walks over to the bus shelter and views the victims from various angles. Two bodies lie within just a couple of feet of each other, both have been shot. At this point, many other detectives may be ready to discount the eyewitness accounts of only one shot being fired; however, Jake has learned not to shove aside any testimony

until all of the evidence had been gathered. So what happened here? Before examining the bodies more closely, he slowly scans the area around the shelter and the bodies. He notices a shoe print in the small pool of blood near the woman and another one, going the opposite direction, only one stride away from the body. He moves forward in the direction the print indicates and sees two more faint tracks in the pedestrian crossing to the parking lot. The trail ends there, so there's no way Jake can know where the person went unless a witness comes forward.

"Manny," Jake calls to one of the patrolmen standing near the crime tape.

"Sir?"

"Ask around and find out if anyone saw someone near the victims after the shooting. If they did, get a description and find out where they went."

"Yes sir," Manny says as he turns to go about the job.

He turns to another uniformed patrolman, the crime scene photographer. "You finished photographing the bodies?"

"Yes sir. I also took photos of the track in the blood, the one there," he nods toward the heaviest of the prints leading away from the shelter, "and the two faint ones."

"Good job. Stay close. We may find something else for you to shoot."

"Yes sir." He crouches down in the shade behind the shelter to change the film in the camera.

Jake kneels beside the woman. Cheryl comes up, flips her notebook closed, and kneels on the other side. "All the eyewitness accounts point to a drive-by," she says. "If its gang related, she may have been an innocent bystander."

Jake nods in agreement. "We won't be sure until we get all the facts, but that would be my guess." He rolls the body, looking for an exit wound. None. He lays the body back flat. "The bullet can tell us what kind of gun was used," he says, pointing at the wound in her side. "Time will tell if that leads anywhere. There's not much blood here. She either died quickly or most of the bleeding was internal."

As Jake checks her for any identification that may have been overlooked, Cheryl moves to check the other body. The boy is lying on his side and she can easily see both the entrance and exit wounds. "Jake. This may explain why the witnesses heard only one shot."

He glances at the through and through wound in the boy's neck. "Possibly," he says. Jake stands and scans the bus stop shelter. "There's no broken glass so . . .," he stops. There, in the metal of the frame, is a small dent. Trying to avoid as much of the blood pool and spatter as possible, he steps forward to take a closer look. "Does this look new to you?"

Cheryl joins him and examines the damage. "The paints been chipped away and, except for the blood, there doesn't appear to be any grime built up. I'd say its fresh."

Jake agrees. "We'll have to wait to see what the M.E. has to say, but my guess is the boy was the target. The ragged entry wound in our female vic tells me it probably wasn't a direct shot and she was killed by the bullet after it ricocheted off this post."

Just then his cell phone rings. He pulls it from his pocket and flips it open. "Jake. One second." He moves the phone away from his mouth. To Cheryl, "Make sure they photograph this post and ask around to see if they found any casings."

He returns to the call. "Hello." He listens. "Sorry Rissa. I got sent out on a call." He listens to Clarissa's understanding voice tell him she'll keep supper warm. "Ok. I'll be home as soon as I can." He ends the call.

Cheryl is talking to Abe and Jake joins them. "No casings," she reports, "but with this crowd." She shrugs.

Jake knows the crowd has thinned since Abe and some of the others have sent the people on their way. But, he thinks, such is the nature of a homicide scene, some people just seem to be attracted to the blood like flies. He faces the crowd. "People," he announces loud enough to get the crowd's attention, "if you're not a witness you need to leave. If you saw what happened or saw anyone near the victims after the shooting, talk to one of the police officers before leaving." He's relieved to see most of them are getting the message and are going about their own business.

Jake turns back to Cheryl. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. Abe was just telling me that before the shooting started, the woman was seen standing at the bus stop holding the hand of a little girl. The witness said the girl was probably about five or six years old."

Jake is instantly concerned. He asks Abe, "Where's the girl now?"

"No one has seen her since the shooting."

“She may have run off when she heard the gunshots,” Cheryl suggests.

“Right,” Abe agrees. “We’ve put her description out over the radio and we have uniforms searching all of the stores and the cars in the lot.”

“I’ve also called the station and put them on alert in the event she climbed into an unlocked vehicle and the driver reports finding her,” adds Cheryl.

“Good,” says Jake. “Make sure to tell the lab to check the blood we collected for any not belonging to either of the vics. We want to find out if the girl has been injured. And notify the E.R. Let them know we’re looking for this girl and to report anyone who fits her description.” To Abe, “Did anyone recognize either of the victims or the little girl?”

Abe shakes his head. “Unless someone remembers something else, we may have to wait for a missing persons report.”

They spend the next couple of hours searching the scene for further evidence and re-interviewing witnesses. As the sun is setting and the streetlamps and store signs begin to come on, they stand there comparing notes. Nothing new has been uncovered - no casings, no bullets, no ID on the victims, and no witnesses who saw anything except the car speeding away from the scene. Jake knows if the bullet from the woman doesn’t match anything in the system, the car may be their only link to a suspect, which may be a long shot with them having only two letters with which to work.

They step out of the car into the well-lit lot behind headquarters. Cheryl looks over the roof of the car at Jake. “You going home?”

He leans on the roof, looks down at the ground, and blows out a tired breath. “I have a few things to check on first.” He looks at his watch, then up at Cheryl. “Clarissa’s keeping supper warm, so I won’t be long. Go on home.”

“Call me if you get anything.”

He nods. “See you tomorrow.”

She heads to her car, he to his office with a couple of stops planned along the way.

First stop, Missing Persons. “Any calls come in for a missing woman or child after five?” He hands the desk officer the descriptions he’d written down.

The officer reads the note. “None matching these. You want me to call you if I get something?”

“Call my cell number no matter what time.”

“Yes sir.”

Jake next makes his way down the back stairs, heading for the M.E.’s office. Dead bodies don’t bother him, but walking to the morgue always gives him the creeps. Even though the department had upgraded everything upstairs and the autopsy suite itself, they must have decided the stairs and hallways down here were fine the way they were. The narrow, dimly lit stairs and hallways always remind him of those horror movies he and his brother had watched as kids. Maybe that’s what bothers him the most down here - the memories of the brother he hasn’t seen for thirty years.

The light is still on in the autopsy room, so Jake knocks lightly, pushes the door open slightly, and sticks his head into the room. “Got anything for me?”

The medical examiner snaps off her gloves. “Just finished. Come on in Big J.”

He smiles at her use of the nickname. Although she’s being paid by the county and working for the department, she isn’t on the force. Most of the brass, along with a lot of the others of lower ranks, think they can order her around as if she’s a rookie patrolman. From the day she first started at H.Q., she let them know exactly who’s in charge of the Medical Examiner’s office and that’s Helen Depree. Her use of nicknames for everyone is her way of telling them she isn’t going to play their game, not on her court.

“I thought you didn’t allow badges in there,” he says with a boyish grin.

“Oh, come on Jake,” she laughs, “you know you’re one of the few people around this place who can barge in here any time without worrying about me throwing something at you.”

He knows she means what she says and he’s never bothered asking about it, until now. “And why’s that?”

“You I respect,” she says, pointing at him. “You do your job and do it well. That’s more than I can say for some of the others around this place. Besides, I like guys who’re interested in the details, not just the final word.” With a big smile on her face, she orders, “Now get in here before I change my mind!”

“Ok! Ok! Just had to make sure I was still on your list of good guys,” he says as he joins her next to the

table. "What did you find?"

"Both of your victims were killed by single gunshot wounds, but you know that." She uncovers the woman. "Her. The bullet entered her side here," she says, pointing at the wound in her right side. Tracing an imaginary line across the woman's chest, she explains, "It traveled across the interior chest cavity and nicked the heart before lodging in her rib."

She hands Jake a small vial. He takes a closer look. There's a small flake of blue paint, the same color as the bus stop, on the side of the bullet.

"It seems there wasn't much in the way of her blood at the scene."

"There wouldn't be. The tear in the heart would've been almost instantly fatal. I'd say she lived less than a minute or two, not any longer. Most of the bleeding was internal."

"Did you . . ."

Before he can finish the question, she interrupts, "They ran her prints, but there was nothing in the system." She seems to always be one step ahead of him.

"Any unusual marks or tattoos that may help us identify her?"

"Nothing." She hands him a file. "There's a photo in there, along with my report."

He thinks that if this was any other detective's case, she would've made them ask for the file. "Thanks. What about the boy?"

They move to the other table and Helen uncovers the body. "Pretty obvious." She looks up at Jake and is surprised to see the look on his face. He's staring at the boy, face pale, as if he's never seen a dead body before.

"Jake? What's wrong?"

He had looked at the kid's face at the crime scene and, not recognizing the boy, had moved on. Now that he has the chance to take a closer look, he's shocked.

"You know him?"

"No." Jake shakes his head. The color is starting to return to his face. "Sorry. He just reminds me of someone I knew growing up in Erie. I'm fine. You were saying?"

She doesn't push him for details. Back to business. "The bullet entered the neck, instantly severing the jugular, then exited near the spine. In the absence of another bullet and calculating the measured angle of the wounds, along with the crime scene photos . . . I'd say the boy was killed by the initial shot and the woman by the same bullet after it ricocheted off the metal frame of the bus stop."

He nods. "I thought her entry wound showed me that."

"Of course it did. You have a good eye for details."

"Did fingerprints turn up anything?" This time he beat her to the punch.

She hands him a folder. "Aaron Tate. Age fifteen. Shoplifting, pot possession, and under-aged drinking . . . that we know of."

"Are you stereotyping based on the fact we suspect this was a drive-by?"

"Take a look." She points at the folder.

He opens it and reads. "South Side Knights. Abe was right. Sounds like a gang related."

"Abe?"

"Abraham Goldman."

She passes judgment. "He's a good cop." Interpretation - in her book, he ranks higher than a lot of other people on the force.

Jake smiles. "I'll let you get back to . . . whatever you need to get back to. Thanks Helen," he says, holding up the paperwork. "You're great!"

As he's going through the door, Helen yells after him, "Tell that to your buddies will you."

Jake sits staring at the computer screen in the office he shares with Cheryl. There are two other gangs rivaling the Knights for territory. The list of gang members in front of him isn't overwhelming, but long enough to take weeks trying to get someone to talk doing individual interviews and these kids aren't going to say anything with their "home boys" sitting next to them. He'll have to leave that up to the gang unit. He hopes the partial plate will give them a lead; although his guess is, even if they trace the plate, the car is stolen. If the car turns up, they may be able to get some prints. Better still, as is often the case with drive-bys, someone might brag about the shooting and then, if he's lucky, whoever hears it will be brave enough to step forward and report it.

He leans his elbows on the desk and taps his pencil on the notepad in front of him. Once they ID the woman, they'll have to notify the next of kin - the part of the job he hates. That's one of the traits he lacks which Cheryl brings to the job. Not that she enjoys it any more than he does, but she does it well. His buddies had laughed at him when they were partnered. Most of them swore they'd quit before working with a "weak, emotional woman", as they put it, especially one who was a rookie detective. Jake had, at first, also had his doubts, but they quickly vanished. Cheryl is strong and capable when that's what the job requires, but when it comes to dealing with grief-ridden family members, she can control her own emotions, while still showing concern and compassion. Jake can relate the details, but, in his mind, he always comes off sounding like he doesn't care; which is never the case, he always cares about the families.

And then there's the missing girl. That part of the case is now in the hands of Missing Persons. He doesn't have kids of his own, but he does have nieces and nephews and he's always had a soft spot for little kids. Any case involving children . . . well, he can hand ones like this over to M.P., but he stays involved. He'll keep his eyes open for her and continue asking about her until she's found. If she's ever found.

Now beginning to feel exhausted, he leans over his arms and rubs his eyes with both hands.

"Clarissa's going to be mad," Lieutenant Adams says, standing in the frame of the open door.

Jake glances at his watch. Ten o'clock. "Oh man!"

"You're too addicted to your job to be married."

Jake is fairly sure the lieutenant meant that as a joke, but coming from Steve it makes him angry. "What about you? You're still here. Isn't Jill going to be mad?"

Steve shrugs. "She's probably gone to bed already."

Jake stands, gathers his paperwork, and starts toward his boss. "Well, Clarissa's waiting up for me so . . .," he pushes past Steve, "if you'll excuse me." As he starts down the hallway, he shouts back over his shoulder, "Turn off the light and lock the door when you're done in my office."

All Lieutenant Adams can do is stand there. He's angry, not realizing the shoe is now on the other foot and Jake is jerking on his chain. He thinks that one of these days Jake is going to push him too far and then Mrs. Stalb won't have to wait for her husband to get home late.

Jake opens the front door, takes one step into the house, and on the next step trips over the kitten Clarissa had brought home from work last week. His papers go flying onto the entry floor as he grabs for the doorframe to keep from falling. "Stupid cat," he mumbles as he scoops up the papers. The anger passes quickly; he knows he should've been paying attention.

Clarissa is standing in the door to the living room, the kitten now in her arms. "What did you say?"

"I called the cat stupid," he says, pretending to still be mad.

"Poor Bob," she says softly to the cat. The kitten is looking intently at Clarissa's face. "Is Daddy being mean to you?" The cat meows softly as if to say yes.

"I swear," he says as he drops his files and keys on the table by the living room door, "if you refer to me as that cat's daddy one more time . . ." Bob hisses in his direction, jumps from Clarissa's arms, and runs upstairs.

"You'll what?"

"File for divorce," he finishes. He reaches out, pulls her into him, and kisses her on the forehead.

"Yeah! Right!" She teases, "I'll divorce you first if you scratch Grandma's antique table with those keys." She's actually threatened several times, jokingly, to kill him for the same offense.

He blushes and looks down at her. "I don't know how you put up with me. Sorry I'm late."

She reaches up to pull his head down and gives him a long kiss. "I spend more time at the vet clinic than you do at the station."

He looks at her seriously. "That's true. Maybe you're the one addicted to their job."

"What?"

He shrugs. "Nothing. Just something the boss man said."

"Stop letting Steve bother you so much," she says while thinking the lieutenant should just mind his own business. "You look tired. I'm guessing you're going to pass on supper."

"Wrong. Tell me what and where and I'll get it. You go on to bed. I'll be up in a few."

As he sits eating lukewarm lasagna, he starts to get angry again at the lieutenant. But Rissa is right, he needs to stop letting the L.T. get on his nerves. The only thing that matters is he and Rissa are still happy after fifteen

years, sixteen in a couple of days. They're one of the few couples he knows that doesn't have arguments or suspect each other of cheating just because one or the other spouse frequently works late. And, in their case, both of them have often come home to an empty house. He's kept at work, like tonight, following leads in a case; she's kept late by animal surgery. There's also the mornings one or the other of them wakes up alone because the other has been called out in the middle of the night.

Why is what Steve said nagging him? As he rinses the dishes, the Tate kid's face resurfaces in his mind. Maybe that's it. No homicide case has ever really disturbed him before. But now? The boy's face is bringing back memories he thought he had safely buried long ago.

When he walks into the bedroom, he sees that Clarissa is asleep facing the edge of the bed with Bob - a stupid name for a cat, he thinks - curled up at her belly. As he sits down on his side of the bed to take off his shoes, Bob peeks over Clarissa's side and hisses at him again.

He whispers, "Oh shut up and go back to sleep." He's surprised when the kitten lies back down and curls into a ball.

Jake unclips his badge and holster to lay them on the bedside table. Instead of laying them down gently, he jumps when Bob lets out another hiss and they thud to the table top. "Stupid cat," he mumbles.

He's feeling a little more like himself after a long, hot shower. The feeling lasts only until the moment he trips over his own shoes, the ones he should've moved before going into the bathroom, and bangs his shin on the bed frame. He sits on the edge of the bed, mumbling under his breath and rubbing the sore spot, then finally swings his feet into the bed. He pulls the sheet up to his waist, turns his chest into Clarissa's back, and nuzzles his face into the soft spot at the nape of her neck.

Sleepily, she asks, "When did you become so clumsy?"

"Why do you do that?"

Acting as if she doesn't know what he's talking about, she asks, "Do what?"

"Pretend to be sleeping."

"So I can laugh at you. Do you realize the quieter you try to be, the more noise you make? Some detective!" She's teasing him again.

"So I'm the clumsiest guy you know. Is that why you have a new man in your life?"

As she quickly rolls over to look at him, Bob gets knocked onto the floor. He hisses at her and scurries out of the bedroom, heading for safer territory.

Even though the only light in the bedroom is from the alarm clock, Jake can see she's taking him seriously.

"What?" She pauses and searches his face, trying to see his emotions. "Are you serious?"

"I couldn't be more serious."

"Jake! I can't believe you'd even think . . ." She's on the verge of crying.

He hadn't intended for the joke to get out of hand and hurt her in any way. Before she can finish her sentence, he flashes his little boy grin. "The cat," he reminds her.

She gently slaps the side of his head and turns away from him. "I'm never talking to you again." She's trying to sound angry at him and failing miserably.

"Well . . . even so, I guess you'll have to settle for me."

"Why?"

"Because your other man just told you off and fled the scene."

They both laugh. She turns back to him and they embrace. Jake is feeling bad about hurting her feelings. "I'm sorry. That went too far. Sometimes I just get a case of the stupids."

"I'm as much to blame as you. I should've known you were joking."

"I should've never said something like that in the first place, not even as a joke. One of these days my mouth is going to get me in trouble, you'll leave, and . . .," his voice cracks slightly.

Clarissa can tell by the hitch in his voice he's being completely serious. "Why would I leave you? You're the only guy I've ever loved and that'll never change."

"I know you'd never leave me just to be with another man, but . . .," he pauses, trying to find the right words, "I know I can be a real jerk at times. I don't know how you put up with that. You deserve better."

Her voice is kind and gentle. "Better? What can be better than the fifteen years we've been married? I don't want anyone else and never will." She can tell by the look on his face he's about to say something else, but before he can, she tells him, "I know you'd never do anything to intentionally hurt me. There's nothing you can do or say that'll ever change the way I feel about you. I love everything about you and I couldn't live without

you.”

Jake thinks there’s no argument against what she said. He lays there looking into her eyes. “I’m so happy I met you. You’re the greatest.” As she begins to fall asleep, he kisses her tenderly. He wraps her in his arms and she snuggles in closer, falling asleep with her head on his chest. It takes him longer to fall asleep than he thought it would. Aaron Tate’s face is back in his mind and this time he just can’t shake it back out. When he finally starts to dream it’s . . .

1976

. . . summer. The bright July sun is beating down on northwestern Pennsylvania. Two bicycles speed up the main path of the park. The older boy peddles just fast enough to stay about five yards ahead of the younger of the two.

“Come on,” yells the one in the back, breathing hard and peddling as fast as he can. “Wait for me!”

“Can’t. Got places to go and people to see,” the other yells back.

They round the bend in the path and the ball field comes into view. The older boy slams on his brakes, skidding the bike around in a half circle, and waits for his slow-poke brother to catch up.

Stopping right beside him and with a pleading voice and a sad puppy dog look in his eyes, he begs, “Let me play today.”

“No way man!” He points at the playground. “Go play with your own friends.” He knows his brother will go and have a good time with the younger guys. He thinks little brothers are ok to hang out with at home on a rainy day. But in front of the guys? No way! Not cool!

He spins the bike around, peddles fast to the ball field, and skids the bike to a stop. He drops the bike on the ground and pulls his glove from the handle bars.

“It’s about time Jake,” Jimmy yells from the pitcher’s mound. The other boys shout their agreement. Jimmy keeps taunting, “Five more minutes and you’d have been booted as a captain.”

Jake yells back, “Yeah. By you and what army?” He jogs out to the mound.

“Very funny,” Jimmy says sarcastically and punches Jake in the arm. “Same teams as last time?”

“Of course. The series is tied 2-2. This is the championship.”

The boys play hard. By the middle of the fourth inning, they’re covered with sweat and, it seems, most of the dirt from the infield. The home team is up. Jake grabs a bat and walks out to the plate. He steps into the batter’s box, pulls his cap low over his eyes, and swings the bat slowly. As Mike gets ready to pitch, Jake bites down hard on his gum and gets ready. The ball flies in and Jake makes solid contact. He rounds the bases and slides into home a full ten seconds before the ball gets there. He stands up and is met by his teammates slapping his back.

Even with all of the shouting in his ears, he hears his brother calling his name and it sounds like he’s crying. He shoves past his buddies to where he can see the playground. There, sitting on a swing and looking scared, is Nathaniel. There’s a teenager standing next to the swing with his hands holding the chain. At fifteen, Doug Sylvester may be low on the totem pole of the high school bullies, but he’s the leader of his own group of thirteen and fourteen year olds. One of his favorite targets, for whatever reason, is eight year old Nathaniel Stalb. Even though Doug is alone today, Jake knows he’s no match for him. But, he thinks, enough is enough, he isn’t going to let anyone hurt his brother. He runs toward the playground as fast as he can.

“Hey Jake,” Tommy yells. “The game isn’t over!”

Pete points. “Look!” They all do. They know Doug and his reputation and they aren’t about to follow Jake. They may be his buddies, but they also know if they get involved in a one on one fight, no matter how unequal the match, the high school kids will retaliate.

Chip shakes his head slowly. “Man! Jake’s brave, but he’s gonna get his butt kicked.”

Jake comes to a stop, out of breath and also out of reach of Doug’s long arms. He looks around for an adult to help him. None are there.

“Well looky here,” Doug says, “little Jakey to the rescue. What you gonna do Jakey?”

“Stop calling me Jakey,” he says angrily, “and leave Nate alone.”

“Or you’ll what? Call your mommy?”

“I’ll . . .,” he stops. He’ll what? Jake is five foot nothing and Doug is half a foot taller and outweighs him by

at least fifteen pounds. "I'm not going to fight you," he says, looking Doug right in the eyes.

"That's right! You won't, because you're a Jesus loving, goody-two-shoes, sissy momma's boy."

Jake knows Doug is trying to tease him enough to push him into doing something stupid, like actually taking a swing at him. He doesn't consider himself a sissy. He may walk away from fights, but only because it's what he's been taught. Without looking away from Doug, he tells Nathaniel, "Come on Nate, we're going home."

As Nathaniel starts to get off the swing, Doug tells him, "You're not goin' anywhere." He gives Nathaniel a shove in the chest. The back of Nathaniel's knees catch on the swing and he falls over backwards. He lands hard, his head hitting the ground first. He starts to cry.

That's too much for Jake. He ducks his head and charges Doug, hitting him low like he'd tackle a running back when he's playing football. When his shoulder makes contact with Doug's stomach, taking him by surprise, they fall to the ground. Jake lands on top, but Doug has pulled his knee up to protect himself. The force of that big knee in his chest forces all of the air out of Jake's lungs.

Doug isn't even dazed. He rolls over onto Jake, pushes himself up with one hand, and lands a punch to Jake's eye with the other. He draws back his arm, ready for another punch. He stops when he hears someone behind him yell.

"Hey! There's a cop!"

Doug leans down so his nose is almost touching Jake's. "This isn't over. Watch your backs," he says, pointing at Jake and then at Nathaniel, then he's up and running.

As Jake sits up, he rubs his eye gently. Nathaniel walks over and sits down beside him, wiping his own eyes with his dirty hands. Jake puts his arm over Nathaniel's shoulders. Finally feeling he can breathe again, and more worried about Nate than about himself, he asks, "You ok?"

His little brother snuffles and looks up at him. "Yeah. Bet your eye hurts."

"Sure does." He looks around the park. "Where's the cop?"

Now that it's safe, Jimmy walks up and sits down next to Jake. "What cop?"

Nate tells Jimmy, "I just said it cause I thought Doug would stop hitting Jake if there was a cop."

Like any other ten year olds, Jake and Jimmy sit there for another hour devising a story about how Jake ended up with a black eye without being in a fight. They settle for the one Jimmy comes up with - Jake slid head first into Jimmy's knee during the game. Once they're positive Nathaniel can repeat the story without any mistakes, they head for home. Jake thinks next time Nate gets to play ball, just so he can keep an eye on him.

The next time the guys get together for a game, Nathaniel has his ball glove. He's worried Jake will change his mind; however, when they drop their bikes behind the dugout and grab their gloves, Jake throws his arm over Nathaniel's shoulders and, together, they walk out to the mound.

Jimmy looks shocked. "Come on Jake! You're joking right?" He points at Nathaniel.

Jake knows Jimmy is referring to the fact that Nathaniel is apparently there to play. He looks Jimmy in the eyes and says firmly, "He's playing. And he's on my team."

When the other guys start groaning, Jake glares at each one of them and that settles the matter. Ever since he had stood up to Doug, Jake's buddies respected him a little more than before. He never purposely uses that new found respect to intimidate his friends; he refuses to become a bully like Doug. The only time he won't back down or compromise is when it comes to his little brother. Nate is now a part of the group, whether the other guys like it or not.

The game goes on as usual; the only difference being that Nathaniel is playing left field and batting right before Jake. Nate's batting is great, but what really impresses Jake is the diving catch he makes for the final out. He didn't know the little booger was so good.

When he runs in from the outfield, all of the guys slap Nathaniel on the back. He stands there with a big smile on his face, looking up at Jake for approval. Jake smiles back and gives him a high five.

On the way home, Jake stops outside of the small bookstore a few blocks from the house. Nathaniel stops beside him.

"What you doin' Jake?"

"You want that Batman comic don't you?"

"Sure do," Nathaniel says excitedly. "But I didn't bring my allowance money."

"No problem. You can owe me."

“Cool!”

They go in and wave at Mr. Smith on the way to the rack of comics. Nathaniel quickly snatches the newest Batman comic. He stands there, hoping Jake hurries so he can go home and read, but he sees Jake is in no hurry.

Jake tries to slow him down. “Pick another one.”

Nathaniel looks up at him sadly. “But I only have money for one.”

“You can owe me for Batman, but the other one’s on me.” Then he adds, “For that great catch you made.”

“Thanks Jake!”

Nathaniel reaches out and grabs a Scooby Doo comic. “Ok, I’m ready.”

“Well I’m not. Just go wait up front. And don’t go outside.”

Except for a few names shouted from a distance, Doug hasn’t bothered them in weeks, but Jake doesn’t want to take any chances. Finally, Jake picks one last book and starts toward the counter. No Nate. As he reaches the counter, he sees Nate standing out by their bikes. He tosses his comics on top of Nathaniel’s. “Back in a sec, Mr. Smith.”

“Ok.”

He steps through the door, intending to yell at Nathaniel for going outside. “You little . . .,” his scolding stops abruptly as two loud pops make him jump.

“Jakey!”

Jake looks in the direction of the voice and sees Doug’s face leaning from the open window of a car, now halfway down the block. He also sees a gun in the hand on the window frame just below Doug’s smiling face.

A question flashes through Jake’s mind. “Where’s Nate?” He spins around and at first doesn’t see him. Then he looks at something lying on the sidewalk. It only takes a matter of seconds for the truth to hit home. Lying there in a pool of blood, not moving, is his little brother.

In a long, drawn-out scream, he yells his brother’s name. “Nate!”