Angelo and Amadeo

by Snarksnboojums

Summary

Love doesn't always begin with champagne and flowers.

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Thank you,

Snarks

Notes

Angelo and Amadeo, among other original characters, attend a public high school in Georgia in the 1960s.

There is some spanking of minors in this story. You are, of course, welcome to read the story and skip over those parts, or if it really bothers you please feel free to go on to the next authors story. There are many fantastic authors out there whom you might enjoy. (I know I do!)
Special thanks to my good friends, Sandycastle and Sparky, and to my friend PJ. You know what you did.
Also a thank you to tailor31415 for pointing some things out for me.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Amadeo's head snapped up as he heard the screech of tires and the blaring of a horn.

"Idiot! Watch where the hell you're going!" The driver of the Dodge Charger yelled.

The 'idiot' in question smiled apologetically and answered with a wave and a "Sorry!" and continued on his way, opening the book he'd been reading, finding his place, and continuing his journey to wherever he was headed.

"Friggin' spaz," Milo said, disgustedly.

"What?" Amadeo asked, surprised at his friend's acid tone.

"Nothin'. That guy just irritates me."

"I don't understand. Who is he?"

"Just the local retard. He's always walking around town with his nose buried in a book. He's in three of my classes and I swear I don't know why the school lets people like that in."

"He's in our school? I've never seen him before," Amadeo said, watching the boy's progress. He had to admit he was impressed when the boy effortlessly swerved around a lamp post without ever looking up from his book. Then he disappeared around a corner and was lost to sight. "What do you mean, people like him?"
"He transferred in last September. He's not someone you'd notice unless you're stuck in a class with him. When he's not in class he's in some corner, reading. Dumb as a load of bricks. I thought there were special schools for people like that but for some reason he's allowed in ours." Milo said disgustedly.

Amadeo shook his head, confused. "I don't understand. Did he say or do something to you to offend you?"

"Huh? No! Like I'd ever be caught dead talking to someone like that?"

"Then how can you chop the guy if you've never even said hi to him?" Amadeo asked angrily.

"You takin' his side?" Milo retorted.

"Yeah, I am! How can you hate someone when you don't even take the time to get to know them? And what makes you think there's something wrong with him if you never spoke to him? You can't judge the depth of a well by the handle of the pump."

"Man, he's a ditz! You don't have to talk to him in person, you only have to listen to him in class. I mean, take Webb's science class. Webb now, he went over the whole chapter, dig? Eukaryotes versus prokaryotes. Simple, right? Then Webb asked if there's any questions and the dumbbell there raised his hand and asked him to explain it all over again!" Milo pulled a face and said in an exaggeratedly thick voice, 'Mr. Webb? Mr. Webb? Kin ya go over it ag'in pleeeease, ah'm a spaz an' ah cain't even figure out two plus two 'thout countin' on mah fingers!' He laughed at his own wit.

"You're saying something is wrong with him because he asked questions in class?" Amadeo asked, trying to wrap his brain around his friend's logic.

"All he did was hold up the rest of the class, forcing us to sit there and listen to stuff everyone but him gets. He did it every freaking day! I mean, come on, 'Deo, he reads enough, all he had t' do was open his damned book and it's all right there. But he don't ask questions in class anymore." Milo said with a smirk.

Amadeo shook his head, not understanding. Seeing the look on his friend's face, Milo explained. "A bunch of us talked to him one day after school, and convinced him to keep his hand down and his mouth shut."
"Milo, we've been friends forever, and I never thought I'd say this, but I've never been as hacked off at you as I am now." Amadeo's mother hated it when he and his friends talked like that, saying that they'd been watching too many of those 'smut movies from up north.'

"What's your bag, man?!" Milo scowled, his hands clenched into fists. Amadeo was on the track and wrestling teams, but Milo was a husky, beef fed, Georgia farm boy and he figured he could give 'Deo a run for his money if he had to.

"What if your little brother was like that guy," Amadeo said, nodding his head in the direction that the boy had gone. "Would you want people threatening him?"

"Anybody messes with my brother they got me to deal with," Milo growled. Unlike most older brothers, Milo thought the sun rose and set on his ten-year-old brother.

"If there were something wrong with your brother would you want people calling him names and refusing to talk to him? I mean, come on, man, you're hating the guy for something he most likely has no control over. That's just... irrational."

Milo had the grace to look embarrassed. He knew he'd been treating the kid worse than bad, but would rather cut out his own tongue than admit it aloud. "Yeah, whatever," Milo said dismissively. "I'm cuttin' out. Later."

Amadeo watched his longtime friend disappear around the corner and then looked back toward where the boy had gone. He wondered where the kid lived, and he made a promise to himself to find out more about him the next day at school. He took a breath and let it out slowly. He'd find out more about the kid, as soon as he found out what his name was, he amended. That night he had a hard time sleeping, alternately angered by his friend's callous words, and haunted by the image of large brown eyes and an apologetic smile.
Early the next morning Amadeo walked into the main office and glanced around. Seeing no one except Sharon, the Student Assistant, he squared his shoulders and approached her, put on his best smile and leaned on the counter. "Heya, Sharon, can we rap?"

"Heya 'Deo. Lay it on me." She laid down the stack of papers she'd been collating, flipped her long, straight brown hair back over her shoulders, leaned both elbows on the counter and cupped her chin in her hands.

"I'm looking for a particular student. If I describe him do you think you might recognize him?"

Sharon shrugged. "You can try, but... I'm not sure I'm supposed to give out any information about students to anyone." She said hesitantly. "Why're you lookin' for this cat?"

Amadeo smiled again. "Nothing bad, I promise. I just saw him yesterday and wanted to learn more about him. From what I heard he could use a friend."

Sharon laughed. "Ok, that narrows it down to just about every dude in the school. Wanna give me a little more info?"

Amadeo thought back to the day before and pictured the boy in his mind. "About 5'5"? Dark brown hair almost down around his shoulders. Bangs..." Heart shaped face, big brown eyes, looks like an angel, he added in his head.

"Hmmm," Sharon said, frowning. "That's a great description of at least two hundred guys in this school. Can you think of anything that would make him stand out from the other hundred and ninety-nine?"
Amadeo cleared his throat and tried not to blush. ""Milo says he's really quiet, bit of a loner, reads a lot. He might be a little slow?"

Sharon stood up and clicked her fingers. "Oh yeah! I don't know his name off hand but I know who you're talkin' about now. He's not a discipline case so he never comes in here. Doesn't really say much? Doesn't bother anybody. Keeps to himself. Reminds me a little of my cousin Marty. But uh, like I said, I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to give out information about students to anyone. I mean, I could get bumped, and that'll go on my transcript... I dunno, 'Deo." she said uncertainly. If it was the same kid she was thinking about, he was the target of a lot of pranks and cruel remarks, and she didn't want to cause him any more grief than he already endured on a daily basis.

"Hey, I don't want to get you into any trouble." He said reassuringly, seeing just a hint of suspicion in her hazel eyes. "I just want to get to know him and maybe be his friend, if he needs one. Scouts honor." He said, even though he'd never joined the scouts. "If you can tell me something about him, great, if not, I'll just keep an eye out for him."

He had just turned to leave when Sharon came to a decision.

"Hang on, Dae." She said, her young brow furrowed.

She went into the back office and was gone for about fifteen minutes. When she came back out she had a tentative smile on her face. "Well, I won't give you any detailed information on him, but it looks like the two of you have lunch at the same time... I mean, it wouldn't be so weird for you to just kind of run into him there. You know?"

"Cool," Amadeo said, smiling. "Thanks, Share." Once again he turned to leave but before he got more than a few steps she called to him.

"'Dae?" She had known him since first grade and had never known him to be a bully like so many of the other jocks and popular kids, and if anyone needed a friend and a champion it was that poor kid. She wanted so badly to trust Amadeo and give the other boy the chance he deserved, but...

He turned to face her. He couldn't help but to notice her worried expression. Walking the short distance back to the counter he took her hands in his and looked her in the eye. "I promise you, Share. I just want to get to know him, and maybe be a friend to him, like I said. I swear I won't hurt him in any way."
She searched his face for a moment before her eyes locked back onto his. He held her gaze steadily and gently squeezed her hands. She nodded once and released his hands before returning to her forgotten paperwork. "By the way," she said so softly he almost missed it, "His name is Angelo."

**Slang***************
can we rap: can we talk
lay it on me: speak, say your piece
cat: guy
dude: geek (yeah, really)
bumped: fired
Amadeo was normally a very good student. Respectful, attentive, hardworking, and was always prepared for class. This day, however, he distractedly answered roll call in his first class by responding to his name by saying 'Yeah?' instead of 'Present.', as was required, earning him a stern glare and a minor scolding which caused him to blush uncharacteristically, as he had never been on the receiving end of either before. He apologized, after which Mr. Mason pointedly called Amadeo's name again to which the boy answered, appropriately, "Present, sir.", after which, mollified, the teacher continued with the roll call as usual.

In his British Literature class he was so lost in thought that when the teacher asked him a question he not only had no idea what the question had been but he had no clue what was being discussed, earning him a short scolding, after which he'd been sent to stand in the hallway for the rest of the period, causing the rest of the class to burst into laughter until the teacher called them back to order.

After class, Mr. Price had confronted him in the hallway and expanded on the scolding. Amadeo had apologized profusely and promised to do better the next day. He sounded so sincere and was normally such a good student that the teacher finally let him go with a warning.

His third class was a disaster that resulted with him being sent to the principal's office with the dreaded blue slip, sealed with tape so that if Amadeo had tried to read what it said before he delivered it to the principal, the paper would tear and he would find himself in even more trouble. Unfortunately, he had no need to peek, he knew exactly what had been written, and he licked his lips nervously. It hadn't been a stellar morning for him so far and he wondered if this infraction would be the one that earned him a trip to the DOD's office for the first time since he'd begun attending school.

After a twenty minute wait that felt more like several hours, the school secretary, Mrs. Jennings finally announced, "Mr. Barnes will see you now, 'Dae."

He thanked her, stood up and went through the swinging wooden gate that separated the waiting area from the main office.

Mrs. Jennings turned her head to watch his passage, peering at him through her shiny blue cat eye frames, studded with light blue rhinestones. She'd known Amadeo and his family since the boy had been six years old and had always found him to be polite and well mannered. To see him walking into the principal's office with the blue slip had been a surprise which had turned to shock as she'd read what Mr. Fishlock had written. As policy dictated, she would contact his parents as soon as Mr. Barnes had dealt with the bad behavior and written his report.
Amadeo stood stiffly before the principal's desk with his hands clasped behind his back and waited for the man to acknowledge him. For his part, Mr. Barnes continued to scribble away at whatever he was working on for another few moments before glancing up and reacting as though he were surprised to find that Amadeo had been standing there.

He gave Amadeo an avuncular smile, displaying ill-fitting store bought teeth, and invited him to sit down.

"So, Mr. Rossi, what brings you here today?"

Amadeo had heard about this tactic from other kids who'd been sent to the office. He guessed he understood it, since his father did the same thing, making the miscreant confess his misdeeds, but it still didn't stop him from mentally yelling at Mr. Barnes to reread the damned slip and not waste their time with head games. But he would no sooner do that to the principal than he would his own father. He'd been raised better than that.

"I was disrespectful to Mr. Fishlock, sir."

"How did you manage that, Mr. Rossi?"

"I called him Fishface, sir." Amadeo had done and said quite a bit more but decided to take one thing at a time.

Mr. Barnes responded with an expression that tried hard to be stern but failed as the corners of his mouth curled up in amusement. He was aware of the student's nickname for the man and had to admit it fit, with the man's back sloping head, sharp, narrow nose and rather frightening, overly large, empty eyes.

"And why would you do such a thing, Mr. Rossi? I've read your files and from what I can see that was very unlike your normal behavior. Your teachers have, in the past, had only glowing reports about you. I'm sure you're aware that Mr. Fishlock has requested that you be sent to Mr. Cobrane's office?"

"Yes sir," Amadeo replied, trying not to look as nervous as he felt. Being sent to the DOD's office was tantamount to a trip to the executioner, to hear the stories from the kids who had been there.

"So what happened today, Mr. Rossi, to make you do such a naughty thing?"

Amadeo flushed at the word 'naughty'. He resented being spoken to as though he were five years old instead of sixteen.

"I am sorry, sir, for losing my temper and resorting to name-calling," Amadeo said carefully.

"Yes, I'm sure you are, Mr. Rossi. I've seen what Mr. Fishlock had to say about the incident, now I'd like to hear your side of the story." Mr. Barnes replied. The smile left his face and he suddenly became all business as he clasped his hands on top of his blotter and focused his pale blue gaze on Amadeo.

Amadeo was reluctant to say anything. After all, he was just a student, and whoever believed students when they were in trouble. Mr. Barnes asking for his side of the story was surely just a formality, and anything he said would go in one ear and out the other. Then, of course, he was sure that Mr. Barnes would report anything he said to Fishlock, and the sh-stuff would really hit the fan since Fishface would never admit to having said or done anything wrong.

Seeing his reticence, Mr. Barnes said, "Mr. Rossi, I assure you that whatever you say in this office
will stay between you and I. I don't want you to be afraid to talk to me. All I ask is that you be honest with me. I can't help you if you aren't truthful."

When the boy remained silent, Barnes played his ace in the hole. "Mr. Rossi, have you ever heard the phrase 'Silence implies consent.'? If you don't speak up then I'll have no choice but to accept Mr. Fishlock's version of the event."

Amadeo wasn't a fink. If he saw another student doing something they shouldn't he would go straight up to them and make them stop. But it was different with a teacher. On the other hand, Fishlock couldn't be allowed to continue the way he had been and if no one said anything it would never stop. He took a deep breath and began.

"He was all over one of the students, sir. The kid was having a hard time understanding differentiation formulas..."

"What is 'the kid's' name, Mr. Rossi?"

"Please sir, I don't want to give the guy's name and get him in trouble," Amadeo said.

"I assure you that whoever this boy is his name will remain confidential."

"Please, Mr. Barnes..."

"Tell me the boy's name, Mr. Rossi," Barnes said, firmly. "Otherwise I'll have to assume that you're lying."

Amadeo knew that Sully wouldn't speak up for himself. No one would speak up against a teacher, it wouldn't end well.


"Very well, Mr. Rossi. Then what happened?"

"Well, Fishlock..."

"Mr. Fishlock, Mr. Rossi." Barnes corrected.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Fishlock went over them again, but he explained it exactly the same the second time as he did the first time which didn't make it any clearer. I could tell that Sully was confused but Mr. Fishlock ignored his raised hand and continued with his lecture, then when he finished he went right onto improper integrals without even asking if he got it that time or not."

"Then when Fishfa... I mean, Fishlock..."

"Mister Fishlock, Amadeo," Barnes corrected sternly a second time.

"Sorry, sir. When Mr. Fishlock asked if there were any questions, Sully raised his hand and asked if he could please go over differentiation formulas one more time."

"Well, Mr. Fishlock," Amadeo forced himself to refer to the old fart properly, "told Sully that we were done with those and he wasn't going to keep repeating himself for someone so dense. He called Sully an idiot and an imbecile. He suggested that Sully's head was made of 'good old Georgian marble' and said that maybe the teachers would have to come to school armed with hammers and chisels in order to crack his skull enough to allow the information to sink in more easily. Mr. Fishlock said that Calculus was so easy that his three-year-old niece understood it, and
that he, Sully, should be ashamed to admit that he couldn't understand something that was as easy as ABC for a three-year-old."

"I find that hard to believe, Mr. Rossi. That sort of behavior is not tolerated by this school." Mr. Barnes said firmly.

Amadeo sighed. "That's not all he said, sir, but he did say it. If the other kids in the class weren't so intimidated by him they'd probably tell you the same thing I did. The problem is that everyone is so worried that Fishlock..."

"MR. Fishlock, Amadeo." Mr. Barnes scolded again.

"Yes sir, sorry sir. As I was saying, the students are so afraid that Mr. Fishlock will flunk them if they tell on him that they're afraid to speak up. I mean, one guy last year in F... Mr. Fishlock's Trig class got so tired of the abuse that he said something. Fishlock failed him on the final and the guy had to repeat the class the next semester, even though he'd been getting A's and B's up till then."

"That's impossible, Mr. Rossi," Barnes stated firmly. "All of the grades are recorded and kept in the office under lock and key. One bad grade would not have caused someone who had been earning A's and B's to fail a class. In order to do that, Mr. Fishlock would have had to go into the files and change all of this boy's grades manually. Are you insinuating that he did anything of the sort?"

Amadeo shrugged. "I can't say what he did or didn't do, sir. But I do know for a fact that this boy..."

"What was this boy's name, Mr. Rossi?" Barnes demanded.

"I'd really rather not..."

"Tell me his name, Mr. Rossi, or I'll have to assume that you're making this story up out of whole cloth and I'll expel you right now." Amadeo was getting a little tired of Barnes' tactics but he knew he really had no other choice. It was tell or be expelled. He could only pray that Barnes was a man of his word and that everything he said would remain between the two of them.

"Adam, sir. Adam Jordan." Amadeo admitted, reluctantly. "Anyway, I sat next to him in class, and we would always compare test and homework grades. He never had a grade lower than a B+ on anything, and he only had one or two that I can remember. He was never absent or late for class, he always did his homework and participated in class, so I know he should have gotten full credit for that as well."

"This is a serious accusation, young man. If Mr. Fishlock did indeed do what you say, he will be fired. You, on the other hand, will be expelled if it's discovered that what you have told me is false. I'll give you this opportunity to change your story," He steepled his fingers and looked at Amadeo expectantly.

Amadeo held the older man's gaze steadily. "No, sir. I don't wish to retract anything that I said. I can't speak for anyone else sir, but if you can guarantee that there won't be any retribution from Mr. Fishlock, other students might be willing to step up and tell you what's been going on."

"And if none of the other students will speak up?"

"Then it's my word against his, I suppose, and you'll probably end up expelling me, sir," Amadeo
replied levelly.

Mr. Barnes opened a folder and glanced at its contents then at the clock above Amadeo's head. "I see that you've missed your PE class and that you have lunch next." He rummaged in a drawer, took out a hall pass and wrote quickly. "Take this and head to the cafeteria. By the way, I expect you to write out a formal apology to Mr. Fishlock for your disrespect, and I'll expect you to verbally apologize as well, in front of the class, the same way as you insulted him."

"But, sir!" Amadeo began to protest.

"Do as you're told, Mr. Rossi or I may change my mind about sending you to Mr. Cobrane. You're dismissed," he said, handing the pass to the obviously angry young man.

The older man's expression was unyielding and Amadeo backed down. His father was a very down to earth man and had always told his children to respect their elders, even if said elder was an 'idjit'.

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Then he turned on his heel and left the office.

Mr. Barnes followed the boy out and watched as he exited the waiting area. Then he turned to Mrs. Jennings and said in a low voice, “Margaret, I want you to find Adam Jordan and Sean Sullivan's schedules. Ask them to report to my office during their next free periods. Then make a list of students who have taken Mr. Fishlock’s classes, narrow it down to the last... two years should do it. Give that to me as soon as possible, please." He turned to go back into his office when he clicked his fingers and turned back toward his secretary. "By the way, hold off on calling Mr. Rossi's parents until further notice. Thank you." With that, he walked back into his office and shut the door.

Margaret Jennings arched her penciled eyebrows, adjusted her glasses and proceeded to do as she'd been bid. Something was going on and it sounded like it was going to be good. She smiled. She was a patient woman and knew she'd hear all in good time.
Milo caught up to Amadeo in the hallway near the lockers and nudged him with his shoulder. Amadeo arched his eyebrows and looked expectantly at his friend.

"Yeah, look, sorry about yesterday. OK? I thought about what you said and you're right. I'll lay off," he said.

"Why the change of heart?" Amadeo asked.

Milo looked sheepish, leaned against the bank of lockers and scuffed the worn grey linoleum floor with the toe of his sneaker. "It's like you said, you know? What if it was Mikey that was, you know, and how would I feel if people treated him like that. So... sorry, you know?"

Amadeo smiled. "Yeah, I know. Don't sweat it."

"Cool. See you in a few at lunch then?"

"Well, if you want to join me, I was going to look for that kid and try to get to know him. Interested?"

"Don't push it, dude." Milo half-joked.

"Come on, it'll be your good deed for the day." Amadeo encouraged.

"Ever hear the saying, 'No good deed goes unpunished.'?"

"Ever hear the saying I'm gonna kick your ass from here to Texas if you don't.'?"

"All right! All right! Don't flip your wig!" Milo laughed. "But how about if we tag team? You know, approach him in turns. I think if everyone suddenly starts talking to the kid out of the blue all at once he's likely to freak out."

"The two of us are hardly 'everyone' but I see your point. OK then, I'll go talk to him at lunch, and if things look comfortable you join us, got it?"

"Gotcha Mad Man."

Amadeo gave his friend a pained look and said: "Don't call me that." The nickname was a combination of the middle of his name and the fact that he became very intense while wrestling, but to 'Deo it sounded like he belonged in an asylum somewhere.

"Sorry... Mad Man. It won't happen again." Milo chuckled.
"Get outta here or I'm gonna pound you one." Amadeo threatened, playfully punching Milo on the shoulder.

Amadeo walked casually into the cafeteria, taking his time so that he could scan the room and find the object of his interest. The city had built this new school four years ago, which included a full cafeteria, something the older schools lacked. As a result, the room was pretty well packed since many of the kids who would normally have walked home for lunch 'brown bagged' it, and stayed to eat and talk with their friends.

"Move it, dude!" came an irate voice from behind him. "You're holding up the line!"

"Sorry about that," he replied with a charming smile. He walked up to the stack of trays, took one and some silverware and headed toward the lunch ladies to inspect the day's endeavors. Stew. At least, it looked like stew. Stuff that was called Italian bread but was really the stale white bread left over from the day before, and pats of rock hard butter. Green beans. The usual peanut butter and jelly or bologna sandwiches. Fruit that looked as though it had seen better days. Nothing that couldn't be made to taste a lot better by adding a half pound or so of salt and pepper, he thought. It was against the rules but he snatched up several more pats of butter and slid down the line to the next server who offered a bowl of wilted greens covered with croutons which were last week's bread sacrifice.

The last woman smiled as she placed a pint of milk and an only slightly wizened apple on his tray. He smiled back, paid his thirty cents, and turned to scan the room again, paying special attention to the corners.

There, in a far corner, at a table by himself, sat the boy... Angelo, head bowed over a book so that his bangs obliterated any sign of his eyes. Without looking up from his book, he picked up half of his sandwich, took a bite and laid it back down. He wiped his hand on his napkin and turned the page.

Amadeo walking through the cafeteria was nothing unusual, and friends and acquaintances alike smiled or waved and shouted greetings to him. Some of them even scooted over a little to make room for him at their table. Eyebrows were raised in surprise as he walked past all of them to stand beside the table containing nothing and no one other than 'The Cootie'.

"Pst! 'Deo!" whispered one of the boys at a neighboring table, "Not there, man! You might catch something! Sit here!"

Amadeo never took his eyes off the solitary boy at the table. Angelo never took his eyes off of the page he was reading but he stiffened slightly and his eyes stopped moving over the lines. His expression never changed but he'd obviously heard the other boy's words.

"Not cool, Darren," Amadeo said over his shoulder, then he turned back to the boy in front of him.

"Hey, your name is Angelo, right?" he said with a friendly smile.

The boy was startled but covered his reaction quickly and gave a half shrug in response. His eyes stayed on the book in front of him.

"I'm Amadeo," he said. "Mind if I sit with you, Angelo? It's a little crowded at the other tables today."

Angelo looked up from under the fringe of his bangs and glanced at the nearly empty table next to
his but gave another half shrug. He mumbled something that Amadeo interpreted as 'It's a free
country.' and then he returned his attention to the book in his hand. Once again, without looking,
Angelo picked up his sandwich, took a bite, laid it down and wiped his hand on the napkin before
turning the page again.

Amadeo noticed that while Angelo had turned the page, his eyes were not moving, indicating that
he was not actually reading, and his shoulders were still tense as though waiting for an assault.

'Deo took a spoonful of stew and grimaced. "Would you pass the salt and pepper, please?" The
cellars were directly in front of Angelo who pushed them the twelve inches across the table toward
Amadeo, who could have reached them easily if he'd wanted to.

"Thanks," 'Deo smiled.

Angelo kept his eyes trained on his book and muttered something that sounded like 'Welcome.',
pulled his book closer and continued reading.

"What are you having for lunch?" Amadeo asked conversationally. "It looks good."

Angelo's shoulders, which had resumed their normal position, hunched once again. He pulled his
book protectively closer to his chest and pushed his flattened bag, which served as a tray and
contained the rest of his lunch, across the table toward Amadeo.

"I don't have any money," he said in a barely audible voice.

"Whoa! Hey! I don't want your lunch! Or your money." 'Deo said, gently pushing the bag toward
Angelo. "I was just saying that it looked good. Come on, eat up. I didn't mean anything by it."

For the first time since he'd introduced himself, Angelo looked directly up at him from under the
fringe of his bangs. The large brown eyes were distrustful and he tentatively reached for the bag as
though he were afraid that Amadeo was going to snatch it back. Instead, Amadeo withdrew his
hand and smiled encouragingly.

Angelo pulled the bag and its contents back to where they'd been, nodded his thanks and trained his
eyes on the page before him before picking up his sandwich and taking another bite.

"What're you reading?" Amadeo asked.

Angelo sighed and raised the book so that the title was visible.

"Any good?"

Angelo shrugged but kept his eyes on his book, hoping that the other boy would get tired of his
little game, whatever it was, give up and go sit with his friends.

"What's it about?" Amadeo tried again.

Angelo closed the book on the table using his finger to hold his place. He looked at Amadeo from
beneath his bangs and asked in a slightly exasperated tone, "If I give you a book to read, will you
please be quiet?"

It was the first time that Amadeo had heard the boy speak in anything like a normal voice or say
more than a couple of words and he was startled by the sound. What a wonderful accent! He didn't
have the words to describe it but knew that he wanted to hear it again. Amadeo smiled. "Sure,
whatcha got?"
Angelo rummaged around in his bag and pulled out a book. He handed it to Amadeo who thanked him, and the two boys read in companionable silence for the rest of the lunch period.
"Where were you, Mi? What happened to 'tag team'?” Amadeo asked accusingly when he caught up to Milo in the hallway after lunch.

"Sorry, man, but you two looked so buddy buddy sitting there reading I figured I'd just be interrupting. Was it that bad, talking to him?"

"No, not at all, for what little he said. Speaking of which, where on earth did you hear that voice you used when you mimicked him? He doesn't sound like that at all!"

Milo blushed and shrugged. "Just makin' fun, you know?"

"Idjit,” said Amadeo affectionately.

"Jerk,” replied Milo. "So anyway, what did you find out? What did he say?"

"Like I said, not much. He doesn't seem to be the talkative sort. Could just be shy."

"Shy? He's sixteen, not six! What kind of..." Milo broke off his line of thought when he noticed the expression on Amadeo's face. "Ok, Kemosabe. So what's our next plan of action?"

"Not sure," Amadeo admitted. "I... we... are going to have to take things slow with him. It's obvious that he's had a really hard time and he doesn't exactly trust anyone."

"Know what this reminds me of?" Milo asked animatedly, "The Little Prince!"

Amadeo was familiar with the book but was surprised that Milo was.

Milo gave a sheepish look and said, "I read it to Mikey, sometimes. Anyway, all you have to do is tame the fox."

"You know, for a complete dork you're actually a pretty cool cat."

"Don't spread that around, I have a rep to maintain."

"Gentlemen," came the soft, dangerous voice of the Cobra, otherwise known as Mr. Cobrane, the Vice Principal, and dreaded DOD. "I believe the bell rang several minutes ago, and yet, here you are in the hallway, and if I were to ask you to produce one, I have the feeling that neither of you will be able to show me a hall pass. Am I correct?" His drawl always became more pronounced
"Yes, sir, Mr. Cobrane. We're sorry, we just lost track of the time and didn't hear the bell." Amadeo answered politely.

"Ah, Mr. Rossi," Cobrane purred. He turned toward Milo and said, "Mr. Jablonski, you may go to your next class, I'll see you in detention this afternoon at three. I believe you're familiar with the room so I expect you to be on time, understood?" With a nod and a quick "Yes, sir.", Milo shot Amadeo an apologetic glance and hurried to his classroom.

Coal black eyes, which were jarringly at odds with the man's pale skin and blonde hair, and which were the actual reason he was called The Cobra, slewed back toward Amadeo and raked him over from head to toe and back again. The man gave Amadeo the willies. Amadeo was a little above average height for his age at 5'10 3/4" but Cobrane was broadly built, something over 6', always dressed in dark suits, and somehow managed to be intimidating without even trying.

"I've been hearing a lot about you this morning, Mr. Rossi, unfortunately, none of it good. Disrespect toward your teachers, inattention in class, a visit to Mr. Barnes' office, and now in the hallway after warning bell without a pass. Is there anything you'd like to discuss, Mr. Rossi? Any problems you're having that would explain this uncharacteristic behavior?"

"No, sir."

Cobrane narrowed his eyes and fixed Amadeo with a stern glare. "Very well, Mr. Rossi. Your teachers... most of them... have said that you're not usually a behavioral problem for them and they're willing to let your actions slide. Let me remind you, however, that I am not one of your teachers, I won't take kindly to the phrase 'Climb it, Tarzan.' being aimed at me, nor will I tolerate the use of vulgar hand gestures. I suggest you follow Mr. Jablonski to Room 11 this afternoon at three. I don't tolerate tardiness, Mr. Rossi. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Amadeo answered politely. Only now did he understand why birds and other prey froze under the gaze of the cobra in nature.

"You may go to your next class, now."

"Thank you sir," said Amadeo, thawing sufficiently enough to move toward his classroom.

The rest of the afternoon dragged by. Amadeo kept thinking about Angelo and wondering what class he was in now and where he lived, and how he could go about 'taming' him if he were stuck in detention. He supposed that he should be grateful that it was only one afternoon and not all week or all month.

Three o'clock finally came around and Amadeo did as he had been instructed and followed Milo to room 11, where Mr. Cobrane sat behind the desk, ramrod straight, shoulders squared and looking grim.

He started to sit beside Milo when the Cobra ordered him to sit several seats away, next to the window. Amadeo sighed and sat down where Cobrane pointed. He looked out the window in time to see Angelo, eyes riveted to his book, begin to walk across the street. The boy was brought up short by the screeching of tires and the loud honking of a horn. The driver's shouts were muffled by the glass and distance, but Amadeo could imagine what he was saying.

Just as he'd done the day before, Angelo waved to the driver, most likely apologized, and focused his attention back on his book before completing his journey across the street.
Amadeo's jaw clenched. What on earth was that boy thinking, reading a book while walking instead of watching where he was going? Did he have some sort of death wish?

Amadeo wondered if it was too soon to approach Angelo about this habit of his.

"You're not here to stare out the window, Mr. Rossi. You may take out your books and work on your homework for the remainder of your detention."

At four thirty Coblane gave the boys permission to leave, watching them with his black eyes as they filed out of the classroom. Amadeo felt the gaze on the back of his neck. It felt like an icicle. Once outside, both boys gave great sighs of relief.

"Wow, I thought he'd keep us there all night!" Milo griped.

"I could have dealt with that all right, but did he have to stare at us the entire time we were there? Now I know what a goldfish feels like." Amadeo shuddered.

That night Amadeo fished out the family's copy of The Little Prince and read it, pausing over several passages.

'I am looking for friends. What does that mean -- tame?'

'It is an act too often neglected,' said the fox. 'It means to establish ties.'

'To establish ties?'

'Just that,' said the fox. 'To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world....'

A little further on the fox continued:

'Please-tame me!' he said.

'I want to, very much,' the little prince replied. 'But I have not much time. I have friends to discover, and a great many things to understand.'

'One only understands the things that one tames,' said the fox. 'Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things already made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends anymore. If you want a friend, tame me.'

'What must I do, to tame you?' asked the little prince.

'You must be very patient,' replied the fox. 'First you will sit down at a little distance from me-like that-in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye,' Amadeo remembered large, distrustful, brown eyes peering at him from beneath a fringe of bangs. "...and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day..."

It was just as he'd done at lunchtime, accepting the book and simply reading with the kid, rather than continuing to try to talk to him. After all, if Angelo had been a real fox or another wild animal, he'd hardly have tried to talk to them, would he? And as insulting as it might be if Amadeo had said as much to Angelo, the other boy, because of the ill-treatment he'd endured, was very much like the fox.
Amadeo paused over the line:

'People have forgotten this truth,' the fox said. 'But you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed. You’re responsible for your rose.’

He read it over and over again. Yes, Amadeo decided, he could handle this.

Over the next few days, Amadeo would join Angelo at his solitary table, pull out a book and begin to read or use the time to get ahead on his homework. Angelo would glance up and look at Amadeo from the corner of his eye, as soon as he was assured the other boy was not planning to talk to him, he would once again resume reading his own book.

Amadeo wasn't sure, but he could have sworn that on the fourth day of the 'taming', a Friday, Angelo had a small smile on his face. However, when Amadeo looked directly at him, there was no sign of it.

AN

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Quotes from: The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
Illustrator: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
Cover artist: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
Publisher: Reynal & Hitchcock (U.S.)
Publication date: September 1943
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The next Monday when Amadeo arrived at the school, he caught sight of a small, oddly silent, group of people who had gathered behind the building. He pushed his way through the crowd easily and choked when he saw what had attracted them.

There was Angelo. He sagged between two upperclassmen who tossed him back and forth so that his feet barely touched the ground, stumbling when they did. He'd lost his sneakers, one foot was bare and the sock was half off on the other. His shirt and jeans were torn, filthy with dirt and blood. The left side of his face was already showing signs of bruising. His pockets had been turned out and his book bag unceremoniously dumped, his books and papers scattered.

"Let him go!" Amadeo demanded. "Let the kid go, now! And the rest of you! What the hell is wrong with you!?" He shouted, sickened, "You just stand around and watch while these two goons beat on someone?! What if it was you, or one of your friends? Would you want everyone to just stand around and stare?"

Several of the students gave Amadeo guilty looks and left the area. One muttered "Hell, I didn't take him to raise!" before he slouched away. Approximately ten others stayed to watch the action.

The two older boys stopped what they were doing momentarily. "This is none of your business, chicken head. Bug off or I'm gonna deck ya!" Brice, the larger of the two threatened as he held Angelo's limp form in his meaty fists.

"Come on, you big ape, I’m not afraid of you." Seeing the bigger boy hesitate, Amadeo taunted, "What's the matter, Brice? Afraid of coming after someone your own size? What's next, gonna kick some puppies? And what about you, Freddie? Got an appointment to shake down some fourth graders?"

"Like he said, chicken head, bug off!" Freddie, Brice's right-hand sycophant, retorted brightly.

"Let him go. I'm warning you," Amadeo maintained.

"Warning... you tryin' to jump bad with me?" Brice scoffed, "You think you c'n take us both on?" The senior sneered, puffing out his massive chest and pulling himself up to his full 6' 2" height. "We'll pound you flat as a flitter."

"Yeah, think you can take us both on?" Freddie the Toad echoed, puffing out his less massive chest and drawing himself up to his full 5'7".

One of the onlookers turned to his friend and whispered, "Felix, you're The Flash. Run to the office, man, give 'em the heads up. This looks like it's gonna be a bad scene. Have 'em call the bat phone. Make tracks, man!"

Felix didn't need any further urging. Felix's friend took his own advice and split immediately after. Two others followed closely behind.

"Let him go, Brice. Last warning."
"Whatta you gonna do about it, skuzz? I can snap you like a twig 'thout even tryin'. I'll slap you so hard when you quit rollin' your clothes'll be outta style."

With a bored and unimpressed expression, Amadeo stripped off his jacket and made a 'come here' gesture. In response, Brice tossed Angelo aside and charged the other boy like a bull. 'Deo winced at the sight of the boy crumpling to the ground like a sack of potatoes but was unable to do anything for him. Amadeo stepped aside like a matador and the bigger boy ran past, stumbling as he tried to slow himself down once he realized he'd missed his target. Some of the kids watching laughed. One of the guys sidled over to see if he could help the injured boy who lay on the ground, who was breathing heavily but otherwise laid still.

Brice once again lunged at the younger boy, who stepped aside, stuck out a foot and tripped the bigger boy up. Brice landed face first in the dust. Freddie took action and ran at Amadeo who turned and planted an elbow in the other boy's midsection. Winded, Freddie joined his buddy in the dust.

Brice was up quickly and charged once again, feet braced wide, prepared for any more tricks. Amadeo rolled his eyes and shook his head slightly before he crouched at the last moment, catching Brice in the stomach and flipping the bigger boy over his shoulder. Brice landed on his back with an undignified 'Oomph!'

Even with all of his wrestling training and matches, 'Deo winced and rubbed his shoulder which felt numb from the impact, but kept his eyes on his opponent. His heart was racing, equal parts adrenaline, fear, and anger.

Why didn't the others help or even run for help? Why did they all just stand there watching? What was wrong with them? He wasn't sure how much longer he could last against the onslaught from both boys and he prayed for a miracle. Where was the Lone Ranger when you really needed him?

Brice caught his breath and staggered to his feet. "I'm gonna jerk you through a knot!" He growled. Once again, he charged Amadeo, who landed a hard punch to the bigger boy's mouth before jumping aside. Brice tried unsuccessfully to grab 'Deo's ankle as he fell. Dae tried not to wince as pain shot through his hand and up his arm, or take notice as the slice across his knuckles caused by the other boy's teeth began to bleed profusely. Showing pain or weakness at this point was the last thing he wanted to do.

Freddie came at Amadeo then, preparing to land a roundhouse punch. Thinking quickly, the Freshman grabbed the Senior by the hand, twisted around so that Freddie's arm was behind him and jerked the arm up sharply between his shoulder blades. Freddie screeched in pain. Amadeo gave the arm another jerk and shoved the boy roughly, causing him to face plant in the dust.

Brice put his hand to his mouth and took it away, amazed at the sight of his own blood on it. "I'll knock you inta nex' week, you som'blish!" he yelled. He stalked up to Amadeo who braced for the assault. Brice feinted with his left and swung with his right, catching Amadeo across the temple. Amadeo staggered back, stunned, but shook it off quickly, more angry at himself for falling for that than at any little clip Brice might have landed. When he saw Brice charging at him again, he clasped his hands together to form a club and swung them like a bat, stepping aside once again and catching the bully across the side of the head. The bigger boy staggered and fell to the ground.

Brice got up stiffly and turned once more to face Amadeo, his face a mask of anger, his fists clenched, wary now of the younger boy he'd taken for an easy mark.

Amadeo saw the bigger boy give a slight nod. Suddenly a voice shouted, "Watch it! He's got a blade!"
He felt more than saw Freddie advance from behind. Amadeo dropped and rolled toward Brice's feet, spoiling Freddie's aim and Brice's balance. Once again the two older boys landed in the dust, this time latching onto the young man and pinning him beneath them. Amadeo thought his heart would burst from terror when he saw Freddie raise the knife, preparing to strike. Someone, he never found out who, kicked Freddie's hand and the knife went flying. One of the other onlookers kicked it further away from the area where the tussle was taking place.

While he was one of the best wrestlers on the team, the weight of the two boys combined was too much for Amadeo and he was pinned helplessly beneath them. The boys took advantage of this and proceeded to punch the younger boy, occasionally catching each other in their fury. If 'Deo had known this he might have laughed. As it was he was too scared to do much more than fend off the attacks and fight back as well as he was able. Blow after blow landed on his face, head, and midsection. He was strangely aware that he wasn't feeling any pain from the blows that rained down on him. He idly wondered why it was getting dark so early in the morning. It was still morning, wasn't it?

While Freddie continued pounding on Amadeo, Brice staggered to his feet and began to viciously kick the younger boy who lay curled in the dust. Taking his cue from Brice, Freddie got up and went after his knife again. The boy who'd kicked it aside tried to put his foot on it but Freddie caught the kid with a roundhouse punch and knocked him on his back. Freddie picked up the knife and advanced once again on the helpless boy on the ground, who lay still under Brice's continued onslaught.

Before he knew what happened, Freddie found himself curled in the dirt once again, face screwed up in pain, clutching his privates and whining in a high pitched tone.

Angelo turned away from Freddie's prone form and ran at Brice and using his full weight and force, hit the larger boy with a flying kick to the knee that Joel Holt* would have been proud of.

Brice howled in pain and collapsed on the ground, arms curled protectively around the injured knee. Angelo staggered toward Amadeo's prostrate form and fell down beside him, completely wiped out after having used up the last of his energy.

The sound of running footsteps alerted the audience. "Beat feet! Cobra at two o' clock!" someone yelled, and the remainder of the watchers scattered.

Mr. Young, the gym teacher, and Mr. Stewart, the British Lit teacher, were the first to reach the boys, followed closely by Mr. Barnes, Mr. Cobrane and Mr. Janco, the Spanish teacher. The wail of sirens could be heard in the distance.

Barnes had heard enough from Felix, who had shown up in the office panicked and winded, to know that Brice and Freddie had been roughing Angelo up and that Amadeo had rushed in to help. Barnes was more than familiar with Brice and Freddie, who could be ruthless and were so feared within the school that none of the other students would say a word against them for fear of being their next target. But he was amazed to find the two biggest bullies in the school curled on the ground, looking like they'd been rode hard and put up wet.

Mr. Cobrane, who had been a corpsman in WWII, inspected Brice and Freddie quickly, judged their injuries superficial and went quickly to Amadeo and Angelo. He checked their pupils, they were both out cold. He gently ran his hands down their arms and legs looking for broken bones, being careful not to move their heads and necks just in case there was damage there that couldn't be detected with hands alone. He was very concerned for Amadeo, whose face and head were badly bruised and swollen.
Mr. Janco, who had been casting around for Angelo's sneakers and sock, came across the knife. He took out his handkerchief and wrapped it, not knowing whose it was but knowing that it was evidence. He then went over to Angelo and took a good look at the boy. He'd been an army medic and he did much the same as Cobrane had done, gently running his hands down the boy’s spine and legs. The toes of his bare right foot were swollen and discolored. The teacher removed his suit jacket and folded it, propping Angelo's foot up until help could arrive.

Mr. Young and Mr. Stewart stood guard over Brice and Freddie, just in case they recovered and tried to run.

Within minutes Mrs. Jennings came around the corner, calmly leading a policeman and a paramedic that she'd had the foresight to call as well as the police, once she'd heard who was involved in the fight. Her eyebrows rose in surprise as she took note of the two bullies still curled in the dust. She'd only understood part of what Felix had been trying to say but from the looks of it Amadeo had hung tough and hadn't gone down easily.

The paramedic ducked back around the corner and signaled to someone. Seconds later an ambulance and police car drove around the corner, over the curb and into the lot behind the school. Cobrane and Janco waved the paramedics over to Amadeo and Angelo, while the police responded to Barnes's summons toward the two older boys.

The two retired servicemen filled the paramedics in on what they'd done and observed and then stood back to let the men do their jobs. One medic ran back to the ambulance and came back with cervical collars and backboards. They recorded the boy's vitals and then gently placed the collars on the two unconscious boys before rolling them onto the boards, buckling them on securely, and putting them into the ambulance. In less than a minute the ambulance took off, sirens blaring.

Brice and Freddie had recovered enough to sit up, though they still winced and held onto their injured parts. "What about us?" Brice complained. "We're hurt!"

One of the officers smiled grimly at the boy and said, "We have different accommodations for the two of you." He and his partner quickly cuffed Brice who began to shout and protest his innocence. "You can't arrest me! I'm innocent! I was viciously attacked! I had to fight back, it was self-defense, ask anyone who was here, they'll tell you! I'm injured! I need a doctor! This isn't fair! Police brutality!" The two officers supported Brice, who hopped on one foot melodramatically for a few steps before going limp and making them half drag, half carry him the rest of the way toward the car.

Once they got him in place, they turned toward Freddie who had tried to stand up and run but who had been hemmed in by the two teachers who had been guarding him.

Freddie began crying as soon as the cuffs were placed on his wrists. His eyes and nose ran freely. He tried to mop his face by using the shoulder of his tee shirt, but since his hands were behind him he only succeeded in smearing the mess across his cheek. One of the officers quickly wiped a look of dismay and disgust from his own face. This wasn't the first 'tough guy' to crack once the cuffs were on him. Freddie was quickly placed in the back seat next to his friend. Mr. Janco gave the knife to one of the officers who placed it in the glove compartment, and moments later the police car followed the ambulance.

The men stood together, watching the vehicles depart. Barnes turned to the others and said, "I recognized two of the kids who ran, were any of you able to identify any of the others?"

Janco nodded. "I recognized Eddie Parker from my third-period class."
Young nodded as well. "I have two of them in my gymnastics class. Jim Barkis and Charlie Grey."

"And then there was Felix, but I think he missed the worst of it," Barnes added.

"And where Felix is, you're bound to find Aiden, so we can look him up as well and find out how much he saw before he left," said Mr. Stewart.

Barnes turned toward Mrs. Jennings, "Margaret, call an assembly for..." he glanced at his watch. Good Lord, he thought, it wasn't even nine o'clock yet. "For 10 am, please, and summon..."
Margaret Jennings held up the pad she'd been taking notes on and showed the list of students names to Mr. Barnes, who gave her a wry smile.

"Thank you," he said. "After you've done that get me the numbers for Mr. Rossi's and Mr. Di Marco's families, also for Mr. Crighton's and Mr. Argus's parents. This is going to be a very difficult morning for all of us." He sighed, "Actually, Margaret, call the assembly for twelve instead. I have a feeling that these calls are going to take longer than an hour."

AN:
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Reference to The Flash (superhero)
Flash Comics was a comic book published by All American Publications and later National Periodicals (DC Comics). The title ran for 104 issues between January 1940 to February 1949.
Information by Wikipedia
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Marine Corpsman

In the field, the hospital corpsman must be prepared to treat and dress wounds, carry the wounded and take part fully in the mission of the unit to which he is attached. This can include digging trenches, establishing perimeters, carrying out surveillance, holding a firing line and forced marching. Corpsmen are also trained to tend to illnesses, carry out medical tests, dispense prescribed medications, keep medical records, assist at births and advise on personal hygiene and safety.

Army Combat medics

(also known as medics) are military personnel who have been trained to at least an EMT-Basic level (8-week course in the U.S. Army), and who are responsible for providing first aid and front line trauma care on the battlefield. They are also responsible for providing continuing medical care in the absence of a readily available physician, including care for disease and battle injury.
"You heard Barnes! They saw us! They recognized us! We're gonna be expelled!"

"Chill out, Jim. They gave us the option of coming forward on our own. If we do that we'll just get into a little trouble." Eddie assured him.

"A little trouble?" Jim interjected. "Suspended? Detention? A visit to the Cobra? You call that a little trouble?!!"

"Hey, they only said they recognized a bunch of us. It's probably just a scare tactic! I bet ya they didn't see nothin'," Charlie said, uncertainly.

"No way, man. The Cobra was lookin' right at me when Barnes gave his speech. They know! We're dead meat! And when Barnes and Cobrane get done with me, the 'rents'll gimme what for once I'm home. If I'm expelled... man, I'll never see the light of day 'til I'm thirty!" Jim griped.

"Barnes said we'll be suspended if we don't come forward on our own. We'll only be expelled if we don't tell 'em what we saw. And after we all just stood there and let that kid get beat on like that..."

"Yeah? Well what about Cobrane? If we do tell we get to go to his office? Great!" Jim griped.

"Well, we deserve whatever Cobrane dishes out." Charlie said with a sad look. He'd been feeling guilty ever since that morning and he stood with his arms crossed, and his shoulders hunched.

Eddie looked at him with amazement. "Have you ever been in Cobra's office?"

Charlie nodded warily. "Yeah, once. For cuttin' up in Spanish class."

"How many'd you get?" Eddie asked.

Charlie blushed slightly. "Three."

"Well, I can guarantee you that we'll get more than that for standing around and watching that kid get pounded into the dirt!"

"Yeah, well I know for sure that if Brice and Freddie hear we dropped the dime on 'em we'll be next! Not only that but we'll get reps as rat finks. That is if we live after those two greasers or their friends get done with us. I don't know about you guys but I don't want to be labeled 'Rat' or get the chill for the next two years," Jim snarled.

"I get the feeling that if we're gonna get the chill it's gonna be because we didn't help, not because we ratted out Brice and Freddie," Dennis said quietly. "There was enough of us we coulda taken..."
'em on! Least we can do is stand up and tell 'em what happened even if it means a paddling and detentions."

"Guys, what it comes down to is this. If we don't tell, then Brice and Freddie get away with it again, cuz you know one of 'em'll lie and the other one'll swear to it. They've been doin' it since the first grade and getting away with it cuz everyone's afraid to say anything against 'em," Charlie said, "and their dads being on the force doesn't help."

An argument broke out then between the four boys, each shouting to be heard over the other, each listing their reasons why they should or shouldn't go to Barnes's office and say their piece.

Dennis let out a shrill whistle and shouted, "Guys! Guys! Cool your chops a minute! Cool it! Listen to me!"

The other boys were red-faced and breathing heavily but they quieted down and looked at their friend.

"Ok, look, there's a pay phone down at Grammarcy's, we can go down there and call Barnes, right? Then we can ask him to meet us somewhere safe. Wait!" He said when he saw Eddie and Jim open their mouths to argue. "We ask him to meet us somewhere safe, one of our houses, or... I dunno... a church maybe..."

"What the heck you thinkin', Clyde! If he meets us at one of our houses our 'rent's'll know! And I can tell you right now if any of us walk into a church before Sunday everyone in town's gonna notice it! Not only that but five'll getcha ten that Father Kelly'll say somethin' to my folks. Uh uh, man. Count me out. I don't really believe they saw me. They have no proof. I'll just deny it was me they saw," Jim maintained, trying to look braver than he felt. He failed miserably.

"That's up to you I guess. Me, I'm all for calling and asking if we can meet somewhere, cuz sure as dogs bark if we're seen walking into Barnes's office people'll know what it's about," Charlie said, looking for support from Eddie and Dennis, putting his arm straight out, palm down.

"I'm with you, man," Eddie said, placing his hand over Charlie's.

Dennis sighed and added his hand to the pile, “Me too. Last chance, Jim. All for one and one for all."

Jim gritted his teeth and nodded curtly before slapping his hand down on top of the others. "I friggin' hate you guys. Let's go if we're gonna go."

They arrived at Grammarcy's in record time, and they all fumbled around in their pockets for the right change. Dennis finally found a dime and Charlie dialed the number. Despite the gravity of the situation, it was all the other three boys could do not to bust out laughing as they heard Charlie's voice go unnaturally deep as he asked to speak to Mr. Barnes.

Eddie, who had his ear pressed close to Charlie's was sure he heard amusement in Mrs. Jenning's voice as she asked him to please hold.

"Vice Principal Cobrane speaking."

Charlie covered the mouthpiece quickly. "Chit! It's Cobra! Whuddo I say?!" he asked his friends desperately.

Eddie made a shooing motion and hissed back, "Just talk, numbskull!"
Charlie cleared his throat and tried to deepen his voice again, but it came out nearer a squeak. "Mr. Co-Cobbrane..." he tried to clear his throat again, but that too came out sounding strangled and Charlie began coughing uncontrollably.

Eddie grabbed the phone. "Mr. Cobrane..." he hated the quaver he heard in his own voice. "We... we want to... I mean... we'd like to... that is..." he took a deep breath and spoke on the exhale. "We're afraid sir, we know you saw some of us and we wanna come straight but we're afraid, see?"

"Hush," the man said in a strangely gentle voice. "Take a slow, deep breath and let it out slowly, do it now, young man."

Eddie took a deep breath and let it out as directed.

"Again. Slowly."

Eddie took another measured breath and let it out.

"Better now?" He asked, still in that same gentle voice.

"Yes, sir," Eddie said, faintly.

"May I know who I am speaking with?"

"Eddie, sir. Eddie Parker."

"Very well, Mr. Parker. Start from the beginning, if you would."

"We know you saw some of us, sir. An' we want to tell you what happened, but we're afraid, see?"

"I understand, Mr. Parker."

"If we go into the office, the other kids'll, you know, they'll know why we're there, you know? An' if word gets out that we dropped the dime on Brice and Freddie..."

"Pardon? Dropped..."

"Um, finked. Told on 'em?" Eddie clarified.

"Ah, I understand, continue."

"If word gets around that we finked on Brice and Freddie then 'em or some of their friends'll come after us next. That's why we were afraid to jump in when that kid was gettin' demolished. And then, even if they don't come after us, the other students'll see us and they'll know we're rattin' 'em out and they'll give us the chill and..."

"I understand, Mr. Parker. What do you propose?"

"Is there... like, somewhere... I dunno, safe we can meet up? Somewhere no one knows us? Then we can tell you everything."

"Hold on, please, Mr. Parker. I'll be back directly."

Cobrane was gone for only a few minutes before he picked the phone back up. "Very well, Mr. Parker. I'm not sure who else is with you but I'd like you to meet us; myself and Mr. Barnes as well as Officer Delaney..."
"Officer! You didn't say nothin' bout talkin' to the fu... cops!" Eddie said, alarmed.

"Oh that's it, I'm outta here!" Jim said as he turned on his heel.

"Don't be dense!" Charlie grated, grabbing the other boy by the sleeve. "What did you think was gonna happen? You can't chicken out now! Hang tough!"

"Mr. Parker... Eddie, don't be afraid. How many others are with you?"

"There's four of us, sir."

"All right then, there is nothing to be afraid of. Officers Delaney and Shelton informed us that the identities of anyone who came forward would be protected. No one will know who you are. Tell your friends that, please. I'll wait."

Eddie repeated the vice principal's words.

Jim grabbed the phone. "Promise, man... I mean... Mr. Cobrane. Promise us. No one knows, okay? Our names never get mentioned?"

"As you are all under the age of 18, your names will be in the official police records, and Mr. Crighton's and Mr. Argus's attorneys will have your sworn statements on file, but they will not be released to the public. It's already been arranged that if you and your friends are required to give statements in person, it will be done away from Mr's Crighton and Argus, with your attorneys and the attorneys for the defense present."

"Will Brice and Freddie ever be able to get the records?"

"No, they'll be sealed. I assure you, Mr..."

"Barkis," Jim said reluctantly.

"I assure you, Mr. Barkis, you will be completely safe. Now, if you and the others are still willing to come forward then I'd like you to meet with myself, Mr. Barnes and Officer Delaney at 325 Astrid Circle, it's at the outskirts of town and should be quite safe. Do you agree?"

Jim repeated the address to the others who all nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Very well then, we'll expect you after dark, say, 7:00? Bring your parents also."

"Oh, God," Jim breathed, "this just keeps getting worse and worse! He wants us to bring our folks."

Charlie and Dennis looked close to tears. Eddie, already pale, went a shade whiter.

Again, in that gentle voice, Cobrane said, "If you'd like, I'll call your parents ahead of time and explain the situation to them, and let them know that their presence is only requested as support and security for you boys. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Jim said weakly before turning to the others and repeating Cobrane's message.

"Very well then, Mr. Barkis, we'll expect you and your parents at 7:00 this evening. And tomorrow morning we'll discuss why the four of you are off campus during school hours."

Jim could have sworn he heard a hint of amusement in the man's voice before he hung up.
Later that afternoon when Charlie arrived home his mother rushed to him, gave him a hug and then turned him to the side and gave him several sharp swats, after which she turned him back and hugged him again. His father stood silently by, leaning against the door jamb watching the interchange with a look of sadness at his son.

Blushing partly from the display of affection and partly from the smacks, Charlie hugged his mother back with one arm and reached back to rub the sting with the other hand. He looked up apprehensively at his father. "Co... Mr. Cobrane called then?"

"Yep." His father answered shortly.

His mother took him by the shoulders, even though he was taller than her by several inches and shook him a little. "You just stood by and watched, Charlie? You just stood by and watched!?" she asked, dismay and disappointment clear on her face.

Charlie, who was only a couple of inches taller than Angelo and only weighed a few pounds more, felt like crying when he saw the expression on his father's face and the disappointment on his mother's. He would never have stood a chance against the two older boys but he knew he could have at least run for help.

"I'm sorry, ma! I was scared. We all were. I know now that that's no excuse but... at least for me, I was scared. If they'd seen me leave they'da thought it was me that ratted 'em out and then they'da come after me next and they'da pulverized me." He was near tears. "I'm sorry, ma, pop. I'm sorry I didn't do nothin' to stop it but I was scared!" Despite his efforts, his feelings of guilt and shame, and the stress and shock of the day caught up with him and he began to cry. He covered his face. Big boys weren't supposed to cry. Only babies cried he berated himself.

The next thing he knew he was sandwiched between his parents. His father held his son's head against his chest while his mother rubbed his back.

Jim got a slightly different reception when he arrived at his house. His father immediately began to yell at his son while his mother stood between them, worriedly trying to keep things from escalating.

The boy stood silently, taking the berating with his head hanging in shame. He'd known his father would have something to say about what had happened and he knew that whatever happened, he deserved it.

"What I don't get is you're just about the same size as the guy who jumped in to help... what's his name again? David?"

" 'Deo... Amadeo."

Mr. Barkis' eyebrows raised slightly at that, who on earth would saddle their kid with a moniker like that? "He's that kid from the wrestling team, right?" Jim nodded and his father continued, "You're nearly as tall as him and you probably outweigh him by ten, fifteen pounds. Why didn't you help him?"

Keeping his gaze on the floor, Jim shook his head slightly. He took a breath to answer but only exhaled and shook his head again.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" his father demanded.
"No, sir," Jim answered quietly. He knew what came next and was mentally prepared for it.

Mr. Samuel Barkis, Mule to his friends, slipped his belt out of the loops and doubled it. "Hands on the wall."

Jim swallowed nervously, turned toward the wall and got into position. He closed his eyes and tried to steel himself for what was coming.

Mule laid six stripes across the backs of his son's thighs and stopped. "Go on upstairs, now. Do your homework. We'll call you down for dinner. After that you go back upstairs, finish your homework if it ain't done, and take a shower. Your mother laid out some clean clothes for you for tonight, we'll call you when it's time to leave."

"Yes, sir," Jim whispered. He turned toward the stairs and felt a firm but gentle grip on his shoulder. The hand squeezed slightly before letting go, and Jim continued his journey toward his room.

Mule stood at the bottom of the stairs, slipping his belt back on, and watching his son until the boy reached his room and softly closed the door.

He turned to see Caroline, his wife, looking at him with approval.

"What?" he asked.

"You went real easy on him. I'm glad," she said, simply.

Mule cleared his throat and shrugged. "He did wrong, he came forward, he owned up to what he did, he didn't make excuses, he didn't try to beg out of his punishment. I'm proud of him."

Caroline approached her husband and slipped her arms around his waist. "Make sure you tell him that," she said, looking up at her husband with a hint of a smile in her eyes before giving him a light kiss on the cheek and returning to tend to that night's dinner.
At 7:00 precisely the four boys and their parents arrived at the address given. They marveled at the house which stood by itself at the end of the cul de sac. It was a modest, slate grey Victorian with white trim and filigree. A garage which had obviously once been a carriage house guarded the left side of the house. The right side was flanked by a majestic willow.

They walked up the stairs and stood on the generous porch. No sooner had 'Mule' rung the bell than the door opened. They were greeted by a very attractive man with black hair, wearing black slacks and a blue shirt which matched his eyes perfectly. He smiled warmly and invited them in, opening the door wide and stepping aside to allow them entrance.

"Hello. We're pleased you could make it. I'm Elias. Please, follow me," he said after he'd closed the door.

Elias led them into a large room lined with shelves of books. A fireplace took pride of place against the far wall, a large couch and several comfortable chairs surrounded it. A large, mahogany coffee table took up the center area and contained two tea trays complete with teapots, creamers, sugar bowls, cups and spoons. Another tray was filled with pastries and small cakes.

Mr. Cobrane and Mr. Barnes stood and welcomed the newcomers. The man who had greeted them at the door smiled and excused himself, closing the double doors behind him as he exited the room. Much to the amazement of the boys, Mr. Cobrane, was dressed very casually in a pair of black slacks, a white button-down shirt, and black vest.

Four other men, dressed more formally in suits, who had been standing next to the fireplace stepped forward and stood quietly beside Barnes and Delaney with placid expressions on their faces.

The normally stern looking man walked over to the folks closest to him and held out his hand with a friendly smile. "Good evening, sir and ma'am. I am Shandon Cobrane, Vice Principal of the school."

The boys looked at each other again. The Cobra had a first name? They all stifled a grin. Shandon!? No wonder he was always so grim!

"Pleased to meet you, Mr..."

"Parker," the man said uncertainly as he reached out for the Vice Principal's hand. This man was completely different than his son had described him. "Dell Parker, and my wife, Marjorie," he said,
gently pulling his wife forward by the hand. Cobrane smiled and took the lady's hand in both of his own as he greeted her.

He then turned toward 'Mule' with his hand outstretched. "And you sir?"

"Samuel Barkis, sir, and my wife Caroline."

Arthur and Arlene Grey were next, and finally Robert and Penny Granger. Cobrane then gestured toward Principal Barnes, who had agreed that the boys would be much more comfortable at the house than at the police station, and Officer Delaney, introducing and giving them time to become acquainted before introducing everyone to the four unfamiliar men and inviting everyone to sit and make themselves comfortable. He poured tea into each cup, adding milk and sugar at each person's request and handed the delicate looking cups and saucers around the table to each person. Only the boys helped themselves to cake. Jim seemed to have forgotten his company manners since he demolished a large danish in three bites, chewing the entire thing happily. No one remarked on it, though.

"Mr. Graves and Mr. Simmons are the attorneys for the defense. They'll be representing Mr. Crighton and Mr. Argus. Mr. Selby and Mr. Holt, the attorneys for the prosecution, will be representing the four of you. They've agreed to come here tonight to hear your stories. They would like to record your versions of the events and ask questions."

The boys all looked at each other, unsure of how to proceed. Jim suddenly looked sick to his stomach.

"If Mr. Selby and Mr. Holt feel that you should not answer a particular question, they'll advise you of such. You do have the right to answer despite their council, though it might be in your best interest to heed their advice. Do you understand?"

The boys nodded, finished chewing their cakes, which had suddenly become quite dry in their mouths, and swallowed them down with gulps of the sweet tea.

Mr. Barnes finally spoke. "Well then, what we would like to do is have Mr. Graves and Mr. Selby take one boy into a separate room, and Mr. Simmons and Mr. Holt will take another, and take their statements without interruption or distraction from the others. Each boy's parents will be allowed into the rooms with their children, however, we ask that you remain quiet during the proceedings. Do you agree?"

It was the parent's turn to look unsure. "If we don't like where the questioning is going, or feel that our boys are being railroaded in any way..." Mule began.

"Questioning can be stopped any time you feel uncomfortable, or at the urging of your attorney," said Mr. Graves kindly.

Mule sighed. He worried about his boy. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, but a good boy, who would sometimes say the wrong thing at the wrong time which would frequently result in a tanning before the truth of the story came out. He hoped that his son would choose his words carefully.

"Very well then," said Mr. Graves affably. "Mr. and Mrs. Parker, Edward, if you would please come with us?"

Eddie's stomach clenched despite the man's friendly tone. No one ever called him Edward unless he was in for it. His mother took one of her son's hands and his father placed a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. Each gave a little reassuring squeeze as they followed Graves and Selby into a
small den.

Mr. Simmons and Mr. Holt invited Jim and his parents to join them in the kitchen.

Mr. Cobrane turned out to be a genial host, and he, Officer Delaney, and Mr. Barnes kept the conversation light and entertaining for Charlie and Dennis and their parents. Approximately an hour and a half later, Eddie and Jim and their parents entered the living room, looking relaxed and smiling. Charlie and Dennis, who had been increasingly anxious, calmed down and began to breathe easier.

Eddie sat down on the couch and asked politely for another cup of tea, which Mr. Cobrane obligingly poured. Jim asked for permission to take a pastry, looking between his parents and Mr. Cobrane for permission. The adults shared glances and granted their permission after which the boy happily snaffled a raspberry tart and bit into it appreciatively. Now that the nerve wracking interviews were over, he found that he was starving. He couldn't wait to get home and have another plateful of the delicious ham dinner that his mother had made that evening.

Charlie and Dennis and their parents were next. They followed with less trepidation than their predecessors had. Once again, Mr. Cobrane, Mr. Barnes and Officer Delaney entertained the Parkers and the Barkis' with light chatter and jokes.

Eddie tried not to, but he couldn't suppress a wide yawn. It was nearly 9:45 and it had been a long day for him. Once again Jim forgot his company manners and began to slouch tiredly on the couch as he rubbed his eyes.

Mr. Cobrane and Mr. Barnes looked concerned. "Would you like to go home, boys?" Barnes asked. "If you're tired you may leave now. We only ask that you make yourselves available to the attorneys if they need you for further questioning."

Eddie looked sheepish but couldn't suppress another yawn. "Yes, sir. I'd like to go home. I'm awful tired. I mean, I'm very tired."

"Me too, sir," Jim added, blinking sleepily.

Barnes and Cobrane looked at Delaney who nodded. The three men escorted the boys and their parents to the door. Once outside, the usually intimidating man's expression softened as he put a hand on each boy's shoulders. "We're very proud of you boys for coming forward and telling your stories. It was very brave of you, and we commend you for doing the right thing," he didn't look forward to the following day when he and Barnes would have to summon the other boy who hadn't come forward to their offices.

Jim looked anxiously at Cobrane, the dark circles of fatigue under his eyes making them look larger and giving his face a vulnerable expression. "Sir? We'll be all right, right? We're safe?"

"You're safe, Mr. Barkis," came the gentle reply.

Jim nodded and turned toward the stairs, and with another jaw-cracking yawn which he tried unsuccessfully to stifle, Eddie followed him. The elder Barkis' and Parkers shook hands with the three men and bid them good night.

At a quarter after ten, Charlie and Dennis and their parents came out of the rooms, looking tired but none the worse for wear. They were offered more tea and pastries which they declined politely, explaining that their sons and they were quite tired. Officer Delaney asked them to keep themselves available in case the attorneys needed to speak with them again, to which they all agreed, before
leaving the house and driving away.

As soon as they were gone, another man came out of a back room. "Your Honor, tea sir?" Cobrane offered.

"Yes please, Shandon," the man said, sitting heavily down on one of the chairs closest to the fireplace. He'd been asked to listen in the room next door to verify that the boy's stories hadn't been influenced in any way by their host or the other two men.

"Gentlemen," the Honorable Judge Byron L. Thompson said, addressing himself to the attorneys, "What are your impressions?"

"Their stories are all similar, with enough differences to indicate that they didn't rehearse their statements beforehand. Each seems to have noticed little details that the others missed as well, but overall, we have a pretty complete picture of what took place," said Mr. Simmons. The other men nodded their agreement. The defense lawyers looked distinctly uncomfortable. All of the evidence was against their clients whom they hoped to convince to strike a plea deal.

"They all testified that the knife belonged to Freddie Argus and that it was used at Brice Crighton's bidding," added Mr. Graves.

"None of them could recall the faces or names of any of the other students who had been watching. They said they'd been intent on the events before them and didn't take note of the other spectators," Mr. Selby said. "They did recall that several people left before the actual fight took place, but they couldn't identify who they were."

"Couldn't? Or Wouldn't?" asked the Judge. "Ah well," he sighed, "I suppose we've got as much as we're going to get from them for the time being," he paused to take a sip of his tea. "What else do we know?"

"We know that Felix Garruson and Aiden Johannson were there, they both said they left before Crighton, Argus and Rossi started fighting, but they, along with the four boys who came tonight, were witnesses to the initial attack on Mr. Di Marco and we have their statements on file. However, neither of them had names to add to the list of students who may have seen what happened either before or after Mr. Rossi intervened," Barnes added, "We've spoken to Felix and he admitted that he only saw the beginning before running to us." The men sat in the living room discussing things for another half hour before bidding each other good night and taking their leave.

Cobrane sat up for a while longer, helping himself to a small glass of brandy and staring contemplatively into the dying fire. Much had happened over the past week and Amadeo Rossi seemed to be the center of it. Rinsing out his glass, he went upstairs, washed and changed, then slipped into bed beside his partner, who slept peacefully, and gently placed an arm around his waist. He lay awake for a while longer, mulling over the events of the day before finally drifting into sleep.
Chapter 9

Angelo and Amadeo

"Wake up! Wake up, man! Come on! I got loads to tell you and you gotta be awake for it cuz you're gonna go ape when you hear it! So come on! Wake up, Mad Man!" Milo encouraged, quietly but insistently. "C'mon, Mad Man!"

"Tol' y' nodda call me dat," 'Deo said blearily. He tried to open his eyes but the light was too bright so he decided to keep them closed.

Milo let out a whoop and ran into the corridor. "He's awake! He spoke! He opened his eyes! He's awake!"

The sounds of running feet and scolding voices reached Amadeo's ears. "Hush now! This is a hospital, not a ballpark!" a woman shushed.

"You should be ashamed of yourself young man!" one voice hissed.

There are sick people here!" ground out another.

"Karen, go get his parents, they're in the cafe getting coffee."

Someone put something on his arm that hissed and squeezed, dang, what was it called? Someone else slid a thermometer in his mouth. Another someone held his wrist for a minute and gently placed his hand back down on the bed. His feet felt cold suddenly and then jerked away as someone ran something that felt like a crochet hook up one after the other. Whoever it was put the blankets back over his feet, tucked them in and gave his toes a reassuring squeeze. Yet another someone stood by the head of his bed, pried his eyelid open with a fingertip and shone a light into it.

Amadeo fought the pressure on his eyelid, tried to turn his head away from it, then tried to lift a hand to swat it away, but his whole body felt heavy and thick and hurt like heck.

"Cuddid ou'," he complained. "'urts."

The light went out and a male voice said, "Close the curtains and turn off the lights, please." 'Deo could hear instructions being carried out. He could feel the temperature difference and could tell that it was dimmer even with his eyes closed.

"Try to open your eyes now," the male voice said. "slowly."

Amadeo slowly opened his eyes. He could see the doctor standing beside him and a group of people clad in white nearby. He blinked his eyes a few times to clear away the fog and the doctor's features came into focus.

The man smiled. "Good morning, son. I'm Dr. Mendoza. How are you feeling today?"

" 'd havta feel bedder t' die," Amadeo quipped. Everyone in the room chuckled, which 'Deo took as a good sign.

"Are you feeling much pain, son?"
"Yuh. 'ole body. Fe'like truck 'it me. 'ead fee's like Wil'y C'oyte after th' anvil drop'd on 'im."

A smiling nurse took the pressure cuff from his arm. Another removed the thermometer and patted his arm gently, then they and several others who had answered the alarm left the room, leaving Amadeo with the doctor, Milo and two other nurses who stood by patiently. The doctor addressed one of the nurses and asked her to get something that 'Deo wouldn't have been able to pronounce even if his mouth hadn't felt like it was full of cotton. Whatever it was she hurried off to get it.

"Wa'er?" he asked. "Wa'er, p'ease. Sirs'y."

The remaining nurse, whose pin said Mrs. Hollings LPN, poured cold water from a jug into a glass, placed a straw into it and brought it over to 'Deo. She helped him sit up a little before bringing the straw to his lips. "Small sips now, hon, you haven't had much in your stomach recently and we don't want you to get sick. There you go. Small sips. Atta boy. Better now?" she asked kindly.

"Yes'm. Thank you," Amadeo said carefully.

The other nurse returned and handed the doctor a syringe. She swabbed 'Deo's arm with something cold. He could smell alcohol.

"Little pinch now, son. Ready?" Amadeo nodded and the doctor gave him the injection. "You should feel better soon," he said smiling.

Amadeo nodded his understanding.

"Do you remember my name, son?"

"M'ndoza."

"Do you remember your name?"

" 'Deo... Rossi."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Hopsital... hossital...?"

"Close enough," Dr. Mendoza smiled.

The doctor gestured and Milo came to stand beside him. "Do you know who this is?"

"Tonto."

The doctor looked askance until he saw both boys grinning.

"You got it Kemosabe!" Milo said happily, taking his friend's left hand in his and gently squeezing, being careful of the IV.

"Go' Silver saddl'd? R'dy t' ride?"

"You ain't goin' nowhere, Dae. You look like somethin' the cat dragged in. Nope, I take that back, you look like somethin' the cat chewed, swallowed, coughed up and then dragged in!" Milo said smiling even more widely.

" 'anks, yer a ray a sunshine."
"Anything for you, my man." Milo grinned.

Just then Amadeo's parents rushed in. His mother ran to the left side of his bed and wrapped her arms gently around his head, planting kisses over every inch of his face that she could reach. He felt her tears as they landed on his cheeks.

His father stood beside his mother and took 'Deo's right hand in his, gently rubbing the fingertips to warm them before bending down and kissing those as well. It was only then that 'Deo noticed that his right hand was in a cast from the first knuckle to about halfway up his arm and that it had been propped up on a pillow.

'Deo raised his left hand to caress his mother's head but his coordination was off and all he felt was his own head, swathed in bandages. Then he noticed the IV.

"Ban'ge'ges? Wha's th' ban'ge'ges for?" he asked, confused.

"You had some swelling and fluid, son. We had to shave your head and drill a few holes in your skull to relieve the pressure. Once your hair grows back they won't even be noticeable."

'Deo reached toward his head again but the doctor gently took his wrist and stopped him. "The holes have been filled in with a special... putty, I guess you could call it. The bone will regenerate around the putty and your skull will be good as new. We just have the bandages on to keep dirt and germs out and to protect the area, which is still soft. Understand?"

Amadeo laid there, taking it all in. "Yuh," he shrugged. Mendoza was amazed at how calmly the boy was taking the news.

"Amadeo," Dr. Mendoza began, looking serious. "Do you remember what happened? Do you know why you're here?"

'Deo took a few moments to gather his thoughts. "Fi'. Bri'on 'n Fargus... I mean, Bridgon an' Froggie... I mean..." he made a sound of frustration.

"It's all right, son, a little confusion is expected. That'll clear up soon."

'Deo raised his hand to his head again, exploring the bandages. He ran his hand gently across his face. "Mir'r?"

"I don't think that's the best idea right now, son." Dr. Mendoza said gently.

"P'ease? 'lease? Doc..."

Mendoza sighed and nodded toward one of the nurses who produced a mirror from one of the bedside tables. Amadeo's hand shook and his mother held out a hand to steady his.

His stomach knotted in anticipation. His head was wrapped in bandages which went under his chin to keep them in place. The bruising on his face was at the yellow and green stage. He ran his tongue inside his mouth and was relieved to feel all of his teeth. There was a cut under his right eye which went from just under his pupil to his temple. It had obviously been stitched up.

"S'it gonna scar?" he asked calmly.

"There's a chance of scarring, yes," Mendoza said honestly.

"I'm gonna look li' a p'rate."
"We'll get your ears pierced and buy you a tricorn hat with a big feather. Maybe a nice ship to complete the image," his father said with a smile. His own stomach knotted when he recalled how close his son had come to losing that eye.

"Nah," interjected Milo, "We'll just wrap you up in a few more bandages and set you after Abbot and Costello."

Everyone laughed, their relief evident. Dr. Mendoza felt the boulder of fear that had been in his stomach since the kid had been brought in to dissolve. He'd been very much afraid that 'Deo would never wake up, or if he did that he'd be blind, paralyzed or mentally impaired. He hadn't brought his fears to the boy's parents, preferring to keep them to himself until the young man actually woke up and he could see for himself the extent of the damage.

For the first time since he'd awakened, Amadeo turned his head to take in his surroundings. He looked to the right, past his mother and father, and saw cards and pictures plastered all over the wall. A bright bouquet of helium balloons took up one corner of the room. More cards and vases full of flowers were on the windowsill.

He looked to the left and saw flower arrangements, stuffed animals, and more cards, as well as a tin of what might possibly be cookies. Then he saw the empty bed on the other side of the room.

"Wer's Ang'lo?" he asked. It was only when he saw the concerned glances passing between the adults in the room that Amadeo became scared.

"Wer's Ang'lo?!" he demanded, "he a'right? he 'live? Wer's 'e?" He struggled to get up but Dr. Mendoza and the nurses held him gently but firmly down on the bed making shushing sounds, patting his shoulders and arms and trying to calm him down.

"Amadeo... 'Deo. Calm down, son, or I'll have to sedate you." said the doctor firmly. He made eye contact with one of the nurses who took a few steps toward the door to get the sedative.

"Lemme go! Wer's Ang'lo? Wha' appen'd to 'im? Go', tell me 'e's ok!" Amadeo cried, still struggling, nearly pulling out his IV.

"Amadeo Christoforo!" came the quiet but stern voice of his father. "Enough of this now! Behave yourself!" he said in Italian.

Amadeo immediately obeyed and the doctor and nurse lowered him gently back onto the bed. His parents were normally boisterous people, neighbors pleasantly jibed that when his father told a joke that they could hear him all the way to the end of the street. To have his father speaking quietly and in that firm tone was enough to get 'Deo's attention.

The boy turned distraught eyes to his father and asked, "'s 'e all right, dad? 's 'e 'live?" His father once again took his son's right hand in his and stroked the fingertips.

"He's alive." his father said quietly. "He's as fine as frog's hair split four ways." Mr. Rossi looked up at the doctor for approval for what he wanted to say next and continued as Mendoza nodded.

Amadeo knew he wouldn't have said anything like that if it weren't true so he remained quiet and looked inquiringly at his parents.

"He's home with his family, honey. He went home... a while ago," he hedged.
"Wh'ile 'go? Wh'as wh'ile 'go?"

He saw the looks pass between the adults again, but knowing that Angelo was all right he wasn't nearly as concerned as he had been. "Tell me. Wh'as 'rong? Wh'as goin' on? Tell me, p'ease?"

Mr. Rossi picked up his son's hand again and caressed the fingers. Mrs. Rossi ran her hand gently up and down his arm. "'Dae, Angelo went home nearly three weeks ago."

Amadeo took a moment to let that information sink in. "T'ree weeks 'go? 'ow long've I been 'ere?"

Milo, who had been standing silently by, once again took his friend's left hand in his and gently curled his fingers around 'Deo's. He looked helplessly at Mr. and Mrs. Rossi.

"A little over a month, son," his father said quietly.

Amadeo blinked several times, licked his lips and said, "M' 'ead itches." He wiggled his toes, then flexed his ankles. He adjusted his body on the bed and slowly drew his knees up. The movement was shaky and he felt weak, but he finally managed it. He marveled at the lack of pain and at how good it felt to move, and how his skin immediately cooled where it had been against the sheets.

He shrugged his shoulders and stretched his arms tentatively, conscious of the IV in the one hand and the cast on the other. He was a little surprised when his mother took a tissue and began to wipe the tears that trickled from the corners of his eyes.

Milo tightened his grip on his friend's hand as much as he could without hurting him and wondered how 'Deo, who had been unconscious since before arriving at the hospital, had known that Angelo had shared the same room with him.
Amadeo recovered quickly, laughing at himself when he tried to wipe the moisture from his face with his right hand and bumped his cheek with the cast. "Swift move, slick," he said aloud to himself. Milo laughed in relief. 'Deo's mother reached out a hand and rubbed the slightly red mark with her thumb, unshed tears bright in her own eyes.

"C'n I ge' up?" he asked the doctor.

"You've been immobile for a while. We've been exercising your arms and legs and moving you regularly, but you're going to be a little weak to start. We'll have to take it slowly, understood?"

"'k," he said.

"Alright then, let's start by having you sit up," Dr. Mendoza said, nodding to the nurses who had been standing by.

Mrs. Hollings cranked the bed so that the head was elevated while the doctor and the other nurse supported Amadeo on either side in case he slid. The name tag on the woman supporting him on the left read Liza Henry LPN. Without realizing what he was doing, he began to sing, "There's a hole, in the bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza, there's a hole in the bucket, Dear Liza, a hole."

Everyone in the room laughed. Ms. Henry blushed but had a huge grin on her face.

Amadeo winced and twitched his shoulders to scratch the itch that developed between the blades. The doctor supported his head and helped him sit forward while Liza scratched his back gently. 'Deo sighed in relief.

"You'll get a lot of that as your circulation returns to normal," he warned.

"Tha' feels sooo gooood." 'Deo purred. Too soon for his liking, the back scratching ended and he was laid gently back against the pillows that had been piled behind him.

"How does your head feel, Amadeo? Any pain? Discomfort?" Dr. Mendoza asked.

"'urts a little, no'bad though."

"Good," he said smiling. "Miss Henry, would you please find Sam and Gary? Tell them we're ready to start." The second nurse smiled, nodded and left quickly to find the men mentioned.

He was a little dismayed when the doctor asked his parents and Milo to please wait in the visitor's lounge. "Don't worry," Mendoza assured him, "they can come back soon, but we have some tests
and treatments to do and you might want a little privacy in the meantime."

The two men arrived and introduced themselves as Sam Fisher and Gary Bearclaw, explaining that they were physical therapists and what they were going to do. They were so down to earth and homey that 'Deo liked them immediately. Mrs. Hollings and Ms. Henry bid them goodbye, assuring Amadeo that they would be seeing him again soon and then left.

Sam and Gary began to carefully massage 'Deo's arms with some sort of sweet smelling lotion, bending and flexing them, mindful of the IV and the cast. The movement felt wonderful and 'Deo began, at first tentatively then with more confidence, to move on his own. He was still weak and shaky but he was moving. The men and doctor smiled encouragingly. They untied the back of his hospital gown and applied the lotion as they massaged his neck and back. Amadeo groaned with pleasure.

They retied the gown and then pulled the blankets down to work on his legs, and it was then that 'Deo realized why the doctor had wanted everyone out of the room for that. He blushed as he realized that he was wearing nothing other than a hospital gown and that he was hooked up to a bag that... he blushed even more deeply. Dr. Mendoza smiled in understanding. "Don't worry, son. Now that you're awake we can disconnect that," he said, as he gently removed the device.

Sam and Gary adjusted the hospital gown and pretended they hadn't seen anything while they worked on his legs, massaging and flexing them gently from the hips to his toes.

Amadeo reached from left to right and began to scratch his arm, closing his eyes in pleasure as the itching eased.

One of the men, Gary, gently put his hand on 'Deo's, stopping him from scratching and placed his hand back to his side. He went to the bathroom and returned with a basin of warm water and a washcloth and soap. He gently washed the area 'Deo had just been scratching. It burned slightly. Deo looked down at his arm with a frown.

What the heck was Gary doing? Then he noticed the three scratches which had appeared out of nowhere and which were bleeding slightly.

"I know it feels good to scratch, Amadeo, but you need to be careful," he said kindly as he accepted a bandage from Sam and proceeded to wrap it around the boy's arm.

"We've been keeping your nails trimmed but you still have a few rough edges. If you need to scratch, use the palm of your hand, all right? Or if it gets unbearable, call one of the nurses and they can give you an ointment that will ease the itch. But don't use your nails."

Amadeo sighed but nodded.

"Do you want to try to stand, 'Deo?" Sam asked. "Only as for as long as you can tolerate it. Don't worry, Gary and I will be on either side of you and we won't let you fall."

Amadeo nodded again.

"All right then," Gary said, lowering the bed rail as Sam turned a crank on the bed that caused it to get closer to the floor. "Easy now. Sit up... slowly, now," he encouraged while he wrapped a soft belt like thing around his patient's waist.

'Deo sat up and fought off a brief surge of dizziness.

"How do you feel?" Sam asked.
"Ok now," Amadeo said assertively, trying to take the belt off. He felt strange with it on and wondered what it was for.

"Ok, then. We're going to swing your legs over to the side of the bed. Doc's got your back so if you feel like you're going to go over backward you'll be safe. Ready?"

'Deo nodded again and took a deep breath. "This thing is a little tight. Can we get rid of it?"

"Nope," Sam said gently, "this is just in case you stumble and start to fall. Gary and I can have a good, strong grip on you without having to worry about you slipping from between our fingers," he joked.

Gary took the boy's ankles while the doctor and Sam supported him from the back and side, and pulled gently until 'Deo's legs were clear of the bed. 'Deo slowly bent his knees so that his feet were inches above the floor.

"How's it going so far, son?" asked Dr. Mendoza who had been observing silently until then. "Any dizziness? Pain?"

"Nosir. Not so's I'd complain."

"All right, Mr. Rossi," Sam said with a smile, "Ready to rock and roll?"

'Deo smiled crookedly, "Gonna dance holes in m' shoes, so watch out."

Sam and Gary gently helped him to stand. 'Deo felt a little dizzy and weak but fought it off quickly. Firm but gentle hands supported him even as he felt the men using their other hands to keep hold of the belt.

Amadeo planted his feet firmly, enjoying the feel of the cold hard linoleum beneath them.

"Take a step when you're ready, start small," Sam encouraged.

The boy took one tentative step, then another. His legs felt weak and a little wobbly but he was determined to keep going until he couldn't go any more.

He took another step, and another, gaining confidence as he walked, supporting himself less and less on the two men as he went along. He got to the wall, tried to turn and lost his balance. Gary and Sam were right there to catch and support him.

"All right, 'Deo?" Sam asked, concerned.

"Havin' a blas'," he smiled crookedly, his face still somewhat swollen after his violent encounter.

"Let's get you back to the bed now. I think you've done enough for the moment," Gary said, preparing to link hands with Sam to create a chair for 'Deo to sit on.

"No!" he protested. "Sorry," he said, sheepishly as he saw the raised eyebrows on the three men. "I c'n do this. Jus' need t' turn 'round. Please? I c'n do it," he said pleadingly.

Sam, Gary, and Mendoza shot each other glances and gave each other the 'let's go for it' look. Sam and Gary slowly helped Amadeo turn around. 'Deo took a deep breath and walked with only a little assistance back to his bed. The men helped him get back in and covered him up, only to remove the blankets a moment later to begin to massage his arms and legs once again as they were shaking
from the effort. Dr. Mendoza would normally have called in one of the LPN's to fetch another washcloth but he did it himself, wet it and brought it back to wipe 'Deo's face.

"Doc? C'n we take the ban'ge'ges off? M' head's a little itchy."

"Yes, we can take them off now, you're due to have your hair washed anyway. But you have to promise me not to scratch. You're all but healed but you may still be a bit tender, and we don't want you to open the wounds again accidentally."

"Yessir. Promise."

Dr. Mendoza gave Amadeo a look that plainly said, 'We'll see about that.' He pressed the button on the wall beside Amadeo's bed and called Mrs. Hollings, requesting her presence. As soon as she arrived he asked her to fetch a clean washcloth, refill the basin with warm soapy water and be ready for when the bandages came off.

When she'd done as asked, he reached into the pocket of his long white coat and pulled out a pair of scissors with blunt tips. He snipped the part of the bandage that went under the boy's chin, then carefully cut a notch near his ear and cut in a straight line across the top of the boy's head before stopping near the other ear. He gently peeled the bandages off just in case any of the wounds had opened and bled and were stuck. They came off without a problem.

Amadeo immediately reached up to scratch until he heard Dr. Mendoza clear his throat meaningfully. Amadeo blushed, abashed, and put his hands back down. Mrs. Hollings approached, and with a very soft touch, began to wash the boy's scalp and hair. He leaned into the slight pressure, reminding Dr. Mendoza of his beagle puppy when his ears were scratched. Amadeo reached up again and stopped when he saw the doctor's expression. "'m not gonna scatch, sir, just want t' feel it."

Dr. Mendoza nodded and Amadeo felt his hair. He'd seen pictures of hedgehogs and had never touched one, but he had the impression that if he could, the two would feel identical. He wondered idly what a hedgehog sounded like.

"Mirror? Please?"

Mendoza nodded at Mrs. Hollings who once again fetched the mirror from the bedside table, while Sam retrieved the one from the empty bedside table as well. Sam held one mirror in front while Mrs. Hollings held one behind his head so that he could see the back, much as the barber did when he went for a trim.

Amadeo had never thought of himself as a Ken doll, but he had been fond of his hair, and he worried that he'd have large empty patches where the scalp had been drilled and the hair had been shaved. There was only a fine growth of hair but it was the same dark black, and the scars were nearly unnoticeable. The hair was more sparse around them, with nothing at all sprouting from the three dime sized areas which were even whiter than the rest of his scalp. But the rest of it was growing and he knew soon no one would be able to see them at all.

"C'n we... can we leave the ban'ge... bandages... off, please?"

"I think we can do that, as long as you keep your word and don't scratch. Deal?" Dr. Mendoza said.

"Outta sight," 'Deo replied, approvingly.

Sam and Gary laughed and clapped him on the back. Mrs. Hollings put a warm hand on his arm above the cast and squeezed gently. Dr. Mendoza smiled and patted the boy's shoulder.
Amadeo's stomach growled. He hadn't felt hungry up till that point but suddenly he thought he could manage a nice lean steak and a baked potato, maybe some corn to go with it. His mouth watered.

Mendoza grinned. "Mrs. Hollings, we can remove the IV now. Mr. Rossi here can start with a liquid diet for the next few days. Please have dietary send up a tray to tide him over until dinner, please."

Liquid diet?! What on earth was a liquid diet? "Ummm, my teeth are all there, sir. I'm sure I'd be able to chew just fine."

Mendoza tried not to laugh. At the boy's inquiring look, Mendoza explained, "You haven't had solid food for a little over a month. We need to get your body used to food a little at a time, same as we did with the walking, understand?"

The boy sighed. "Yes sir," he replied as his stomach growled again.

"'K 'Deo, we'll leave you to your lunch and your visitors. We'll see you tomorrow and do more exercises, all right?" Gary asked.

"Sounds like a plan," 'Deo smiled.

Dr. Mendoza, Mrs. Hollings, Sam and Gary all left the room and Amadeo settled back against the pillows and cautiously leaned his head back. He had no idea what could cause the wounds to reopen besides scratching but he was determined not to do it.

He'd nearly fallen asleep when his parents and Milo came back into the room, followed by all of his brothers and sisters.

"'Deo you son of a gun!" his brother Dante bellowed, leaning down to give his youngest brother a hug. "Lookin' good!" Then he gave a little yelp as his mother 'Natie' gave him a hearty swat to the seat of his jeans. "Ow, ma!" he protested.

"If she hadn't I would have." his wife Beth Ann said sternly. "We are in a hospital," she said pointedly.

"And we've only been allowed to come in all at once because we promised to keep the noise down," his sister Rene added. "If we end up being asked to leave I'll smack you myself, got it?" she hissed.

"OK! OK!" he said in a much quieter voice. "Take it easy!" he replied as he turned to get his hindquarters out of reach.

His sister Teresa leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "How are you, sweetie? It's so good to see those big brown eyes open again." Her boyfriend, Connor smiled and took 'Deo's casted hand in both of his. "Good to see you, buddy."

One by one they all approached him and shook his hand or kissed him, some doing both. All had grins a mile wide on their faces.

"You ate it but good, didn't you, nimrod?" asked his seventeen-year-old brother Con, grinning wider as his mother delivered a somewhat harder swat to his backside for being insensitive. "Ow, ma! He knows I'm joking, right Dae? Dae, me say Dae, me say Dae, me say Dae-o!" he sang.

"Some'n'ke knock me out 'gain, please?" 'Deo pleaded.
"Awww, come on little brother... gimme some sugar!" Con said as though speaking to a baby, puckering his lips and making loud smooching noises.

"I'll give you sugar!" his mother said giving him a smack on the rear that made him bolt upright and cover his behind with a scowl. "Now behave yourself! Don't make me go home and get the wooden spoon!"

Con glanced at his father, and seeing the expression there, respectfully said "Mi dispiace, mamma." (I'm sorry, mom.)

Amadeo grinned at his brother's discomfort and laid there trying to get the Banana Boat Song out of his head when he realized then that he had no idea what day it was and asked. An employee from dietary slipped in, placed a tray in front of Amadeo and slipped out before anyone realized she'd been there.

"It's May 9th. It's Saturday," his mother replied.

"Where're the kids?" he asked, turning his attention toward his sisters, Gia and Rene, and their husbands. He was unaware of it when his mother uncovered the bowl of chicken broth and began to feed him some, little by little.

"Corbin and Keith are with my folks." Giovana's husband, Daniel replied. They had four-year-old identical twin boys who were so alike that even their parents had a hard time telling them apart, and the boys took great pleasure in pretending to be each other just to confuse everyone.

"Michael is with Alex's Aunt Delphina," said Rene, referring to their two-year-old son.

"And unfortunately I have to get back to the base by tonight, so I won't be able to stay as long as I'd like," Alejandro, Rene's husband, said regretfully. He was a Gunnery Sergeant who had been temporarily stationed at the Marine Corps Supply Center in Albany, a two-hour drive away when he'd gotten word of Amadeo's injuries. He gave Amadeo an approving look. "Do you remember anything about the fight, Dae?"

Amadeo thought about it for a few moments. "I remember bits and pieces, but... some things are kinda fuzzy. Doc says that's normal though." His mother offered him a glass of ginger ale, placing the straw in her son's mouth so that he could take a sip.

"Heard it turned into a mess and a half. Mom was madder'n a wet hen! Pitched a major conniption fit when Cobrane called." Con said enthusiastically. It was his father's turn to smack his son's backside. Constantin frowned and casually made his way to the other side of the bed.

"But we also heard that you were very heroic," his brother Gabriel interjected. "You went in when no one else would, and you put up a good fight. You used your head."

"Tough as nails and twice as sharp," Milo said, proudly.

Alejandro patted his youngest brother in law on the shoulder. "I heard that you fought like a lion. I heard that you took on two boys who were older and bigger than you and that you did some damage to them before they overpowered you." They'd been asked to encourage him to remember whenever possible.

Amadeo frowned, flashes of memory came and went. "Yeah," he said, distractedly, "Yeah, I remember a little. I used some of those hand to hand combat moves you showed me." He looked up at his brother in law. "I remembered what you said about potentially lethal moves. I didn't use them," he reassured, then he frowned, "Should I have?" He opened his mouth for a spoon full of
gelatin and grimaced at the taste, blushing furiously when he realized that his mother had been feeding him the whole time.

"No, 'Deo, absolutely not. You did exactly what you needed to do. The last thing you needed was a murder charge leveled against you," Alex reassured his brother in law. "But when you're better, we are going to go over tactics that are useful when faced with multiple opponents. OK?"

The boy tried not to but he yawned widely before nodding at his brother in law. "Gotcha, boss," he said sleepily.

"I think we'd better leave, for now, everyone," Natie said quietly.

"No, ma, I'm fine," Amadeo said through another yawn.

"You go to sleep now. We'll be back later, my little love," she said quietly.

The family bent to kiss and hug him goodbye.

"Milo, can we give you a ride home?" Mr. Rossi asked.

"No sir, thank you. I'd just like to stay with 'Deo for a minute more. I'll walk home afterward. Thank you for the offer though."

'Johnny' Rossi made a grand bow and filed out behind his children and wife.

"Dae? 'Deo?"

"Yuh, Milo. S'up?" Amadeo answered, fighting to keep his eyes open.

"Got lots t' tell you. I'll be back tomorrow first thing in the morning, 'k?"

"Yuh. 'K."

"Deo?"

"Wha'?" he asked, slightly annoyed that his friend wouldn't let him sleep.

"I need t' know... how'd you know that Angelo was in the bed next to yours?" Milo had tried to speak to Angelo, other students had stopped in to see him, but the privacy screen had always been closed and the other boy had always appeared to be asleep when his parents and brothers weren't visiting him.

"I cou' hear 'im. He'd talk t' me," 'Deo mumbled. "Can't remember what he said, zactly, but I could hear 'im. Coulda swore he was readin' L'il Prince t' me."

With that, Amadeo drifted off to sleep.

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Reference to: Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)

Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany: By early 1954, the station was sufficiently complete with warehouses and administration buildings to assume supply support for Marines east of the Rocky Mountains and in the Atlantic area. On July 29, 1954, the command was renamed the Marine Corps Supply Center Albany. The MCSC managed and controlled supplies at storage and issue locations in the eastern half of the United States, the Caribbean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea areas. Depot level rebuild operations began to function at the base in October 1954.

The base opened in 1954, as the Marine Corps Depot of Supplies. In 1959, renamed the Marine Corps Supply Center, it was assigned the mission of rebuilding nonaviation equipment.

Wikipedia
Sunday morning, Milo slipped out of church before the service was over and ran toward the hospital. He knew that when his parents found out he'd be in for it but it was worth it to be able to talk to Amadeo for a little while before everyone in the state stopped by to see him. He just bet that every person with a phone was on it last night, spreading the word, and those without phones were most likely told in person. He pictured the neighbors scurrying around the neighborhood from house to house like field mice, spreading the word. He knew for sure his mother had been on the 'gossip gadget', as his father referred to it, from the time she got home until dad made her hang up around eleven that night.

"Young man," the nurse chided, "visiting hours do not start until eleven o'clock. It is only nine forty-five now. You'll just have to wait. You may sit in the lounge." She then watched him until he plastered a hangdog expression on his face, and turned toward the indicated 'lounge'. Lounge! Milo thought sarcastically. Fancy name for a featureless room filled with uncomfortable furniture.

He casually glanced toward the nurse who had turned her back to work on whatever it was she'd been doing before he'd walked in, then quickly swerved and darted into Amadeo's room, partially shutting the door and pulling the privacy screen around them so that he wouldn't be seen immediately.

'Deo smiled broadly when he saw his best friend. "Thank God you're here, Mi! Thought I was gonna go insane with boredom! How'd you get past the dragon?"

"Wore my elven cloak, how else?" Milo replied, nonchalantly. "Hey, love the lid," he said, gesturing to the knitted cap on his friend's head. "Oh, um, when's she supposed to come back in? Any idea?" he asked, concerned.

"Beats me!" 'Deo replied. "I had breakfast about a half hour ago and they already came to pick up the tray, so I think you're all right till the doctor comes in."

"Hey," Amadeo whispered, glancing furtively around. "I don't suppose you have any snacks on you?"

"Uh, no man, sorry. Just got outta church. What're you looking for?"

"Anything solid! Popcorn? Twinkies?"

"What," Milo asked amused, "they won't give you junk food in the hospital?"

"No, man! They won't let me have anything solid! It's all juice, tea, broth. The most solid thing I've been allowed to eat is ice cream! And that gelatin? Nasty stuff! I don't know what they make it out
of but it ain't food! I'm dyin' here!"

"Solid, eh?" Milo put a thumb to his lips as he often did while thinking, then smiled and clicked his fingers. "I know just the thing, Dae! Ice cream soda. It's liquid, right? And you said they gave you ice cream, so that's in there too, right? And you get ginger ale, right?"

'Deo nodded, catching onto what his friend was saying.

"Cherry Coke!" they both said at the same time.

"Have no fear Kemosabe. I'll get the word out and I know the kids'll be happy as clams to smuggle stuff in for you, just for the fun of getting it past Smaug*." 

"Ah, you are a true friend, Mi," Amadeo said, relaxing against the pillows and smiling broadly.

"OK, so look, Dae! I've been wanting to tell you what's been going on forever! Wait'll you hear!"

"Hey, before you start, I'm just curious...where the heck were you that morning? What day was it? Anyway, I'm getting distracted...where were you?"

"Well, on the day forever after to be known as The Day of the Amadeo's Arthurian Adventure..."

"What?!"

"Amadeo's Arthurian Adventure," Milo repeated casually.

"Oh my God. That's horrible!" Amadeo said disbelievingly.

"How about 'Deo's Dilemma."

"How about 'Deo's Disaster?" he argued.

"Are you kidding, man? You're a hero! They're calling you 'Deo the Defender!"

"How about 'Deo the Nearly Decapitated!"

"Amadeo the Arbiter!"

"Amadeo the Ashen."

"Amadeo's Advent!"

"Amadeo's Annihilation."

"Amadeo the Avalanche!"

"Amadeo's Anticlimax."

"Amadeo the Assassin."

"'Deo the Ditz!"

"'Deo the Deity!"

"Whoa! No way Jose! I draw the line at sainthood!"

"Ok then, how about 'Deo the Diabolic?"
"Well, now let's not go crazy here."

"Amadeo the Assailant! Amadeo the Audacious! I got more good ones than you have bad ones, so shut up."

"Idjit, hate to tell you but they're all bad."

"Jerk, now let me finish...the date of the Big Adventure was April 13th," Milo said, capitalizing the words with emphasis. "And I'm real sorry I wasn't there. I, uhh..." he blushed. "Well, first I overslept, and then I kinda mouthed off to mom a few times and dad gave me about twenty good reasons with his belt that convinced me that wasn't the best thing I coulda done. That's why I was late, or I swear, 'Deo, I'd have helped you. You know that, don't you?" he asked anxiously.

"Yeah, man. I know," replied Amadeo, reaching out to his friend to take his hand. "I couldn't help but wonder if you'd been there helping if other people would have grown a pair and jumped in too."

"No sense worrying about it now, Dae," Milo said sensibly.

"You're right. So tell me, what's this exciting news you just had to tell me that it couldn't wait till regular visiting hours?"

"Well, if you're gonna be like that I'll leave and come back at eleven when everyone in the United States is crammed in here..."

Amadeo laughed. "No, now don't be like that, mio fratello del cuore. Spill."

"One of these days you're gonna tell me what that means if I gotta get you wasted to get it outta you."

"Ugh, don't even joke," replied Amadeo, who disapproved heartily of drugs and alcohol. "So tell me before I bust. What's happening?"

"Wow, now that I'm here I don't know where to start!"

"Wanna try going alphabetically?" 'Deo joked.

"Won't work, you know I always have to recite the alphabet in my head to know what comes next."

Amadeo twisted his lips and cocked his eyebrows which made Milo laugh.

"OK, Well, for one thing, Fishlock is gone."

"None of the teachers are supposed to have keys to the room where the grades are kept, Dae! The students were approached privately, one by one, and asked about their experiences in Fishlock's classes. Once they were told that someone had brought charges up against him and they were assured that their identities would be kept secret, from Fishlock anyway, since the school board might need to talk to them, a bunch of them spilled the beans. Once word got out, Barnes and Cobrane couldn't keep up with the stream of kids who came in and called to tell their stories. People who already graduated came in and told their stories! And get this, Barnes asked Fishface for his keys. At first ol' Fishie refused but Cobrane... man he's my new hero, I'm tellin' ya... just looked at him... just looked at him, and Fishlock handed the keys over, and one of 'em fit the door."

Amadeo looked confused.

"None of the teachers are supposed to have keys to the room where the grades are kept, Dae! The
only ones who are supposed to have keys are Miz Jennings, Mr. Barnes, and Mr. Cobrane! The
members of the school board don't have keys either! They have to ask Barnes, Cobrane or Miz
Jennings to get the required records if they want any, and it has to be documented who wanted the
records and when."

"No one knows when or how Fishlock got his copy but he wasn't supposed to have one! I didn't
know this before but even the room where the schedules and student records are off limits to the
teachers. If teachers want information on a student they have to request it through Mrs. Jennings,
Mr. Cobrane or Mr. Barnes."

"What about Sharon?" 'Deo asked suddenly.

"From what I heard she has to get permission to go in too. If one of them opens the door for her she
can get in and get whatever file they asked her for, but she doesn't have a key either. Why?"

Amadeo frowned at that information. If Sharon didn't have a key, how had she gotten into Angelo's
file to get his schedule? "No, no reason, really. Just curious."

"So anyway, Fishlock was brought up in front of a board of inquiry, the list of charges and the
testimonials were read out loud, and you had to hear Fishlock, yelling that everyone was lying,
everyone was against him, it was a plot to discredit him, he wasn't going to stand for it."

"They let the students in to listen?" 'Deo asked, surprised.

Milo grinned. "Not precisely. A bunch of us stood outside the door, and some others sat on the
ground under the windows and listened in. He wasn't exactly hard to hear, so it wasn't really
eavesdropping."

"Where were all the teachers? When did this all happen?"

"It was after school hours, and the teachers were... well jeez, I dunno but they sure weren't
anywhere around where we could see them."

Amadeo grinned. "So he's really gone?"

"He's really gone. 'Grades have been adjusted accordingly,'" he said, trying to imitate Barnes which
was a little harder, "He lost his tenure... whatever that is, and he was told that 'you will not be
receiving recommendations from this school if you attempt to apply for a teaching position
elsewhere.'"

'Deo had no idea who Milo was trying to imitate that time but they were welcome words, and he
didn't care if Milo sounded like Donald Duck while he spoke them.

"So what else happened? You said you had lots to tell me," Amadeo prompted.

"Oh, ok! The cafeteria... remember how bad the food is?"

"Course I do," Amadeo said, sounding insulted. "As a matter of fact, from what I can tell, the fine
cafeteria workers moonlight here on the weekends!"

Milo grinned. "Well, everyone boycotted the cafeteria. Everyone brown bagged it, and they
brought extras for the kids who didn't have anything at home to make a lunch out of. At first, there
was a little problem some of the kids saying they wouldn't take charity, but the other kids? They
said 'It's not charity, it's one friend sharing his lunch with another friend.'"
"When Barnes asked what was going on, that guy Darren got up and told him how the food was. Then he invited Barnes to sit down at the table and try that day's menu. Well, everyone there just bust out laughing when they saw the look on his face. D'ja ever offer one of your friends a 'crabapple' and it was really a green persimmon?"

Amadeo laughed and nodded. He had in fact done that to Con the year before. It had been particularly funny since Con had fallen for the same prank the year before.

"It was priceless, Dae! I wish I'd had a camera! So anyway, the menu at the school got a lot better since then. They replaced the people who'd been cooking, had someone called a die-titan write up a whole new menu. Someone's in charge of checking out the produce before it's delivered to the school, so we don't get wrinkled fruit anymore. You can actually recognize what's on your tray now. There's different kinds of soup offered three days a week, there's more choices for sandwiches other than bologna and peanut butter, and if you want a salad it's really crisp. Remember what we used to call the cherry tomatoes?" he grinned.

"Eyeballs!" they said together.

"That's great!" Amadeo couldn't have been more pleased if he'd accomplished that feat himself.

"The strange thing is that there's suddenly a lot fewer cats and rats than there used to be," Milo said with a wink.

'Deo pulled a sick face. "That's just nasty, Mi."

"Oh, I got better for you! Everyone has banded together against the bullies."

"Say that again?"

"Everyone travels in packs, even the geeks. Some of them carry whistles and'll blow 'em if the school bullies come anywhere near them. Anyone who hears the whistle runs to help."

"Hot dang!" 'Deo said happily.

"Wanna hear something really funny?"

"Sure."

"A bunch of girls beat up Oren Ogilvy," he laughed.

"You're joking?! Oren is like seven feet tall and must weigh three hundred pounds!" Oren had been held back twice in senior year and was the only guy in school that the other bullies had been afraid of. If Oren had had his way he'd have left school after flunking out the first time without the added hindrance of a diploma. His goal in life was to drive a big rig and he was sure he didn't need a high school diploma to do that, but his parents disagreed and forced him to continue his schooling. This was Oren's last chance to graduate and he was even more hostile than usual as a result.

"Yeah, according to Molly Denton, Oren started up with her, Gretchen Pierce and Sue Peterson, shoving them around and pulling their hair. So they just hauled off and started kicking and punching him, pulling his hair... 'Deo, no lie, the guy was half bald by the time they got done with him. He even had bite marks on his arms and hands! He ran like the devil was after him!

"No kiddin'!" 'Deo replied, pleasantly surprised. "Good for them!"

"Yep, after what Angelo went through the students decided to put their foot down... feet? Anyway,
the students all look out for each other now, and some of the guys from the wrestling and football teams monitor that area behind the school before and after school to make sure no one else gets blind-sided. The stoners weren't too happy with that though, because now they have to find a new place to hide and sneak their smokes." Milo said with a smile.

Amadeo became serious. "How's Angelo? Is he included in the new protection plan?"

Milo looked slightly embarrassed. "He hasn't been back to school since it happened. What I heard is that his parents arranged for a tutor to go to their house. I found out where he lives, though!" Milo said encouragingly, "But his parents or one of his brothers always answer the door and all they say is that Angelo isn't available. Then they smile politely and close the door. Same thing when we call his house. Well, I mean, they don't close the door when we call cuz that'd just be silly, well, I dunno if they close the door when we call or not since I don't know if anyone might'a been at the door at the time, but they hang the phone up nicely when I call," he added, "I don't even see 'im in town anymore."

'Deo looked closely at his friend to see if he'd been serious about Angelo's family not closing the door when people called on the phone and then shook it off.

"Where does he live?"

"Know that dirt road just down a ways from the Ketterly's?"

"Between them and the Mason's?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

'Deo raised his eyebrows. Who on earth could live there, it was just about next to nowhere. Phone service? Must have cost a fortune to hook one up down there, he thought.

"Anything else happen?"

"Oh, yeah! Curly Baker was suspended!"

"Curly? What for?"

"Well, word is that Felix Garruson ran for help and a bunch of the teachers came out, including Cobrane and Barnes. Curly's the one that didn't come forward when they gave everyone they saw the chance to fess up."

"What? What happened? Gave everyone the chance to fess up to what?" Amadeo looked perplexed.

"After you and Angelo were rushed to the hospital, Barnes and Cobrane started making calls to everyone's families, to tell them what happened. Miz Jennings went into a few classrooms, looked around and then left, no one knew what that was about. 'Bout an hour and a half later Mr. Cobrane came on the PA and called an assembly. Barnes got up to the podium and told everyone that some of the people who'd been standing around watching had been identified and the teachers knew who they all were.

"Barnes said that he was going to give the kids the chance to come forward on their own, but anyone who didn't, they'd be suspended."

"One of the students raised his hand and asked what was going to happen to the kids who did tell, and Barnes said it depended on how truthful and helpful they were. The ones who admitted to
staying and not doing anything could face detentions and or a visit to Cobrane's office. The ones who didn't would be suspended and possibly expelled... uh, what's the word?... pending... pending a hearing with the school board, for breaking the code of conduct and allowing another student to be injured and not getting help from someone in authority."

Amadeo nearly laughed. "Confess and get detention and paddled, or stay quiet and get suspended and maybe expelled. Great choices there. Why didn't they just threaten to feed 'em peas and brussels sprouts, they'd've gotten the same results."

Milo wrinkled his nose at the thought.

"So, who came forward, do you know?"

"At first no one would talk about it. Some of the bigger kids started talking trash about anyone who told, callin' em finks and stuff, but Cobrane got wind of it and called another assembly. He told everyone what happened. Man, 'Deo, I didn't know, you know?" Milo said looking distraught.

Amadeo wasn't sure but it looked for a moment as though his best friend were about to cry.

"Didn't know what? Come on, man, waiting for you to spit out the story is worse than trying to choke down another bowl of chicken broth."

Milo gave a watery laugh and rubbed his eyes as though he were tired. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to tell you."

"Why don't we find out how much Mr. Rossi remembers today, then we can go from there?" came a voice from the doorway.

Milo and Amadeo jumped guiltily and turned to see Dr. Mendoza standing in the doorway with a wry grin on his face.

"Good morning, Mr. Jablonski. I'm just curious, do you happen to have the correct time? It seems that all of the hospital's clocks are running slow today."

"Gee, Doc, I musta forgot my watch at home today. I'm not early, am I?" Milo asked innocently.

Amadeo tried but failed to keep the grin from his face, so he raised a hand to partially cover his mouth in a thoughtful gesture.

"Just a little," Mendoza deadpanned.

"Young man! What are you doing in here!? I specifically told you..." scolded The Dragon, otherwise known as Ms. Greer.

"It's all right, Ms. Greer. I don't believe that Mr. Jablonski has done any harm. You're exactly on time however, I was just about to find out what our young man here has been able to remember since waking. Did you bring your notepad and pen?"

With a final scowl aimed at the boys, Ms. Greer gave the doctor an offended look and replied, "Of course, Doctor."

"Are you ready to begin, Amadeo?" asked Mendoza.

"I guess so, sir. What do you want to know?"

"What is the first thing you remember from that day?"
"Mmmmm, do you mean like, what I had for breakfast?"

"If you like," replied Mendoza with a smile. "However, if you'd prefer we can skip over that and begin with what you saw when you arrived at the school."

"I saw Freddie and Brice tossing Angelo around like a football, and a bunch of people just standing around watching," 'Deo said, anger tinging his voice.

Ms. Greer wrote down every word, a grim expression on her face.

As Amadeo related what he could remember of that day, Milo looked increasingly distressed and held onto his best friend's hand, squeezing reassuringly when 'Deo recalled Freddie advancing on him with the knife.

Seeing Amadeo's agitation as he recalled the events, Dr. Mendoza suddenly said. "That's enough for now, Amadeo. Ms. Greer, please get Mr. Rossi a glass of cold water and a cool cloth."

Milo's fingers were red and aching as his friend's grip had tightened with each word, but he would never complain. He could tolerate a little pain if it helped his friend feel better.

Ms. Greer, with a much softer expression than when she'd arrived, helped Amadeo slowly sip some water and then bathed his face with the cloth. "All right, honey, it's all right. It's all over and done with, OK? All over and done with," she said softly, placing her hand gently on the side of his face.

Mendoza eased Milo's hand out of 'Deo's grip and placed it on his chest and then put one of his own on the boy's. "Amadeo, I'd like you to breathe with me, can you do that son?" he asked, calmly. "Breathe in for six beats of your heart, and exhale for six beats. Breathe with me, son. Let's start. Ready? Come on, Amadeo, you can do it. Breathe in for six... that's right... slowly now... out for six, good boy. Let's do it again. In for six... that's right. Out for six. Good."

When Amadeo's breathing returned to normal he leaned back against his pillows. He felt as wiped out as if he'd run a 10,000-meter event. Ms. Greer took his pulse, wrote it down on the pad she'd been taking notes on and placed the cloth on his forehead.

"We'll talk more later, if you're up to it, all right, son?" Mendoza asked soothingly.

"I'm all right, Doc. Really," 'Deo replied tiredly. "I can go on."

"I know you can, but I think we should take a break for now, let you get your bearings."

"Doc, honestly, it's all right. There's really not much more I can tell you. They had me down. I was pinned. They were punching me," he hesitated. "They had me pinned," he repeated, frowning in concentration as he tried to remember. "One of them got up and started kicking me. My face. My head. The other one kept punching me. I tried to put up my arms to protect myself... and then it's just dark after that. I'm sorry. I can't remember anything else after that," he said apologetically.

"There's no need to apologize, Amadeo," Mendoza said kindly. "Full or partial memory loss, whether permanent or temporary, is normal after injuries such as yours. I'm frankly amazed that you've been able to remember as much as you have."

"Is it... is it ok to tell him what happened afterward?" Milo asked uncertainly.

"Amadeo?" Mendoza asked, concerned. "Are you up to it?"

"I've been dying to hear what happened ever since this turkey woke me up the other day with his
Amadeo said with an exaggerated look of long-suffering. "I'd have told you yesterday but you went and fell asleep on me before I could, dipstick!"

"Idjit."

"Jerk.

Mendoza listened to the exchange with a bemused expression. Ms. Greer's mouth never twitched but her eyes sparkled with amusement at the boy's banter.

"Well, I'm awake now! Get with the words!"

"Wait'll you hear this! One of the guys who'd seen the whole thing spoke up. He said that Freddie and Brice had you down, that's when Brice got up and started kicking. You stopped moving, and Freddie got up and went after the knife again. One of the others tried to step on it to keep Freddie from getting it but Fred punched the guy and knocked him down, picked up the knife and started to go after you again."

Milo paused for dramatic effect. "Dae, you'll never believe what happened next!"

"There was an alien invasion, the entire human race was captured and they were rendered incapable of finishing a story."

"Jerk."

"Idjit."

"All right, Melvin, don't get bent. So anyway, that kid, Angelo? Don't ask me how, but he got up and kicked Freddie in the..." he glanced at Ms. Greer with an embarrassed expression on his face, "in the, uh... i coglioni..."

Amadeo guffawed and covered his mouth to control the volume, which caused him to snort instead. Amadeo had been giving his friend lessons in Italian, starting with the 'naughty' words. Leave it to Milo to remember that one.

Milo grinned, blushing partially from what he'd said and partially from pleasure that he'd made his friend laugh.

Mendoza chuckled, and the corners of Ms. Greer's mouth turned up despite her best efforts. She ducked her head over her notepad and continued writing to hide it.

"OK, so then he kicks off like he's about to run a relay, from the way the guy tells it the kid's got some speed on him, by the way. He jumped... man it was impressive to listen to, I gotta tell ya, and lands a flying kick to Brice's knee, and the two of them are curled up in the dirt like roly polies. Angelo, he walks over to you, stands there a second or two and just drops like someone cut his strings. That's when the teachers got there. Anyway, everyone'd scattered when they saw Cobrane coming, but Miz Jennings told Sharon that Cobrane and Janco took care of you and Angelo and Mr. Young and Mr. Stewart stood over those... J.D.s til the cops came and busted 'em."

"So they're in jail now?" Amadeo asked through his laughter.

"Yep. So anyway, just a few days after they were arrested Judge Thornton calls the... what's it called..." Milo's brows knit in frustration as he tried to remember the word.
"Arraignment?"

"Yeah, that's it!" Milo said, clicking his fingers. "Thanks," he grinned.

"All right, so they had the arraignment... and what happened?"

"OK, so they held it in a closed court. Figured it would be a zoo if they made it open to the public so only reporters were allowed in. And Dae, they came from all over Georgia! Look, I brought one of the articles for you to read."

Milo handed the paper to Amadeo who unfolded it. There on the front page was a picture of two young men. If the caption hadn't identified them as Brice and Freddie, Amadeo would never have known who they were. Their hair was clean and trimmed, and both wore suits and ties.

According to the article, the judge read the charges and instructed the two boys to enter their pleas. Brice stood, claimed he had acted in self-defense and entered a plea of 'Not guilty.'

Next to speak had been Freddie who also entered a plea of not guilty, following it up by announcing to the judge, "'We was jus' jokin' around with the dago when the wop went ape, scrammin' and yellin' threats.'"

According to the article, the lawyer had advised him to stop talking but the boy was on a roll and continued by saying, "'We tol' 'im real nice like t' back off but yer honor, I think the wop was gassed, he pulled a blade an' attacked us, see, so we had to rough him up a bit to get him to settle down. We were the victims, yer honor, y' see. It was a mistun'erstandin'."

Judge Thornton had sat back in his chair, clasped his hands on his desk, and declared the statement to be the biggest crock he'd heard in many a year. He then remanded the boys to the county jail until their formal trial which would take place in August.

Amadeo grinned when he read the judge's verdict, then he refolded the paper and laid it down on top of the blanket.

"Are you all right, Amadeo?" the doctor asked.

"I'm fine, doc. Just... confused. People sometimes just don't make much sense to me."

"Same here, son," the doctor admitted. "Same here." He took a breath and let it out slowly. "Well, Mr. Rossi, visiting hours will be starting in a few minutes, and then there's lunch and physical therapy. You did wonderfully yesterday. Everyone was impressed with how well and how far you walked for your first time. I know you'll make great strides. But 'Deo, listen to me now. You're young, you're strong, you're in good physical condition, but all that aside I don't want you to try to rush your recovery. You did great yesterday, but you pushed yourself a little too hard. When Sam and Gary tell you to sit and relax, you sit and relax, got it?"

Amadeo looked as though he were about to argue with the doctor's orders.

"Do you know what duct tape is, Amadeo?" Dr. Mendoza said sternly.

Amadeo blinked, taken aback. "Yes, sir."

"If Sam and Gary tell me that you're not listening to them, I'm going to come in here and duct tape you to the chair. Understood?"

Amadeo and Milo looked at each other to verify that they'd both heard what they thought they'd
heard, and then looked at the doctor, who looked very serious. They glanced at Ms. Greer whose face was completely impassive, except for a hint of something in her eyes. Was that a smile in there? Who knew dragons smiled, but was that smile for them or against them, and was a smiling dragon anything like a smiling crocodile? If it was, Amadeo was in trouble.

Rather than take the chance, Amadeo replied, "Yes sir."

"Very well then, young man," Mendoza said, glancing at his watch, "It is 10:45 and I have no doubt that the lounge is near to overflowing with friends, family, and well-wishers, so in a few more minutes Ms. Greer and I will open the doors. We'll see you again around 3:00, after your therapy session, is that all right?"

"Sounds good, Doc. Thank you."

Dr. Mendoza patted the boy on the shoulder and he and Ms. Greer left the two boys in the room.

"Dae, I need to ask you a question, ok?"

"Was that your question?" Amadeo quipped.

"Cut it out, Goofus, I'm serious. I need to ask you something."

"Ask away, my friend."

"What's a dago? And what's a wop? I asked my father and he said he didn't know."

"Dago is meant as an insult toward Italians, Spanish and Portuguese. It doesn't make any sense to me, to be honest. It's like if I went around calling every Polish person a Milo just because they're Polish." he shrugged.

"And wop?"

"Depends on who you talk to. It could either mean 'With Out Papers', W.O.P., meaning I'm here without identification, here illegally, and don't belong in this country, or it could be a mispronunciation of the word, guappo, at least that's what my father said. Basically, it means me and every other Italian are bad guys, troublemakers, members of organized crime and such. Neither is correct but, eh, whatta ya gonna do?"

"Throw myself down on the floor and hold my breath until I turn blue!" They both said, laughing.

After a pause, Milo asked sheepishly, "Um, so, do you?"

"Do I what?" Amadeo asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Have papers? I mean, you're not here illegally, right? I mean, I don't care really, I'm just curious."

Amadeo smiled. "Dad's parents came here in 1899, and dad was born on February 29th, 1904 in Pennsylvania. Mom's folks came here and settled in Pennsylvania in 1900. She was born on May 22, 1908, making them, and their brothers and sisters, American citizens. Mom and dad were married May 21, 1926, when dad was twenty-two and mom was eighteen. They moved back to Italy when dad's job transferred him there because they were opening a new branch of the factory and he knew the language. All of us kids were born there, but we have dual citizenship... that means we're citizens of both Italy and America."

"That's so cool," Milo said admiringly. He'd have liked more time alone to talk to his friend but
there was no time. The Rossi clan, minus the children, filed in, followed minutes later by Mr.
Barnes and Mr. Cobrane.

Johnny and Natie stood up and greeted the men, offering them the comfortable seats closest to the
bed.

"We're only going to stay a little while, but thank you for the offer," Barnes said with a smile as he
shook Amadeo's hand.

"We're very pleased to see you awake and well, Mr. Rossi," Cobrane said, then shocked the
teenagers by smiling. "We've come bearing good news, Mr. Rossi," said Mr. Barnes. "Your
teachers, in light of recent events, have offered to waive the obligatory makeup work required
toward your final grade, as there are only five weeks left to the school year. Since summer break is
coming up soon, they've agreed to allow you to take your final exams at the end of June. They will
each schedule a day for the exam, and will, with your parent's permission, go to your house to
administer them. This will give you several weeks to study. They will also provide you with study
guides so that you will know which topics to concentrate on."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Barnes," said Mrs. Rossi with a gracious smile.

'Johnny' gazed appreciatively at his wife. He could listen to her voice all day. She was what his
father had described as 'a real lady.' She was soft and feminine and yet could be hard as iron when
the need arose. She was caring and gentle but was strong physically and mentally and had yet to
run from any challenge. She had a heart as big as the outdoors, loved her children without question
and yet still had love to spare for their friends, who all called her 'Mama', and for every stray cat
and dog that needed a little food and tenderness. She had a smile that lit up the room and could
charm the birds out of the trees. They'd been married for thirty-eight years and she only seemed to
become more beautiful as the time passed.

Other men would be possessive and jealous and guard her like the treasure she was, but he had no
need to be or do any of those things. She was as devoted to him as he was to her, and he wondered
every day what he'd done right to deserve such a marvelous gift.

Johnny dragged his eyes away from his wife long enough to thank Mr. Barnes and Mr. Cobrane as
well.

"We'll be looking forward to your return to school soon, Mr. Rossi," said Cobrane, reaching his
hand out to shake 'Deo's.

Amadeo put out his hand and clasped the man's outstretched hand. "Thank you, sir. It'll be nice to
be back."

AN
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Reference to Smaug - The name of the dragon in The Hobbit
Author: J. R. R. Tolkien
Publisher: George Allen & Unwin (UK)
Published: 21 September 1937

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Amadeo's recovery was quicker than expected and he was released from the hospital a week later. He was still a little stiff, and his head ached occasionally, but otherwise, he was in good spirits. The only thing that had ruined his good mood were the doctor's orders to avoid any unnecessary physical exertion, which meant he would be unable to participate in any sports. He understood why he just didn't like it.

A couple of reporters had called at his house and asked permission to get a follow-up story and pictures, which 'Deo's parents allowed. He'd posed, wearing his knitted cap, with his family who all smiled happily. One of the reporters presented Amadeo with a scrapbook which contained pictures and articles from the papers that had carried the story.

"All over Georgia, Milo?" Amadeo asked, eyebrows raised sarcastically. "Exaggerated a little there, hmmm?" he asked, flipping through the book which was approximately half full and featured articles from the local paper and two others from neighboring towns.

Milo blushed but smiled. "Yeah, well, maybe just a little. But word did get around and more than one reporter came to get the story." Amadeo gave his friend an affectionate but exasperated look and closed the book. He stood up and stretched carefully. Sam and Gary had put him through a workout to get his muscles limber again and had given him a list of exercises to do at home, but he still felt stiff if he sat for any length of time. It was Saturday night, people had been coming to visit most of the day and Milo was the only one left. He appreciated the concern and good wishes of his neighbors and friends but he was worn out and grateful for the relative quiet.

Amadeo glanced at the clock on the wall. "Gonna stay over, Mi?"

Milo shrugged and smiled apologetically. "Can't. Pop's gonna be by to pick me up any minute now."

"Pick you up? Mi, you live just down the street," Amadeo replied, perplexed.

"Well, I kinda got in trouble for sneaking out of church early last week and Pop said he's not letting me out of his sight for a while. I'm technically grounded, but since it was you I was coming to see he let me come. It didn't hurt that Mikey came to bat for me and hit him between the eyes with those dimples," Milo added affectionately.

Amadeo huffed a laugh. "So let me guess, you went up for communion and slipped out the back instead of going back to your seat."

Milo tapped the tip of his nose with his forefinger. "Bingo. Lots of people do it, and Father Kelly never mentions it so I figured I'd give it a try. Besides, it was for a good cause, which Pop said was the only reason I wasn't sitting on a sore rump that day."

"Good thing I didn't get wind of it young man, or I'd have done it for him," Amadeo's mother scolded with a smile.

Milo blushed and grinned. "Yes'm, Mrs. Rossi."
She cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, mama," he revised.

"I just came in to ask if you'd like to take some food home. Laws, I haven't had to cook for over a month now, everyone has been so wonderful and generous since 'Deo was injured, and honestly our fridge is overloaded. I'd be obliged if you'd take some, shame to let it go to waste."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure mom'd like that just fine."

"All right then, sweetie, I'll wrap some and box it up for you," she said as she turned toward the kitchen.

"Mmmmmmm, hope there's some of Mrs. Witt's fried chicken," Milo said, licking his lips.

"Matter of fact I'm pretty sure there is," Mrs. Rossi's voice wafted from the kitchen.

Milo leaned in toward Amadeo and whispered, "You have got the best mother, you know that don't you?"

Amadeo leaned in toward Milo and whispered, "I may be biased, but I'd have to agree."

In the kitchen, Mrs. Rossi carefully wrapped the food and smiled.

"Honest, dad, I'll be fine. It's only a little over a mile from here, and if I feel tired or dizzy I'll just sit down for a few minutes."

"No Amadeo," his father replied firmly. "If you insist on going I'll drive you and wait in the car. You've only just got out of the hospital and the doctor told you to avoid unnecessary physical exertion."

'Deo tried to argue but his father raised a hand to stop him and continued, "Plus, Milo said himself that the Di Marco's are nice enough folk but they haven't been accepting visitors so I doubt that you'll be there for more than a minute, and you'd just have to turn around and come right back. I will drive you," he said with finality.

The actual drive took less than five minutes, but the Rossi's were so amazed at what they saw that they drove a little slower after they'd turned down the hilly dirt road which led to the Di Marco home.

To the left was wild forest and overgrown shrubs. But to the right was a wall of stone that began at about knee height and steadily became higher as they went further down the hill, creating a tier which seemed to be filled with a variety of fruit trees; pear, peach, plum, and apple as well as a couple of others which Mr. Rossi couldn't immediately identify. At the end of the road it was either turn right or drive off the edge of a small cliff, also edged with stone, so they turned. The wall to their right was now twice the height of their car. To the left, growing behind the stone ledge, was a bank of mulberry trees, already bearing the sweet berries.

Just past the mulberry trees was a barn. The sounds of hogs and chickens met their ears. Straight ahead was the Di Marco home, an old gray farmhouse which was tall and narrow and which seemed to have been added as an afterthought. A station wagon and a pickup truck were parked along the right side of the house. They parked near the fence and got out to admire their surroundings.
Past the fence was another, lower garden, this one planted with various vegetables. 'Deo and his father recognized many of them, all growing in orderly rows, a large patch of corn off by itself possibly so that it's shadow wouldn't impede the growth of the surrounding plants. The same was done with the peas which curled up around stakes set in the ground. Broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and lettuce, escarole, onions, carrots and many others which they could only guess at.

Beyond and beneath that was yet another tier which contained more trees. Mr. Rossi recognized the pecan and chestnut but wasn't sure about the others. Concrete stairways allowed access to the lower gardens and the barn, but neither Rossi had yet seen a way to get into the upper garden. They did see the two stout wooden poles which supported the wires which supplied the electricity and phone service for the house.

"OK, kiddo, get a move on. I'll wait here for you."

Amadeo gave his father a wry smile and walked into the enclosed front porch. To the immediate left as he walked in was a wooden stairway leading up and he wondered if it were a two-family house and if the Di Marco's lived on the first or second floor. There was a door directly in front of him so he knocked on that. The worst they could tell him was that he had the wrong apartment.

A young man answered the door with a friendly smile. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm sorry to come without calling first but I was in the neighborhood," Amadeo lied, knowing that God would forgive it. "I was wondering if I could see how Angelo was doing? Maybe see him for a just a few minutes, if he's up to it?"

"I'm sorry, Angelo isn't available right now?" the boy said as he began to gently close the door.

"Um, ok, if you could just tell him Amadeo came to see him, please?" he said before the door could close completely.

Suddenly the door swung open with such force that it hit the wall behind it. "Amadeo!? Rossi? Mom! Pop! He's here! Come in! Please come in? Who is that outside? Mom! Pop! It's Amadeo!" the boy said excitedly as he dragged Amadeo into the kitchen by the hand.

A man and woman, obviously Angelo's parents, came running into the kitchen. The woman took Amadeo by the face and soundly kissed both of his cheeks. "È meraviglioso, ragazzo meraviglioso! È coraggioso, ragazzo magnifico! Benvenuti a casa nostra!" (You wonderful, wonderful boy! You brave, magnificent boy! Welcome to our home!)

The man grabbed his hand and pumped it vigorously. "Welcome, Amadeo, I'm sorry. When my wife gets excited she loses her English, she said..."

(I understood, sir. Thank you.)

While Angelo's parent's had been welcoming him, the boy, who had to have been Angelo's brother, had run outside and shaken Mr. Rossi's hand while simultaneously dragging him into the house with repeated entreaties to come in.

Mrs. Di Marco reached into her apron pocket and fished out a lacy handkerchief to wipe away the tears that had been running down her cheeks. Mr. Di Marco went to the kitchen table and pulled out two chairs. "Please, please, make yourselves comfortable?"

Mrs. Di Marco happily offered them tea or coffee, then wondered if Amadeo might prefer milk, "We have homemade wine if you like? Can I offer you something to eat?"
"Thank you," said Mr. Rossi politely. "Coffee if it's not too much trouble." He'd smelled the coffee brewing as soon as he'd entered the kitchen and had to admit it smelled wonderful.

"Milk is fine, ma'am," Amadeo replied.

"Paulie, go get Angelo, please? Let him know he has company?"

Paul turned with a grin and ran into the room to the left of the old wood burning stove which took up part of the center wall of the kitchen. Mr. Di Marco opened the door of the refrigerator which stood next to the oven and pulled out a pitcher of milk. Mrs. Di Marco went into a tiny cubicle which contained a sink and cabinets, taking out the sugar bowl, spoons, cups and saucers and glasses for milk for her sons and Amadeo. Mr. Di Marco expertly went around his wife as she came out, a dance they were both obviously masters at, and brought out a plate of cookies.

"Hey, monello! You have company? Mamma says come on out."

"Tell 'em I'm asleep or something?" said Angelo who lay on his bed reading.

"Not this time, sourpuss. Get up off your rump and get out into the kitchen."

"Tell 'em I'm sick?" he said, turning his back to his brother without taking his eyes from the page.

"Ange, get up and get out there. Now." Paul ordered firmly.

"Why?" Angelo argued, grumpily.

"Chickabiddy, kiddie!"
(Because I said so.)

Angelo made a rude gesture.

"Don't make me get Pop, Gumdrop. You don't want to be dragged in there by the scruff of your neck with a hot seat."

"Who the hell is it and why the hell do I care?" Angelo growled.

"It's Amadeo?" Paul replied, "And if I were you I'd watch your mouth before papa hears you."

"Tell 'im I died. Tell 'im Pop used me as fertilizer for the fig trees."

Paul took three steps across the room and smacked his little brother hard on the bottom. Angelo jumped up. "Son of a..." he growled, glancing toward the door and listening just in case his parents had heard what he'd been about to say. "What'd you do that for?!" he hissed.

"That kid nearly got killed defending you!" Paul hissed back, "The least you can do is go out and be polite."

"I didn't ask him to defend anyone!" Angelo said heatedly. "They'd 'a gotten tired of it soon enough and left me alone."
"You ungrateful little... We've been trying to be understanding, we've been putting people off for weeks, but enough is enough! You get your ass out there now or I'm tellin' you I won't wait for Pop and I'll beat your skinny little butt myself, then I'll drag you out there!"

"You can try!" Angelo countered, fists clenched by his sides. Paul was taller, broader and older than he was, but he would give as good as he got before his brother finally took him down.

"What is your problem?!
" What's my problem?!" Angelo asked disbelievingly, "My problem is that for the past eight months I didn't exist unless someone decided I might have a little scratch or a better lunch than them! And if they didn't like my lunch, Paul, they'd dump it on the ground and grind it into the dirt rather than leave it for me to eat later!"

"For eight months no one would talk to me!"

"For eight months no one knew who I was and no one wanted to know! For eight months, if anyone cared to call me anything at all it was 'The Cootie' or the Dago, cuz God forbid anyone find out what my real name was and call me by that! For eight f***ing months I'd find spit balls or wads of gum in my hair, tacks, or even puddles of ink on my chair. For eight friggin' months they'd trip me up and then they'd walk around me while I lay there and they'd laugh and say 'Did you have a nice trip? See you next fall!' My things would be scattered all over the place, and rather than help pick them up they'd step on them, sometimes grinding my homework into the dirt and tearing it. They'd use my books for a welcome mat and wipe their f***ing muddy boots on them and ruin them! And you want to know what my problem is?!

"Now all of a sudden I'm someone because I got the crap beat out of me? Now all of a sudden people want to know me? Now people know my name? Now people want to talk to me? Well I don't want to talk to them! Eight months ago I'd have killed for their friendship, but what they're offering me isn't friendship, it's pity, and I don't want their f***ing pity! They can take their get well cards and their stuffed animals and all the rest of the crap they've been giving me and shove it up their..."

"Angelo! Guardare la vostra lingua!" came the sharp remonstrance from the doorway. There stood his father, arms crossed and frowning. His mother stood beside her husband with a sorrowful expression, wringing her hands.

(Giosea advanced on his son who swallowed nervously and backed up a few steps. In Giosea's experience, teenagers were an emotional lot, and teenage boys were naturally volatile so he expected the occasional outburst. However, he was raising not only boys but gentlemen, and intelligent gentlemen at that. He frequently told his boys that an intelligent man didn't need to curse to make his point, and a gentleman never cursed within hearing range of women or children.

"I don't care, Dad! I don't f***ing care!" Angelo was yelling and crying freely. "I never wanted to move out here in the first place! I told you I coulda stayed with Matt and Martina in New York! Even Iggy and Nat said I could stay with them, but no, you insisted I had to come here! 'Don't worry,' you said, 'You'll make new friends. People down south are very friendly.' Friendly my ass! If this is what's considered friendly then there's any number of punks back home that woulda qualified as my best friends!" he shouted. "Oh, hell, for that matter, Freddie and Brice are my bosom buddies! When can I invite them for a sleep over?!"

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Angelo's calves hit the edge of the bed which stopped his retreat. Giosea took his son by the arm,
turned him and gave him several sharp smacks on his bottom. Angelo grimaced, tried to arch away and cover his behind but his father pushed the hand aside and delivered several more.

The slight boy immediately stopped his rant and turned tear filled eyes toward his father. Seeing the look of misery on his youngest son's face he pulled the boy into a fierce hug. Angelo buried his face in his father's shirt front and sobbed inconsolably.

"Hush mio piccolo angelo. E 'tutto a posto. Se riuscissi a trovare un modo per prendere un po 'del tuo dolore lo farei," he whispered, close to tears himself.

(Hush my little angel. It's all right now. If I could find some way to take some of your pain I would.)

Angelo's mother wasn't nearly as restrained and she wrapped her arms around her husband and son, tears running freely down her cheeks.

Paul retreated, embarrassed and overwhelmed with guilt because he hadn't known how bad things had been for his little brother. Angelo had never complained, his usual response when asked how school was on any given day had been, "It was there." Then he'd give them a little smile and retreat to his room to do his homework and read for a while before dinner.

When he went back into the kitchen to check on their guests he found it empty. He looked outside and saw his older brother Giani talking to them beside their car and ran out to join them.

"Please, Mr. Rossi, Amadeo, I'm sure things'll be all right soon. I know my folks would appreciate it if you could come back? Tomorrow after school, maybe? Amadeo, I think you're the best thing that could happen to Angelo, really. If you could come back and talk to him when he's calmer?"

"We did come unannounced," Mr. Rossi explained apologetically. "Tomorrow would be fine, if that's convenient."

"Amadeo... 'Deo... if Ange knew I'm telling you this he'd kill me but I think it'll make a difference? Angelo isn't much of one for talking, he's a pretty quiet kid usually. But all last week all he did was talk about you. How you approached him in the cafeteria? How you were kind to him, and talked to him? How you sat with him and read and didn't demand anything from him. How you seemed happy with nothing more than his company. That meant a lot to him."

"I... I know you heard what he said," Giani added with an embarrassed expression, "But I know he didn't mean it? This is something that he's been holding in for a long time apparently. He never said a word about any of it to any of us, we had no idea."

"Yeah," Paul added, "Mom would ask him if he wanted to bring some of his friends home for dinner someday but he'd always give her some excuse about them having to go to band or sports practice, or chores or family obligations? He never let on. Dad thought maybe Ange was ashamed of the house? I mean, it is kind of old and beat up, so he figured that Angelo didn't want to bring anyone home because of that."

"We were going to start to scrape and paint it last month but then Ange got hurt so we kind of put it off," Giani said self-consciously.

Amadeo smiled. "Honestly, when I saw the house for the first time I thought it was pretty cool looking! I've never seen one like this before."

Giani grinned. "Our uncle Pasquale, mom's oldest brother, he built the place? He died last February and left the house and the land and everything on it to us."
"I'm sorry to hear about your uncle," Amadeo and his father replied at the same time.

"Thanks. Us kids never met him in person? We'd get letters and pictures, and a couple of times a year we'd go to the corner store and use the public phone to call him, or someone would come get us if he called. Mom was thrilled when we finally got a private phone and could talk to him without the neighborhood knowing about it," he laughed.

"So he planted all of this by himself?" Mr. Rossi asked, impressed.

"Ah... yeah," Giani replied. Mr. Rossi could swear the boy was being evasive but felt it would be bad manners to ask for clarification.

"Well, the gardens are beautiful."

Giani smiled again and said, "Dad saw the gardens and was in heaven. Mom saw the trees and started making plans for all the kinds of jam she could make," he laughed. "In New York, we had a garden on the rooftop of our apartment house? But it was nothing like this. This is... amazing," he said, looking appreciatively out over the land.

"I suppose we should be heading out now, gentlemen," said Mr. Rossi. "Please give our regards to your parents and ask them to give us a call to let us know if tomorrow is inconvenient for them."
He pulled out his wallet and removed a rectangular white card with his name and number on it. "It was very nice to have met you all," he said, extending his hand.

The Di Marco boys shook his hand and turned toward Amadeo to do the same to him, "See you tomorrow then?" Paul asked.

"Tomorrow, as long as it's ok with your folks," promised Amadeo.

He and his father got into the car and backed carefully down the driveway. They hadn't noticed the indentation at the end of the driveway, hidden by the brush and bushes that would allow them to pull the car back far enough so that they wouldn't have to drive backward the entire way to the end of the dirt road.

Mr. Rossi turned the car onto the dirt road and glanced at his son before training his eyes back on the road.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"I can see the wheels turning in your head. There's smoke coming out of your ears," his father teased.

Amadeo sighed. "I feel so bad for him, dad. He was there since last September and I never noticed him at all. I didn't even know he went to our school. Milo had to tell me."

"Deo, mi amato, there's no way you can possibly know every student who goes to your school, is there?"

"Well, no, but you'd think I'd have seen him, or heard about him. I mean, the stuff he went through you'd think someone would have been laughing about it or talking about it afterward. It's not that big a school, you'd think I'd have seen people acting like that, treating someone like that... for eight months..." he replied, becoming increasingly upset.
Mr. Rossi pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. He looked directly at his son and said sternly, "Amadeo Christoforo, you are not going to blame yourself for this, do you understand me? There is no way you could be everywhere in that school at once. There is no way you could have defended him, or any other student who had been being victimized, every time someone took it into their head to pick on him. The school is not big, as you say, but there were plenty of people who could have stepped up and stopped that boy from being abused, and I find it highly unlikely that it was being done where there were many witnesses, or else I'm sure the teachers would have stepped in as well. This was not your fault. You have nothing to blame yourself for."

Amadeo looked uncertain.

"What happened to Angelo was wrong. It was unfortunate. It was cruel and that poor boy suffered alone and silent for all that time. But the fact is that when you did see what was happening, you stepped in and stopped it. You said something. You did something when no one else would. As a result, you started something good in your school," his father said earnestly. "I'm proud of you."

"Now don't get me wrong," he said, suddenly stern. "I don't ever want to get another phone call like that as long as I live. You are not responsible for everyone in that school, you can't protect everyone, all you can do is what you did and either help, as long as you're not outnumbered," he said significantly, "Or get help. No one can ask you to do more than that. Understand? You are not responsible for everyone in that school."

Amadeo thought about his father's words for a moment. No, he thought, I'm not responsible for everyone in the school, but I am responsible for that which I have tamed.
Angelo and Amadeo

The next day was his first day back to school and he was a little overwhelmed by the smiles, cheers and slaps on the back. Students and teachers alike approached him to shake his hand and welcome him. His locker was covered with cards and letters that people had taped to it, wishing him well, offering congratulations and included several marriage proposals with S.W.A.K.s, which were unsigned. Much to Amadeo's relief things returned to normal very quickly and life went on as usual.

After school, Johnny Rossi picked Amadeo up and drove him to the top of the driveway leading to the Di Marco house. "I was called into work tonight or I'd stop in with you. When you're done just call home and Gabe or Carmie can come to get you if mom is tied up."

"Dad, honestly I can..."

"What did I tell you yesterday?" his father asked with arched brows.

Amadeo looked at his father, an innocent and slightly blank expression on his face. "Yesterday? Yesterday. What is this thing called yesterday? Who are you? Who am I? Where am I?"

"You're lucky you're sitting down right now, monello," his father smiled at him. He hooked his son's neck with a hand and pulled him over to plant a kiss on the top of the boy's head. "Get going, I'll see you in the morning."

Amadeo hugged his father and got out the car. Johnny Rossi watched as his son walked down the hill and turned the corner before pulling away from the curb.

Amadeo didn't get the chance to knock on the door before Angelo's mother opened it with a wide, welcoming smile. "Ragazzo dolce, thank you for coming today. Can I get you something to drink? Are you hungry?"

(Sweet boy)

Before he had a chance to answer, Angelo walked into the kitchen, looking tired but with a shy smile on his face. "Hi 'Deo, sorry about yesterday, I was a little... upset I guess?" he said quietly, looking up at Amadeo from beneath the fringe of his bangs.

"Don't worry about it, Angelo. It's all good," Amadeo smiled back.

"Angelo, give Amadeo the five-cent tour of the house while I get you boys a little snack?"

Angelo looked at his mother with a smirk, "It's gonna be a really short tour, mama, so I'll only charge him two cents, ok?"

Mrs. Di Marco made a grab at the stove where a crockery pot containing a collection of wooden spoons sat.

"Run!" Angelo laughed as he grabbed Amadeo's hand and pulled him into the room to the left of the stove. He glanced back over his shoulder as though expecting his mother to really pursue them and grinned at 'Deo.
"OK, the grand tour... this is our living room."

It was a very small room, rectangular rather than square, the wall behind the couch was almost completely taken up by a large window. It overlooked the lowest garden and offered a fantastic view of the city below. Deo's eyes went wide and he moved aside a stack of books before he knelt on the couch that sat beneath it and leaned closer to the window to get a better view. "Angelo, this is amazing! You can see practically the entire city from here!"

"You gotta see it at night when it's all lit up. It's like... a Christmas tree, or... the sky reflected in water, with all the stars shining," he said lovingly. "It's so different from New York... I mean, New York was always lit up but... this is softer... ethereal? And it's so quiet. It took me forever to get used to air that didn't smell like trash and melting asphalt, and the sounds of crickets and birds instead of horns blaring?"

Amadeo turned around and took in his surroundings. Books were stacked on the floor beside the chairs. Another chair sat near the wall to the left, with its twin on the right beside another door. The wall across from the windows sported a television set with some of the largest rabbit ears Amadeo had ever seen. There was hardly an inch of wall, which was covered with photographs, visible behind the television and Amadeo made a note to himself to ask Angelo about them later.

"We're down in a kind of valley so it's harder to get reception down here, but we manage to get a few channels?" Angelo explained.

In the corner beside the television was a waist-high wooden cabinet with two sets of doors in the front. Beside that were two wooden boxes stacked atop each other that seemed to be full of old papers. Amadeo asked about them.

Angelo smiled, "Of all the things Uncle Pat left us, this is my favorite," he said as he lifted the top and opened one of the upper doors. The top contained a turntable and Angelo took out a thin bent rod. He put that aside and opened one of the lower doors which contained stacks of something that Amadeo initially mistook for more papers, but which were actually old records still in their protective sheaths. Angelo removed one of the records and put it on the turntable, slotted the winding key into the appropriate hole and cranked it up, then he carefully placed the needle on the record.

'Five foot two, eyes of blue
But oh what those five foot could do
Has anybody seen my gal?'

Angelo leaned in toward Amadeo and whispered confidentially, "This is what dad sings to mom when he's in the doghouse with her over something. Always makes her smile. Like, when we first got here the place was a shambles and he'd been here for a couple of months so she figured it would be pretty much straightened out by the time we got here, right?" Angelo laughed and shook his head as he removed the record from the turntable and carefully replaced it in its paper sheath and back into the cabinet.

"When did you move in?"

"Well, we got the notice that Uncle Pat died in February, and his attorney contacted us to let us know we'd been left the farm in March? Then dad had to arrange for time off so that he and mom could come out and take a look at the place, thinking they were going to sell it off, but once they saw it neither of them wanted to go back to New York." Angelo sighed, a resigned look on his face.

"So anyway, we had to pack everything up and sell or throw away whatever we couldn't take with
us... that took a couple of months? Dad's company was really cool about it though, and rather than accept notice they gave him the job of scouting out good places to open a Georgia branch. Electronics are a big thing now and having a distribution center out here would cut down on the cost of shipping and double their output, so dad stayed out here to get started on that. Matty, Iggy, and Luke, my oldest brothers, helped us straighten things out in New York and the rest of us finally made it out here at the end of June."

"So anyway," Angelo said, getting back to business, "In here is my room?" He led Amadeo into an even smaller room and gestured grandly.

Amadeo looked speculatively at his friend. He loved the other boy's accent; a combination of Italy and New York, but with an inflection he'd never heard before. He found that while he liked it, he had to admit he didn't always understand it. He shrugged it off for the time being, planning to ask Angelo about it at another time.

The wall behind the door to the left had a smaller window but still offered a striking view of the city below. Shelves of books covered the wall from floor to ceiling, an easy chair and lamp stood in the corner. Next to that, taking up most of the wall, was Angelo's bed, neatly made, beneath another small window. To the right of that was what could only be a closet and on the wall to the right of the door stood a dresser.

Amadeo was drawn to the shelves of books. "Amazing! You have your own library in here!"

"Some of those are left over from my brothers, some are mom and dad's that they didn't want anymore, but they're really good so I asked them not to throw them away."

Amadeo tilted his head to read some of the titles. "This is cool!" he said admiringly.

"You can pick them up and look at them if you like. It'll be a lot easier on your neck, anyway."

Amadeo grinned and thanked him, carefully picking up random books to read their titles and the date they were published. Some of them were first editions from the thirties and looked brand new. Amadeo raised his eyebrows, impressed.

His eye was drawn to a beautifully lacquered wooden box, stained dark brown, which he guessed was about eight by twelve by three and held closed with a sturdy but attractive hasp and lock. He picked it up to admire it, tilting it side to side slightly which made the finish seem to shimmer.

Angelo took it from his hands quickly. Amadeo apologized for touching it, concerned that he'd done something wrong. Angelo smiled but it was forced. "It's nothing, sorry, just... stuff. Private stuff, you know? Stuff that I got in New York before we came here. It's just personal stuff, pictures and things?" Angelo glanced around the room and finally shoved the box under his dresser.

"Do you miss New York?" Amadeo asked.

"I miss my friends? Matty and Iggy and their wives and kids stayed there so I miss them. My brother Luke is in Massachusetts. He graduated college and got a job and an apartment so that he could stay close to his fiancée." He leaned in toward Amadeo and whispered confidentially, "Woman is pure evil. Pure! And that's probably all that's pure about her. She's all sweetness and smiles when Luke is around right? But as soon as he's out of the room I swear I expect her to sprout fangs and claws, disembowel me and offer me up in her next Satanic ritual," he shuddered.

Amadeo smiled. "She's not really that bad is she?"

"Do skunks stink? OK, case in point. Mom likes everyone, she's rarely met someone she didn't like,
but sometimes she’ll just get this sense about people? She said as soon as she met Rosalia that there was something wrong. Maybe it was the too red lips, or the phony, too wide smile, the little girl voice she uses when anyone else is in the room, or the two inch long red nails. Mom says she doesn't see how anyone can do an honest day's work with nails that long. Dad calls her Betty Boop's evil twin, minus the soul, but Luke just doesn't see it. Everyone is hoping he'll wake up from whatever spell she has him under before he actually marries her."

Before Amadeo could pursue that line of conversation Angelo's mother called to them from the kitchen to come and eat. It was then that they noticed the enticing aromas coming from the kitchen.

The table was covered with food that looked wonderful and smelled even better. Plates of roast beef and barbeque pork sandwiches sat next to bowls of potato salad and coleslaw. A green salad with black olives and marinated artichokes stood next to a basket filled with warm rolls fresh from the oven and a little crock of what looked like fresh butter. Stampeding footsteps could be heard behind the closed door to the right of the refrigerator. The owners of said feet exploded through the door, which hit the wall with a loud bang, seconds later.

"Ma! That smells like heaven!" said Giani.

"Nah," argued Paul, "Breakfast smelled like heaven. This smells like paradise!"

"Which means dinner is going to be sheer nirvana," Giani said with a dreamy expression.

Mrs. Di Marco held up her hands to stop their momentum. "Johnny! Paulie! You're in the house, not on a racetrack! Now go back, walk down those stairs like human beings and enter the kitchen like gentlemen. And this time close the door gently behind you," she ordered, clicking her fingers and pointing toward the door with a stern expression.

"Awww, mom!" Paul complained.

"Uno, due..." said their mother.

Paul and Johnny swiftly, but without running, left the way they'd come in, closing the door gently behind them, walked back up the stairs and then deliberately walked back down. They carefully opened the door and stood there, entreating each other to go through first.

"After you, sir," said Paul, politely.

"Oh, no, dear brother, after you."

"I insist! After all, you are my elder and I should show you the proper respect, so you should really go in first," replied Paul, bowing his head deferentially.

"Ah, but as your elder, it's my job to protect you from anything that could hurt you, so just in case a ghoul or a dragon comes up out of the cellar, I should be behind you to fend it off."

"Oh, but I couldn't allow you to sacrifice yourself like that! I'm younger, more tender and juicy, no offense, and while he was sucking out my gizzards and picking his teeth with my femur that would give you plenty of time to escape, lock the door and save everyone else."

Mrs. Di Marco solved the problem by striding over to her sons. She pulled Johnny in first and delivered a smack to his backside then set him aside. Then she pulled Paul in and gave him a dose of the same. Judging from the giggles and the grins on the boy's faces the smacks hadn't hurt in the
slightest.

"Door," she ordered.

Paul gently closed the door.

"Seats," she said firmly.

The boys covered their backsides, scurried to their seats and sat quickly, ducking their heads, trying unsuccessfully to hide their smiles.

"Eat," their mother commanded, shaking a finger at her boys, "or I'll get the spoon."

"Oh no! Not the spoon! Not the spoon! Anything but the spoon! We'll be good!" the boys chorused, cowering back in their chairs with looks of terror on their faces which were would have been convincing except for the wide smiles on their faces.

Amadeo sat quietly in his seat, biting the insides of his cheeks to keep himself from laughing.

"Hmmph," said Mrs. Di Marco satisfied that she'd made her point. With a final meaningful look at her sons, she turned toward the little alcove off the kitchen that contained the sink and began washing the dishes. As she washed she began to sing softly.

'A heart that's true, there are such things
A dream for two, there are such things
Someone to whisper "Darling you're my guiding star,"
Not caring what you own but just what you are.'

'A peaceful sky, there are such things
A rainbow high where heaven sings,'

'So have a little faith and trust in what tomorrow brings
You'll reach a star because there are such things,
So have a little faith and trust in what tomorrow brings
You'll reach a star because there are such things.'

Amadeo hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until she finished and he grinned. Mrs. Di Marco had a lovely voice and he wished she'd sing louder.

Her sons got up, each gave their mother, blue eyes sparkling and blushing a pretty pink, a sound kiss and a hug before returning to their seats to eat their lunch.

Afterward, the boys cleared the table, wrapped the leftovers, washed the dishes and utensils and swept the floor which didn't seem to need it but they figured it couldn't hurt. They peeked into the living room where Mrs. Di Marco sat on the couch, eyes closed, listening to a record.

"Hey guys, mom told me to give 'Deo the tour, mind if I show him the upstairs?"

"I dunno what your gonna show 'im," Paul said matter of factly. He looked at Amadeo and explained, "The upstairs was a separate apartment. A couple lived up there and helped take care of the gardens and animals, so it's set up pretty much the same as the downstairs?"

"Where are they now?" Amadeo asked curiously.

"Uncle Pat bought out their shares and they moved. They stayed here long enough to take care of
the farm until dad and everyone else settled in. Since the rooms are so small dad suggested that me and Johnny take the upstairs, and like I said, it's exactly the same up there as down here, 'cept the furniture is a little different."

"And you can walk around without tripping on a stack of books," Johnny added with a smirk.

"If you read more books perhaps you wouldn't be so fatuous," Angelo replied with what could only be described as an uppity expression.

"Who you callin' fat!? I'm in perfect condition!" Johnny argued.

Amadeo casually covered his mouth with his hand. He was pretty sure that laughing at one of his hosts would be considered bad manners.

"Ragazzi, fermarsi mentre sei in vantaggio." Mrs. Di Marco's tone was calm but her words were sufficient to get her boys to back down.

(Boys, stop while you're ahead.)

Johnny gave his little brother a grim look. Angelo merely raised his eyebrows and smirked in a way that clearly said 'What are you going to do about it?'

"Come on, Johnny, let's go upstairs and watch TV or something," said Paul, giving his youngest brother a disapproving look before turning his older brother toward the door they'd originally come through.

After the two boys disappeared Angelo grinned. "Let's keep going, the best is yet to come."

Amadeo wondered what was going to happen to Angelo after he left but gamely followed his friend.

"This door just past the table is the bathroom," he said, opening the door, revealing a positively claustrophobic room. To the right was a toilet, above which was a wooden cabinet. The entire length of the wall directly across from them was taken up by a large, old-fashioned claw foot cast iron tub with hot and cold knobs above separate spigots, and a small wire basket hooked over the rim which held a bar of soap. Above the tub was a small window, supposedly for ventilation.

"There's a towel rack on the back side of the door? And there's a mirror and another little rack on the wall behind the door with shampoo and stuff, but you have to get inside and close the door to see them and we both won't fit." Angelo grinned at Amadeo's look of dismay. "And you can either run the tub to wash your hands or go into the kitchen and use that, but you'll either scald your hands or freeze them off trying to combine the hot and cold water at once, the stopper doesn't work right now, so I'd suggest using the kitchen sink."

He closed the door which scraped slightly against the edge of the tub and gestured to the door directly to the left. "That's mom and dad's room. Strictly off limits without permission otherwise I'd show it to you."

"This door," he said, opening the door which his brothers had come from, "goes either into the cellar, I'll show that to you later," he said, pointing to a door on the immediate left, "or you could go upstairs if you needed the guys for something..." he continued, gesturing toward the stairs.

"What's this door?" Amadeo asked, pointing to a door beyond and to the right of the stairs.

"That is actually a door that leads into my closet?" Angelo said with a laugh. "I have no idea why anyone would build a door that leads into a closet, but anyway, it's locked. And this door leads to
the back porch," he said, opening the door and leading Amadeo out onto an enclosed porch which was about as large as his bedroom had been. "Which leads to a back garden where we grow strawberries and blueberries."

He led Amadeo carefully through the patch of strawberries toward the stand of blueberry bushes. Instead of stopping there he kept going, through a growth of rhubarb which tapered off little by little, giving way to overgrown foliage. Eventually, Amadeo could hear the sound of running water. Angelo knelt down and scooped something up in his hand. He showed it to Amadeo. "Spring water. Taste it," he encouraged as he gulped his own handful as though he hadn't seen water in weeks.

'Deo knelt beside his friend, scooped up a handful of the water and tasted it. It was incredibly cold and fresh. He'd never had water that tasted that good. His mother always kept a jug of water chilled in the refrigerator but the taste of the spring water was indescribable. He scooped up another handful and drank it greedily. "This is marvelous."

"From what Uncle Pat told us, they used to fill buckets from here and carry them to the house before they had plumbing installed. The water doesn't always run fast so sometimes it would take a long time to fill one bucket. And further in there are maple trees so they could tap them and make syrup? Unfortunately, dad says he has no idea how to make maple syrup so that's just one of those things we'll have to buy or trade as the crops ripen."

"So, what do you want to see next?" Angelo asked.

"Well, I was wondering... how do you get to the upper garden? I haven't seen any steps."

Angelo led Amadeo back to the house. Leaning against the back wall was a sturdy, homemade wooden ladder, painted green. He picked it up, leaned it against the stone wall and climbed as agile as a monkey. Amadeo followed a little more slowly, having a little trouble transferring himself from the top of the ladder to the stone wall at the top.

They stood on the spot for several moments, just taking in the terrain. Amadeo and his father had seen the fruit trees but they hadn't seen the plants that were growing closer to the wall.

"What's all this?" Deo asked.

"Tarragon, oregano, basil, thyme, mint, shallots..." Angelo said, pointing toward each patch of greenery as he named them. "There were parsnips, turnips, beets and rutabagas, but no one would eat them, no matter how mom prepared them, so she gave up? I mean, honestly, if my mother can't make it taste good then it just can't be done?" he said. Amadeo noticed that there was no braggadocio in Angelo's voice. He was simply, in his opinion, stating the obvious.

"Hey... Angelo," Amadeo began hesitantly, "I'd like to ask you something... if you don't mind."

Angelo shrugged and smiled. "Ask away."

"Well... first, are you aware that you frequently answer a question with a question?"

"I do?" asked Angelo, surprised. Then he laughed. "Yeah, I guess I do. Actually, Mr. Price noticed it last November, every time he hears me do it he points it out after class. He actually kept a tally sheet one day to show me how many times I did it," he laughed. "I've been trying to be more careful about that, but I'm not usually aware of it until someone points it out?"

Amadeo smiled. "That's the other thing I wanted to ask you about," he said.
Angelo cocked his head inquisitively.

"I was curious about the way you speak..."

Angelo laughed. "Spit it out, Dae. Do I lisp or something?"

Actually, you have a voice I could listen to all day, Amadeo thought.

Instead, he said, "It's your speech pattern that caught my attention."

Angelo smiled uncertainly, "You lost me."

"It's just that you sometimes phrase a statement as a question."

Angelo shook his head slightly and looked uncomprehendingly at Amadeo.

"Well like just now, when you were talking about the parsnips and stuff, you said no one would eat them no matter how your mother made them, and you said, "...so she gave up?" he said, stressing the inflection at the end. "And then you said if your mother couldn't make something taste good, '...it just can't be done?' I noticed that your brothers do it too, but not as often as you do."

Angelo looked thoughtful as he recalled the conversation. He raised his eyebrows and then shrugged. "I dunno," he replied, slightly surprised. "I never noticed it? It's just how we talk."

Then he realized what he'd said and blushed, "I'm sorry if it annoys you," he said stiffly, turning away slightly and focusing his gaze on the plants at his feet.

Amadeo heard the edge in Angelo's voice and knew that he'd upset his friend. He took a step closer to the unhappy boy and bent to look into his eyes. "It doesn't annoy me at all, Angelo," he said with a smile "I really like it. It's... charming."

Amadeo's smile widened slightly and there was a sparkle in his eyes that made Angelo's breath catch.

"There's much about you that I find charming," Amadeo said more quietly, unsure of how a statement like that would be taken.

When their eyes met, 'Deo could swear he felt a little jolt of electricity run through him once more. He resisted the urge to brush the hair away from Angelo's eyes and to touch his cheek.

After several moments, Angelo seemed to shake himself awake. "Come on, let's go back down and I'll introduce you the chickens and the hogs. Watch out for Brunhilda though, she's a mean one," Angelo said as he climbed back down the ladder.

"Brunhilda? Is that one of the chickens or one of the hogs?" Amadeo asked, following him down.

"The mother of all chickens. She was one of the first chickens to crawl up out of the primordial ooze and she's been alive since then producing generation after generation of vicious, flesh ripping, carnivorous fowl? God help anyone who tries to take her eggs."

"She can't be that bad," Amadeo replied, amused, unconsciously echoing his sentiment about Angelo's possible future sister in law, Rosalia.

"Let's put it this way. She makes a pterodactyl look like a parakeet." Angelo said.

"Ummm, well, I don't know much about chickens but... if she's that dangerous..."
"She probably weighs about ten pounds now. Pop says the plan is old Hilda is going to be mom's birthday dinner come June, we just have to put up with her 'til then cuz she lays more and bigger eggs than the others every day," Angelo grinned. "The way he figures she'll be so plump by then that there'll even be enough left to make a nice chicken pot pie and soup to last a week. Come on, 'Let the games begin.'"

They walked down the stairs next to the barn and turned left. He opened the door to the screened in portion of the coop and closed it securely after he and Amadeo entered. "They usually go back to their nests when it gets too hot out here," he explained, "we already gathered the eggs this morning but, who knows, maybe one of them popped out a few more since then." Angelo laughed as he picked up a large window screen and unlatched the door in front of them.

Amadeo gave his friend a quizzical look.

"You'll see," was all Angelo said.

It was dark as pitch inside the barn, but then Amadeo's eyes adjusted and he saw glints of yellow-orange in the darkness as the light from outside reached the chickens and illuminated their eyes like tiny lanterns. Angelo adjusted the screen in front of him and then flipped the switch which turned on the overhead light. Several chickens mumbled their complaints at the intrusion and hid their heads beneath their wings.

"Get ready," Angelo said in a low voice.

Amadeo didn't get the chance to brace himself for the attack before a screeching bundle of feathers seemingly came out of nowhere, orange eyes glaring, wings extended to their full width, claws spread. He was amazed when the chicken literally launched itself from ground level toward Angelo's head. If the other boy hadn't had the screen in front of him, Amadeo had no doubt that those claws would have done some damage to Angelo's face.

"Uncle Pat's friends warned dad about Hilda and told him about the screen, and he told us. Makes things a lot easier," Angelo explained.

Angelo used the screen like a snow plow and pushed her ahead of him to make his way toward her nest. There were six new eggs. "Pick those up, would you? I didn't really think there'd be more so I didn't bring the basket."

Amadeo pulled out the hem of his t shirt and made a temporary pouch, placing the eggs carefully into it. Brunhilda, for her part, continued the onslaught, clucking and screeching, beating her wings against the screen.

"Is she insane or something?" Amadeo joked. "Are the eggs safe to eat?"

"Well, none of us has gone nuts since we started eating them so I guess they're ok. The vet says she's just one of those super protective critters you run into sometimes... thinks she's a mountain lion instead of a chicken?"

"And you do this every morning? How do you manage to fend her off and gather the eggs?" raising his voice to be heard over the chicken's clamor.

"Sometimes two of us'll come out here and do it? Sometimes only one of us can do it cuz the others are doing other chores, so you hold the screen with one hand, put the basket down, push a hen off her nest and pick up the eggs with the other hand. Except for old Hilda, they're mostly pretty docile." he replied, using the screen like a tennis racket, causing the mad hen to fly backward a
couple of feet. The chicken stopped her attack and seemed to stumble a few steps before regaining her footing and standing quietly.

"Angelo," chided Amadeo, shocked, "don't hurt her! Whatever else she is, she's just a dumb animal and you're ten times bigger and stronger than she is!"

Angelo at first looked surprised that his friend would speak to him like that. Then he hung his head, looking embarrassed and ashamed.

Amadeo would have said more except they were interrupted by Johnny's irate voice coming from the door. "What the heck are you doing!? Mama says get out of the barn and stop tormenting that stupid thing or you're in for it! It's bad enough listening to that racket every morning, we don't need to hear it in the middle of the day?"

"We were just leaving," Amadeo replied, looking firmly at Angelo, who blushed.

"Well, I don't know how you got her to be quiet but keep the screen ready, Ange, and get out of here?" Johnny said as he left.

"'Deo?" Angelo said meekly, "I'm really sorry about doing that. You won't tell, will you?"

Amadeo looked hard at Angelo, trying to see if his regret was real or just an act. Satisfied with what he saw he replied, quietly, "No, I won't tell, but hear me," he continued, looking directly into Angelo's large, dark eyes, "if I ever see you do anything like that again I'll take care of you."

Angelo licked his lips nervously. "You... you can't punish me. You... you're not my father."

"No, I'm not your father, I'm your friend, which is the only reason I won't tell, but bad behavior has consequences. If it didn't then everyone would go around doing whatever they wanted regardless of who or what they hurt or damaged and then nobody would be safe."

A movement caught their attention from the corners of their eyes and they turned in time to see Brunhilda spread her wings and shake herself. The two boys, screen at the ready, left the barn, turned the light off and closed the door. Mrs. Di Marco was pleased to see the extra six eggs and no mention was made of Angelo's actions in the barn.

Amadeo stayed for dinner, which he had to agree was definitely Nirvana but still secretly thought that his mother's was better. After he helped with the cleanup, they played board games and then caught an episode of Bonanza on television before he called for a ride home.

Johnny insisted on walking Amadeo to the car by himself, where he shook the younger boy's hand again. "I want to thank you, 'Deo. Remember when I said you were probably the best thing that could ever happen to Angelo? Well, I think you're the best thing that could have happened to the whole family. Mom? She only sings when she's happy, you know? 'Deo, she hasn't sung for over a month. Thank you."

He opened the car door, allowing a stunned Amadeo to slide into the seat before gently closing the door behind him and watching as the car backed down the driveway and disappeared into the gloom.

That night Angelo lay in bed, thinking about what Amadeo had said. Surely 'Deo wouldn't actually punish him. Would he? And it wasn't like Amadeo had any right to punish him. Angelo could always say no, right? But would he tell dad then? After all, he was only sixteen like Angelo, and
really, how bad could it be if he did give him a smack or two? It couldn't possibly be worse than his brothers who swatted him all the time. It never actually hurt, whereas if his father got a hold of him... well, that was a whole different matter. If Amadeo told dad then there was no question as to what he'd do.

He mulled the question over in his mind for a while longer and then listened closely to the house sounds. Everyone was asleep. He held his alarm clock up to the window so that the moonlight could illuminate the face. Eleven twenty five.

Angelo got up quietly, slid into his jeans and shirt, picked up his sneakers and tucked them under his arm. He opened his closet, pulled a skeleton key out of his pocket and quietly unlocked the door that lead to the hallway, closing it gently behind him. Locking the door again, he slipped out the back porch, being careful not to let the screen door slam behind him. He ran to the end of the driveway where he sat down long enough to put his sneakers on, before running up the hill and disappearing into the darkness.

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Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue/ Has Anybody Seen My Gal - The California Ramblers, 1925

There Are Such Things, Gene Austin, 1942

No copyright infringement intended
Angelo and Amadeo

Although they kept in touch by phone nearly every night, Amadeo wasn't able to get back to the Di Marco home until the following Saturday, when his father allowed him to ride his bicycle with strict instructions to pull over and rest if he felt fatigue or pain, and after numerous promises to call home for a ride if he felt he couldn't make it back under his own power for any reason.

"I promise," Amadeo repeated for what felt like the hundredth time.

"You'd better, young man, you're not too old for me to take over my knee. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Deo had replied with an embarrassed grin. "Besides, Milo and Angelo are going to be with me, so if anything happens, they'll be right there."

When he arrived at the farmhouse, Mrs. Di Marco opened the door with her usual beaming smile, invited him in, asked him to sit and offered him a drink in the same breath.

"Just water, please, ma'am," he said gratefully as he sat at the table.

Mr. Di Marco had been sitting at the table, sipping his coffee. He smiled at the youngster. "It's so good to see you awake and healthy, my boy. I have to admit that when you first came to the door I didn't recognize you? We'd only seen you asleep and wrapped in bandages until then." He didn't mention the swelling and bruising that had marred the boy's features, the memory was too painful, knowing that the boy had gotten them defending his son.

"You saw me in the hospital?"

"Of course sweetheart," Mrs. Di Marco said, placing the glass of water in front of Amadeo and tenderly running a thumb over his cheek where there was only a hint of a bruise left. "How could we not visit the boy who did so much for our son?"

"Yes," Mr. Di Marco agreed, "the room was always full of people during the day? So the nurses would allow us to sit and talk to you and Angelo after visiting hours. We'd bring books and take turns reading to you, or read you stories from the newspaper."

"My husband would often tell you funny stories," Mrs. Di Marco said affectionately, "I could swear that sometimes I could see you smile a little. It would give me hope that you would be well soon. And Angelo? He would watch you as though afraid that if he took his eyes off of you for even a second that you would disappear."

"We're very grateful to you, Amadeo, for having the courage to step in. You may have saved his life."

"I didn't really do much, Mr. and Mrs. Di Marco," Amadeo said, embarrassed, "And from everything I've heard, he saved my life. I owe him."

Mrs. Di Marco took Amadeo's hand in hers. "Have you ever read Aesop's Fables, Amadeo?"

"Umm, when I was little, my mother would read them to me, but..." he hesitated, unsure of how
they'd gotten from one topic to the other.

"There is the story of the Lion and the Mouse, do you remember that?"

Amadeo thought a moment and then nodded.

"You were like that lion caught in the net," Mrs. Di Marco said. "'Now you see that even a mouse can help a lion.'" she quoted.

"But Angelo isn't a mouse by any means. He was the bravest guy there," Amadeo protested.

"No, sweetheart, he's not a mouse," she smiled gently, "The moral of the story was that no act of kindness is ever wasted."

Amadeo thought about that for a moment and nodded again in understanding.

She patted his hand and stood up. "And speaking of Angelo, let me get him. One minute, honey," she said as she headed toward his bedroom.

Amadeo couldn't help but smile as he heard Mrs. Di Marco's voice as she sang to her youngest.

"Lazy Boy will you get up, will you get up, will you get up. Lazy boy will you get up, you've slept through half the morning." She laughed as he mumbled something in response, and Amadeo could hear it as she gave her son a friendly swat. She laughed again at his reply. Moments later she was in the kitchen.

"Lazybones will be out in a minute. I swear no matter how much sleep that boy gets he's always tired the next morning," she said with a smile. "Ah, well, it is Saturday and perfect weather to lie in for a bit," she said, glancing at the clock on the wall above the table. It was nine thirty and her other two sons had been up and out since eight o' clock.

Mr. Di Marco got up to pour himself more coffee. He gestured with the pot, "Have a seat il mio fiore, I'll pour you a cup." (My flower)

She took a seat with a grateful smile, and Mr. Di Marco kissed the top of her head as he pulled her cup toward her and filled it. Giosua kissed her again after he poured her coffee, then refilled his own mug before replacing the pot on the stove top.

Amadeo passed the little jug of milk and the bowl of sugar to her.

Mr. Di Marco stepped over to the door leading to the living room and Angelo's room and shouted, "Vostra Maestà! Il tuo pubblico ti aspetta! Datti una mossa!" (Your Majesty! Your public awaits! Get a move on!)

Amadeo couldn't hear what Angelo said but Mr. Di Marco apparently heard it quite clearly because his expression changed from amused to stern. "What was that?" he asked dangerously.

"Nothing, papa? I'm coming," came Angelo's hasty reply. Seconds later Angelo came into the kitchen, wide eyes on his father, hands covering his backside, sliding cautiously past the older man who still stood in the doorway with a glower.

Once he was safely past his father, who seemed content with nothing more than a stern glare aimed at his youngest, Angelo turned toward his mother and leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek and a smile. "Mornin, mom." He turned to Amadeo with a shy smile. "Hey, Dae. Where's Milo?"
"G'mornin' Ange. He had to do some chores before he could leave. He'll be here soon," he replied, taking a good look at the young man in front of him.

Angelo's hair was tousled, his jeans and t-shirt had been pulled on hastily, his face still slightly puffy with sleep making him look younger than his actual sixteen years, and now that he wasn't worried about his father smacking him, his eyes were sleep heavy, long lashes shadowing already dark brown eyes making them appear black. Amadeo found himself fleetingly wondering what it would be like to wake up and see those eyes first thing in the morning. He dropped his own eyes to his glass of water and took a sip.

"Would you like me to make you something to eat, Angelo?" asked Mrs. Di Marco.

"Thanks, mama, I'll do it." He smiled. "Can I make anything for anyone else while I'm up?"

"If you make eggs put some on for 'Deo. I'm sure once he smells them he'll be starving," said Mrs. Di Marco with a smile.

Mr. Di Marco sat down at the table to take a sip of his coffee and grimaced at the taste. He made an odd sound, which nearly made 'Deo laugh but which his family was well acquainted with. Mrs. Di Marco pushed the milk and sugar toward her husband while Angelo picked up the coffee pot, went to the table, and topped off his father's mug with hot coffee before replacing it and taking out a pan, butter, and eggs to make his breakfast.

At first, he hadn't liked the old, cast iron wood burning stove that had come with the house. Keeping it full and lit was a pain in the rear end, but he loved the smell of the wood smoke, and once he'd gotten used to it, it hadn't been that hard to learn to cook on it. He was a little sad that his parents were planning to replace it with a more modern, electric stove soon, but had to admit that this one threw a lot of heat which was wonderful in the winter but which would make things unbearable in the summer.

Everyone sat at the table in comfortable silence as Angelo cracked the eggs into a bowl, tossed the shells and began to scramble them, adding a little milk.

"So what are you boys up to today?" Mr. Di Marco asked as he sipped the coffee appreciatively.

"We thought we'd steal a car and go for a joy ride," Angelo said deadpan as he poured the eggs into the hissing and sizzling butter. He ignored his mother's and Amadeo's shocked expressions.

His father cocked an eyebrow at him. "Let's try this again. What are you boys up to today?"

Amadeo took a breath to answer but Angelo spoke up first. "We thought we'd knock over the Midtown Bank and fly to Bora Bora with our ill-gotten gains." He replied seriously as he stirred the eggs and added a little bit of salt. "Or maybe Timbuktu," he said thoughtfully, "I mean, any place with a name like that has to be interesting, don't you think?"

"You're pushing it, ragazzino," Giosua warned, although he was finding himself struggling to stop himself from smiling. He glanced at his wife and saw his dilemma mirrored there. "So, il mio angelo, what are you boys up to today?"

Amadeo wasn't nearly as successful and simply put a hand over his mouth as he watched the interchange.

Angelo stood at the stove, casually stirring the eggs so that they wouldn't burn. He looked at his father with wide, innocent eyes. "Well, actually we thought it would be really fun to go to every police call box, yell 'Help!' and then run behind the bushes to see if anyone comes," he said
"earnestly. "it would be a public service project!" Angelo replied logically without moving, "See, we'd be timing them to see how long it took them to get there. Sort of like a fire drill at school?"

"Last chance, ragazzino. What are you boys up to today?"

"We thought we'd go to every convenience store and ask what year it is? Then when they tell us we'd yell, 'It worked!' and then run out."

Giosua pointed at his son and crooked his finger in a 'come here' gesture as he pushed his chair away from the table.

Angelo gave a quick shake of his head in response.

Amadeo worried at first that his friend was really in trouble and was about to excuse himself until he saw the glitter of amusement in the eyes of all of the Di Marco's. Mrs. Di Marco smiled and placed a reassuring hand on Amadeo's shoulder, squeezing slightly.

His father made the come here gesture again, pointed to his son, and then at the floor in front of him.

Angelo slowly walked over to his father and stopped just at arm’s length. His mother quietly went to the stove to keep an eye on the eggs.

Once more, Giosua pointed at the floor directly in front of him. Angelo took a half step closer. The man stood, reached to grab his son's wrist and pulled the boy toward him and over his lap and landed a playful swat. "This, Amadeo, is how you deal with a brat," he said, looking up at the other boy with a look of mock severity before focusing on his son again and giving his bottom another swat.

"Let's try this again, young man, where are you going today?"

"Crrrrraaaaazy..." sang Angelo, who grimaced when his father smacked his rump again.

"Where are you going?" he asked pleasantly.

"Bang! Zoom! To the moon, Alice!" Angelo responded.

Giosua and Julia glanced at each other with matching grins. Their friends sometimes compared them to the Kramdens as a joke, as two people more unlike the television couple couldn't be found. Giosua would quote Ralph just before wrapping his arms around his wife and giving her a sound kiss. He winked at his wife before proceeding to land a series of spanks to his son's backside.

Angelo's face was only visible in profile to Amadeo. He could see his friend wincing a little, but he didn't seem to be in any real pain.

Amadeo knew it wasn't a real spanking but he felt strange sitting there watching, so he focused his attention on his glass and took another sip. He was grateful when Mrs. Di Marco placed a fork and a plate of hot, fresh eggs in front of him, followed by another glass full of cold milk. Now that he smelled them, he had to admit he was hungry.

"All right now, monello," Giosua said, landing another smack to the boy's jean clad rump, "let's try this again. What are you boys up to today?" he asked, emphasizing every other word with a swat.

"Don't make me get the thumb screws."

"OK! OK! I give! I'll confess!" Angelo said with a laugh, trying to lever himself up.
At that, his father merely tightened his grip on his son, who kicked and wriggled in an attempt to get himself free.

"Come on dad, let me go!"

"Oh no, I've got your number kiddo, I let you go, you run. You just stay put until I get my answer."

Angelo went limp, as though his heroic efforts had worn him out. "We didn't have any definite plans. We were just going to sort of hang out, maybe go to the park or... ummm... catch a movie? That is, if I can have a couple of bucks?" he asked sheepishly, propping himself up on his elbows and glancing back over his shoulder at his father.

"A couple of dollars?! Are you going to watch the movie or buy it?" Mr. Di Marco asked, surprised. "What do you need that much money for?"

"Well, the movie, and maybe soda and popcorn... and I thought if it's ok we could go to Grammarcy's and get a burger and stuff afterward?" he asked hopefully.

"Kids these days! Spoiled!" his father replied, emphasizing the first and last words with a hearty smack.

"I'm not spoiled, I'm fresh," Angelo replied with an impudent grin which turned into another grimace as his father gave him a final wallop.

"Go eat your eggs before they get cold! Bambino marcio!" (rotten child) he muttered, finally releasing his son who went to the place his mother had set, between his father and Amadeo, rubbing his backside melodramatically.

"Oh! The torture! The torment! The agony! The horrible, excruciating pain! I think you broke me! I'm scarred for life!" Angelo wailed tragically as he sat, contorting his body impressively in a paroxysm of pain.

Giosua looked at his youngest as though he'd never seen him before, then picked up his mug and handed it to the boy, who looked perplexed.

"Well, I figure a performance like that deserves some sort of award, don't you?"

Angelo and Amadeo exchanged grins. Angelo stood up and held the cup reverently.

"I'd like to thank all the little people who made this award possible, especially my mother for giving birth to me, and my father for..."

Giosua reached over to give his son another playful smack. "That'll be quite enough young man! I'll give you little people," he said with a grin, "and since you're up anyway, go get those peanut butter cookies mama made yesterday!"

Angelo, ever the dutiful son, did as he was asked and brought the tin of cookies to the table, opened it, snatched a cookie from the top, replaced the lid and put the tin on his lap as he sat back down in front of his plate of now cold eggs. He looked at his father and deliberately took a large bite from the cookie, rolling his eyes and making sounds of pleasure.

To Amadeo's surprise and amusement, Mr. Di Marco touched his index and middle fingers to his thumb and shook the 'fist' at his son. Then, in what surely had to be a parody of a thick New York accent said, "'Ey! Wadda ya doin'? Make wit' da cookies!"

Angelo mirrored the gesture and replied in the same accent, "Oh! Ya said get 'em! Ya nevuh said
"Oh, that's it!" his father said with a feral grin, pushing back his chair and making a production of rolling up his sleeves. "You're gonna git it now ya little smart alek!"

Angelo let out a little shriek of terror and ran behind his mother. "Ma! He's gonna get me! Save me!"

"Oh no you don't," his mother replied with a stern expression that was only slightly marred by the lifting of the corners of her mouth. "You got yourself into this mess, you get yourself out."

Giosua stood and slowly advanced on his son who just as slowly backed into the alcove. An instant before he was about to take hold of his son, there came a knock at the door.

"Someone at the door, dad. Don't you think you should answer it?" Angelo said innocently.

"You're safe for now, monello, but don't worry, I know where you sleep," his father growled menacingly, before turning to the door and opening it, his scowl turning to a pleasant smile in a blink.

"Hello there, young man. You must be Milo? Come in please," Giosua said shaking the boy's hand while drawing him into the kitchen. "The boys are just finishing a little late morning snack, can I get you anything?"

Milo, looking a little overwhelmed, managed a smile and a polite, "No sir, thank you." He looked at Angelo, who was casually leaning against the sink in the alcove and welcomed him with a welcoming smile and wave, and then at Amadeo who seemed very amused by something but who merely raised a hand in greeting.

"Well, you did get more money than you asked for," said Milo bracingly as they rode their bikes through town.

Angelo looked at his friend with a petulant expression. "Yeah, but now I have to go get my hair cut too. I'da rather done extra chores to earn the money!"

"I didn't want to say anything, but you are getting kinda shaggy there," Amadeo said, ruffling his friend's hair.

Angelo batted his friend's hand away in irritation. "I always look like I'm headed to boot camp when I get my hair cut."

"Well, want to go to the movies before or after the barber?" asked Amadeo.

"Leave it til last." Angelo groused, "I always get hair clippings down the back of my neck and it itches like crazy. If I have to sit through a movie like that I'll go insane."

"Yeah, that makes sense," agreed Milo, "I mean if we go to Grammarcy's we don't want hair getting into the food every time he moves."

"All right then, pull over here." Amadeo said, pointing to the news stand. He picked up the newspaper and flipped a dime to the owner who caught it in one smooth move.

He turned to the movies page and looked at what was available. Several movie theaters had opened
up recently, each trying to attract the most customers by offering the best deals and movies.

Amadeo pointed to one movie which was playing at the closest theater. "Man's Favorite Sport"? he suggested.

"Ugh, chick flick," Milo said.

Angelo leaned over and scanned the choices. "Band of Outsiders?"

Milo read the blurb beneath the movie title and times, "Too grim," he responded.

"Children of the Damned?" Milo suggested.

"Looks sufficiently creepy." Angelo said. "That's a possibility."

"Let's look a little more then decide," Amadeo said.

"Hey look!" Angelo said excitedly, "There's a movie that looks good, with Peter Sellers. Doctor Strangelove?"

"Sellers?" replied Milo, just as excitedly, "Yeah, the guy's a riot!"

"Only problem is it's playing next town over," Amadeo pointed out.

"We could take the bus there. It won't take that long," Milo said matter of factly. "We could go, catch the movie and get back in plenty of time."

"Not a good idea, Mi. If one of us got hurt or we got stranded we'd be in deep."

"Come on, 'Deo, stop being such a goody two shoes," Milo accused.

"No, Mi," replied Amadeo firmly, "We stay in town or we can just cancel the whole thing."

"Hey, despite your name, you are not God, so cool it!" Milo argued with a frown.

"I'm not trying to be God, Mi, I'm being rational."

"Dae," said Angelo in a coaxing voice, "It takes forever for these movies to reach us out here in the sticks, I mean, Strangelove came out in January and here it is the end of May and we're only just getting it. Plus we don't have any idea how long it's been in the theater so for all we know today is the last showing and we'll never get to see it!"

"Tell ya what," 'Deo said reasonably, "First let's stop at the bus station and find out the schedules. Then let's call our folks. If we get the thumbs up we'll go. If they say no, we stay put and do what we'd originally planned. And..." he said, forestalling any further argument, "if we ask real nice there's a good chance that one of our folks would be willing to take us to see the Sellers movie next weekend. Deal?"

Milo made a sound of disgust. "Well, I'm out. Pop makes me work my butt off for every cent he gives me. I'd be worn to shreds if I asked him for movie money two weekends in a row. If I did get to go I'd be so tired I'd sleep through the whole thing."

"Well, it's supposed to be a day for the three of us, so if you can't go, we can't go," replied Angelo. "Besides, that other movie really looked good," he glanced at the paper and then at his watch, "And it starts in about twenty minutes. We'd just have time to get there, get our drinks and all and find seats."
"Fine," Milo huffed reluctantly, giving his best friend a sour look, "Let's get a move on then."

The boys were smiling and laughing as they talked animatedly about the movie over burgers, fries and cherry Cokes.

"... and a brick wall? I mean, even Superman has to come up against lead before he's stymied!" said Milo.

"Well, these were kids, after all," replied Angelo. "Creepy little alien kids, but still kids."

"Speaking of creepy..." Milo said, wrinkling his nose as Angelo first dipped his fries into the blob of mayonnaise and then into the blob of ketchup he'd poured onto the edge of his plate.

"Eh, don't knock it til ya try it." Angelo replied with a shrug. "I at least tried grits before deciding they weren't for me."

Amadeo cocked an eyebrow at his best friend before taking a couple of his fries and copying Angelo's actions.

Milo watched his friend's face closely for his reaction.

Amadeo chewed slowly, analyzing the flavor. Both eyebrows went up in surprise. "It's really not that bad, Mi. Give it a try."

Milo, nose still wrinkled, did as he'd been told and brought the fries to his mouth as though he'd been asked to kiss a snake instead of eat French fries. Moments later his eyebrows also rose in surprise. "Yeah, that's good! Kinda... takes the edge off the ketchup, you know?"

Angelo, with an evil grin that made the other boys a little nervous, got up and went to the counter. He leaned over toward the waitress and whispered something in her ear. Not long after they could hear the sound of the milkshake machine going.

He returned with a tall glass filled with a chocolate shake and placed it on the table. Picking up a small stack of his fries he proceeded to dunk them into the shake and eat them with a taunting smile on his face.

"Oh no! Absolutely not! That's just nasty, Ange!" Milo protested, scooting his chair back and away from Angelo, sure that the other boy's prank would backfire on him and he'd lose his lunch.

The girl behind the counter watched the scene before her with a mixture of disgust, fascination and amusement. A look which was replicated on the faces of many of the kids sitting at nearby tables who'd been alerted by Milo's outburst.

Amadeo simply picked up a stack of his fries and dipped them into the shake before eating them. "Hmmm," he said, "Interesting blend of textures. Salty and sweet at the same time."

"Ugh," Milo complained, looking sick, "I've lost my appetite."

"In that case, can I have your fries?" Angelo asked.

"Only as long as I don't have to see you eating them like that."

Angelo's response was to pick up another stack of fries and dip them into the shake before slowly bringing them to his mouth, eyes on Milo, savoring his expression nearly as much as the fries.
Some of the other customers got up and left without finishing their lunches.

The girl behind the counter approached them and leaned down to whisper to them. "My boss says you're scaring away customers. He said stop that or leave."

Amadeo looked at his watch. "Ange, don't forget you still have to go to the barber and get your hair cut. He closes in about an hour."

"You know, that's never made sense to me? You'd figure Saturday would be his busiest day and he'd stay open longer," Angelo said, stalling for time.

Amadeo gave his friend a look that plainly told the other boy to cut the crud and get off his butt.

Angelo sighed in defeat. "OK, OK, let's go." With a cheeky wave to the restaurant manager, he led his other friends out of the restaurant.

They arrived at the barber shop, which despite it being Saturday was quite empty. "Ah, nice to see you boys. Which one of you is in need of my services?" He glanced at Amadeo who's hair still hadn't grown out completely and said, "Nope." He looked at Milo, "Did you last week so that leaves... you my friend! May I ask your name, young sir? Haven't seen you before."

"Angelo, sir. Angelo Di Marco."

"And I'm George, your friendly neighborhood barber, at your service," he said with a courtly bow, which showed quite clearly the bald spot on top of his head. "So then Mr. Di Marco, now which hair would you like cut?"

Angelo was taken aback at first at the man's humor, and then grinned. "My father wants me to get my summer cut."

"Summer cut? Well, didn't you explain to him that it's not summer yet? Can't do a summer cut if it's not summer," George said sagely. "No, no, can't be done. Come back the first day of summer. Your dad'll understand, I'm sure."

Angelo laughed. "He said he won't let me back in the house unless I get my hair cut, so, how about we settle on a pre summer cut?"

"Oh! Well, that's an entirely different matter! Why'n't y' say so in the first place? Have a seat here my friend and we'll take care of you faster'n Clark Kent changes clothes."

Angelo sat in the chair, preparing to have his hair cut and suffer itchy cuttings down his neck when George wrapped a towel around his neck. He then covered that with something that looked like an apron and tied that as well.

"All right then, young sir, how would you like it today?"

"Ummm, Old Mr. Jeffries used to just take the clippers and mow it down," Angelo said.

"Hmm, every good gardener knows not to mow the lawn too short. Let me see what I can do, and you tell me if you like it, hmmm?"

Angelo looked at Amadeo and Milo who shrugged. "Yes sir, you're the professional."
"All right now, Mr. Di Marco, no looking until I give you the word. Promise?"

"Promise," Angelo agreed.

George quickly and efficiently began to comb and cut Angelo's hair. Amadeo and Milo took seats and began to read the comic books which were on a small table for waiting customers. Occasionally they'd look up to see how their friend was doing. Amadeo could swear that Angelo's hair was reproducing on its way to the floor, because before he knew it an amazing pile of hair was gathered there.

When he finished, George took a tiny amount of pomade on his hands, rubbed them to spread it around and then slid his hands through Angelo's hair, picking and preening carefully before making a sound of approval. He took some talcum powder and a soft brush and removed the tiny clippings from Angelo's neck before removing the 'apron' and towel and turning the chair so that the two other boys could see the results.

"Well, boys, whadda ya think?"

Amadeo looked at his friend, wide eyed and speechless. Milo could only stare and say, "Holy cow."

Angelo looked concerned. "Is it that bad? Let me see!"

George turned the chair toward the large mirror on the wall.

Angelo could only look at himself. Or, was that him? It couldn't be. His dark hair wasn't all but shaved the way Mr. Jeffries had always cut it. It was shorter along the sides and only slightly longer on the top. The pomade had brought out the natural wave and curl, which Angelo had always hated, complaining that it made him look like a girl, but this style was far from girly. His features were both brought into stark relief and yet softer. His eyes seemed somehow larger and darker than they ever had.

"Whoa, Ange..." Milo tried again. "Lookin' good," he finally managed, trying to sound nonchalant.

Amadeo looked at Angelo, seemingly unable to take his eyes off of his friend. "You look... wonderful," he finally said.

Angelo turned to look into the mirror again.

"Now, you don't need the pomade necessarily," said George, "It only helps keep the hair in place better. You can use plain water and let it dry naturally, ok? Can't stand these kids who use an entire danged can of pomade a day," he continued, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

"Thank you, sir," Angelo said, getting up, slightly dazed. He reached into his pocket and took out a five. "Here, for the cut, and keep the change?"

"Oh no no no no no!" George protested, "That's way too much for a tip no matter how much you like it, my boy." He went to the register, broke the five and gave Angelo back a dollar and thirty cents. "Now you come back to see me again before school starts, unless you start to look shaggy again, then you come in for a trim, all right my boy?"

Angelo smiled, "Yes sir. Thank you sir."

The three boys left the barber shop with wide grins, and began to walk back to Angelo's house. Amadeo found himself becoming a little jealous as several people on the street did very obvious
double takes on Angelo. He fought the feeling down. Angelo wasn't his... at least, not yet. Perhaps not ever if he'd read the other boy wrong. He tried not to think about that.

Later that night Johnny and Angelo sat on the couch, watching an episode of Rawhide. Their parents and brother had gone to bed early since there was weeding and pruning do be done in the gardens the next day and they wanted to get an early start.

"Hey, kiddo, we need to get up early too? Let's hit the hay."

"Johnny..." Angelo said thoughtfully, “I've been wondering something. 'Deo asked why we sometimes phrase statements as questions?” he rolled his eyes at his own slip. "I was wondering, why do we do that?"

"What'dja tell him?"

"Just that it was just the way we talk. I never really notice it till someone points it out but it's been on my mind since then."

"Well, I'm not really sure? I mean, lots of folks in the old neighborhood spoke like that... not everyone mind you, but a lot. The way I always interpreted it was that... well... it's kinda like asking the person who's listening to you, 'You understand?' or 'You with me so far?' cuz sometimes you'll be talking to someone and they just give you this blank look, you know? So you're kinda giving em the chance to say 'Hold up a minute, I lost you.' Got me?"

Angelo smiled, "Yeah, I gotcha."

Johnny got up and turned off the television. "Good night little brother," he said fondly.

"'Night big brother," Angelo said as he walked into his room. He shucked his jeans and t shirt and slid under his blanket. Content for the first time in months, he quickly fell asleep.

Dr. Strangelove, Release date: January 29 1964
Man's Favorite Sport, Release date: January 29 1964
Band of Outsiders, Release date: March 15 1964
Children of the Damned Release date: January 29 1964

Crazy by Patsy Cline (Written by Willie Nelson), 1961

Quote from The Honeymooners, 1951-55

No Copyright infringement intended

TV Shows 1960s
Lassie 1954 - 1973
77 Sunset Strip 1958 - 1964.
The Twilight Zone 1959 - 1964. (Original Series )
Rawhide 1959 - 1966
Bonanza 1959 - 1973
Route 66 1960 - 1964.
The Virginian 1962 - 1971
The Fugitive 1963 - 1967
Doctor Who 1963 - 1989
Gilligan's Island 1964 - 1967
The Man From Uncle 1964 - 1968
Bewitched 1964 - 1972.

Technology 1964

BASIC (Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code), an easy to learn high level programming language is introduced.
IBM announces the System/360.
The world's first high speed rail network opens in Japan
First Ford Mustang is manufactured
Sony introduces the first VCR Home Video Recorder
History of Video Recorders
The first driver-less train runs on London Underground
China explodes its first Nuclear bomb

All information by Wikipedia
"Angelo? Angelo!" Mrs. Di Marco called from the kitchen, becoming frustrated. She was in the middle of making biscuits and her hands were covered with flour. "Gio, can you get Angelo please? He's not answering."

"Em, sorry my sweet, I'm in the bagno," came her husband's muffled reply. (bathroom, pronounced baan-yo)

Mrs. Di Marco made a noise of frustration and stopped to wash the flour and dough off of her hands before going toward Angelo's room to check on him. He'd been quiet all morning. He hadn't moved once when Giosua had gone in to wake him for breakfast and chores. "Well," his father had said, "if he doesn't want to eat or do chores he can stay hungry until lunch at school."

Not taking that as an acceptable answer she went to his room and shook him and nearly had a heart attack when his head, a teddy bear, came off. She came back seconds later, a perplexed expression on her face. By then her husband was in the kitchen. He looked inquiringly at his wife.

"Gio, did you see Angelo leave?"

"No, il mio amore," he replied, equally perplexed. "One minute, please," he said, getting up and turning toward the door leading to the hallway. He went to the bottom of the stairs and called up. "Paulie? Johnny!"

They could hear footsteps on the floor above and a door opening. "Yes dad?" came Paul's voice.

"Have you seen Angelo?"

"No, dad. Well, I mean, I saw him last night before bed? But he went right to sleep, far as I know.
Is everything all right?"

"Did you see him this morning? Did he say where he was going?"

"Ummm, no sir, I just figured he went to Amadeo's."

"You didn't see him at all? Either of you?" their father asked, becoming more and more frantic and trying not to show it.

There was a slight pause as Paul looked at a clock, "Honestly papa, not since last night."

Mrs. Di Marco looked at the clock on the wall above the kitchen table and frowned. It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning.

"Dad? Everything ok?" Giani asked.

"I don't know." the eldest Di Marco replied with a concerned expression. It wasn't like Angelo to go out late or leave early without telling anyone where he was going. He turned toward the phone but his wife was already there, dialing Amadeo's number. Paul and Johnny ran down the stairs and stood silently beside their father as they listened to their mother's side of the conversation.

She quickly verified that Angelo had not gone to the Rossi home. She hung up the phone and wrung her hands, as she often did when she was upset. She couldn't help it but she immediately feared the worst. She'd heard about the students at the school protecting each other but she wasn't sure if that protection included Angelo, now that he no longer attended the school. She worried that she would receive another phone call that her son was in the hospital. An invisible hand squeezed her heart as she imagined the worst.

"Boys, check around the property first," Mr. Di Marco directed. "Johnny, you check the upper garden and the spring, Paulie, get the lower ones, I'll check the barn."

They were all back within minutes, each looking at the other for word that Angelo had been found.

"Don't worry, ma. We'll go out and look around for him, ok? You know how he gets when he
walks, gets lost in his own little world and forgets the time? We'll find him, mamma, don't worry, ok?" Johnny said.

"Yeah, ma, we'll find him," Paul said, putting an arm around his mother and giving her a gentle hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I'll take my bike and Johnny'll take the truck so we can cover more ground."

"I'll take the car. You stay here just in case he comes back or calls," Joshua said, giving his wife a tender kiss.

"Ma, I'm sure we'll find him soon," Paul said bracingly. He didn't say it aloud, but if worse came to worst he'd call his girlfriend and ask if she and her parents and brothers could join in the search. Her oldest brother, Elric, was on the police force and he'd be able to put the word out as well. He didn't think it would be necessary, Angelo was probably sitting somewhere having an ice cream cone despite the time, but if his little brother didn't turn up soon, a few extra sets of eyes wouldn't hurt.

The Di Marco men scattered but not before Paul poured Mrs. Di Marco a cup of coffee and placed it, the little milk pitcher and the sugar in front of her, gave her another hug, and went to join the search.

Amadeo hung up the phone and picked it up again quickly, dialing Milo's number.

"No man, I haven't seen him since yesterday, sorry." Milo replied, "How long's he been gone?"

"Since about sometime late last night," Amadeo replied anxiously.

"Look, I'll tell my dad, we'll go out and help look, k?"

"Thanks Mi," he said before hanging up.

When Milo turned around his parents were there, with curious expressions. People didn't normally call too early or very late unless it was an emergency.
"Angelo went out and no one knows where he is," he said, his brows furrowed with concern. I'm going to ride around a bit and see if I can help find him," he turned toward the front door and had his hand on the knob before he heard his father's stern voice telling him to stop.

"You are not going anywhere alone!" his father said sharply. "If you insist on going out, you'll go to school and I'll go out by myself mister, understand me?" he said sternly.

"But dad..."

"Unless you want a good spanking you'll do what you're told, understand? We don't need two missing kids... three if you and 'Deo get together."

Milo looked anywhere than at his father, trying to hide his anger. "Yes, sir," he replied, willing away the fire he felt heating up his cheeks and his insides. It was probably futile but he hoped that his father wouldn't keep repeating his threat in public, otherwise the kids at school would be teasing him for the rest of the week.

Mr. Rossi warmed up the car and honked the horn once to let Amadeo know he was ready to go. Amadeo ran out of the house and jumped into the car.

"Any ideas where he might have gone, 'Deo?" his father asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"Lots of ideas but nothing definite," Angelo replied with a sigh. "He loves to read, so he could have gone to the library or one of the bookstores, but they'd be closed by still. He likes to go to the park to feed the ducks, or watch the fish, but it's still a little too dark to see much of anything by now. The railroad... he likes to watch the trains sometimes... same problem though, they start running at nine."

"Well, those are a start. Any friends he might have gone to visit?" Mr. Rossi asked, then smacked himself on the forehead. "Forget I asked that. All right then, let's start with the park, that's closest I think."

When they arrived at the park it seemed, as expected, completely deserted, however they both knew that there were plenty of areas that weren't visible from the street. Due to vandalism and unaccounted crowds of young people, police had warned the public away between dusk and dawn, and to never to into the park in groups of less than four or five if possible.
Mr. Rossi pulled the car to the curb to take a closer look. "I really don't like this, Dae. It's too early, too dimly lit, there are too many hidden places where punks could be hiding." He stopped talking. He had no idea how worldly his son was but he didn't want to be the one to introduce him to the less seemly side of humanity.

"How about we take a quick walk around together. Safety in numbers and all that." Amadeo suggested, although he was pretty sure what his father's response would be.

"Not safe if we run into a gang. Let's just drive around the periphery."

Halfway through their search they were pulled over by a police car. Thankfully it was their friend and neighbor, Gage Roberts, and his partner Glen Carrigan.

"I thought this was your car," Gage said with a grin. "What on earth you folks doin' out here this time 'o day? Snipe hunting?" he joked.

Johnny Rossi tried to smile back but failed miserably. "No, sorry. The Di Marco kid is missing. His folks said he left the house about late last night and no one's seen or heard from him since."

"Di Marco?"

"Yeah, lives on the old Lombardi farm. His mother inherited the place when her brother died. Are you familiar with it?"

Gage frowned trying to remember. "Lombardi... Pascal, or somethin' like that? Yeah. I remember 'im. Quiet guy. Just him and a few other guys workin' the farm. I'd run inta him or one of the others now and again at the farmer's market. Real nice guys but... well..."

Johnny frowned slightly. "But?"

"Well, there was a lot of gossip about them but... you know how it is with gossip. Mountains and molehills an' all that," the officer grinned.
"Nothing bad?" Johnny asked, unable to conceal his curiosity.

"Nah, nothin' illegal or anything like that. It's just that they weren't mixers, pretty much kept themselves to themselves. So 'o course that lead to a lotta speculation by folks with nothin' better to do about what a bunch of bachelors did on the farm."

Johnny shook his head, not understanding.

"Word was the lot of em was light in the loafers, know what I mean? But hey, they didn't bother no one. They paid their bills, they were good neighbors from what I heard, and it's not like they went around... ahhh..." he stopped, realizing that there was a child in the car. "Well, you know what I mean," he finished with an embarrassed smile. "So anyway, about this kid," he said, getting back to business, "You said he went missing last night? How old is he?"

"Sixteen," John answered.

"I didn't get any notice over the radio about it," Gage replied, sounding a little put out. He looked over at his partner as though he'd had something to do with the lack of information. Glen who had so far been standing silently by, merely shrugged in response.

"The family hasn't called yet," John replied. "His brothers and his father are out looking for him. We were trying to check the park but there's just so far we can see."

"Smart move. It's just not safe anymore to take a walk in the park anymore. So, what's the kid look like? We can keep an eye out for 'im while we're doin' our route," Gage said, pulling out his notebook and a pencil. "We'll take a look around the park too while we're here... just in case."

John looked to his son and gestured from him to the police officer.

"Ummm, about 5'5", large dark brown eyes, dark brown hair, slender..." Amadeo faltered.

"Any idea what he was wearing?"

"No sir," Amadeo answered. "Sorry."
The officer sighed and raised his eyebrows. He shook his head slightly. "Kid like that's a prime target, 'specially if he's been gone all night. Oh! Sorry!" he said, seeing the look of fright that passed over Amadeo's face. "I'm sure he'll be fine," he reassured quickly, "We'll keep an eye open for 'im."


"No problem John. Drive safe. If we see 'im, we'll pick 'im up. Who do we call?"

Amadeo quickly gave the officer the Di Marco phone number.

"All right then folks, do us a favor and if you find 'im let us know, k?"

"Will do," Mr. Rossi agreed.

With a smile and a friendly pat to the side of the car, the two officers got back into their car and drove off. Glen looked at Gage who gave a slight nod. Glen picked up the mic and radioed into the station, passing the word of the missing boy.

They stopped at the railroad station, but Angelo was not sitting on the platform.

Amadeo scratched his head with an embarrassed expression. "I didn't ask, I just figured he sat on the platform and watched them go by. He asked me to come with him a couple of times but it just wasn't my thing."

"'Deo, did he say he sits and watches or does he walk the rails? If he walks, without knowing which direction he went in, we'll never find him, especially if he's been going at it all night. Do you think he ran away?"

'Deo had been thinking the same thing, but Angelo had given no signs that he was unhappy, or wanted to leave his home for any reason. He tentatively shook his head. "I know his brothers drive him nuts, but... no... I'd never have imagined that he'd run away."

"Most of them are right down the main street. The library and book stores are definitely closed," Amadeo answered uncertainly, glancing at his watch. "We've been out looking for about thirty minutes. We can check them out anyway, then find a pay phone and call the house to see if anyone's found him yet."

"Couldn't hurt," his father agreed. They drove slowly for several blocks on the lookout both for the boy and a pay phone. Within minutes they'd found a pay phone at a gas station, but when they called the house Mrs. Di Marco tearfully reported that there'd been no word yet.

The Rossi's drove around town in steadily wider and wider circles, stopping every hour to check in at the Di Marco home. Mrs. Di Marco did her best to keep herself under control but each time they called, Johnny Rossi could hear that control cracking a little more. It was now one o'clock in the morning and they and the Di Marco's had been searching for over 24 hours since discovering the boy missing. The police had been officially notified earlier, and all cars were on the lookout for the boy.

They were just at the outskirts of town when suddenly, emerging from an alley, was Angelo, who began to cross the street without looking and stepped out in front of the Rossi's car.

Mr. Rossi stepped on the brakes and honked the horn lightly. He was both happy to see the boy and half scared to death that he could have run the kid over.

Angelo stopped dead with a startled expression. He scanned the street and finally focused on the Rossi car, which had stopped just inches away from him.

For a moment it looked as though Angelo were going to turn and run.

Mr. Rossi got out of the car with a stern expression and called to the boy. "Angelo! Don't you dare!"

Angelo blushed, embarrassed that he'd been read so easily.

"Get in the car," Mr. Rossi commanded.
Angelo, head bowed but keeping an eye on his friend's father, walked around to the passenger side of the car and slid into the back seat.

Amadeo immediately caught the scent of cigarette. Mr. Rossi, who had gotten back into the car after assuring himself that the boy was in and settled, smelled it a moment later.

Figuring that his father would deal with that issue, Mr. Rossi demanded, "Where have you been?"

"Just... around," Angelo answered quietly.

"Your family was worried, Angelo," Mr. Rossi scolded. "You never told them you were going out, no one had any idea where you were."

Angelo, eyes fixed on the knees of his jeans, didn't answer.

Amadeo turned in his seat to look at his friend. "Angelo, man, what's going on? Where were you?" he asked, concerned and a little angry.

Angelo kept his eyes down and remained silent but gave a little shrug by way of an answer.

Amadeo shook his head in frustration and turned to face forward. They'd only driven another block before Amadeo pointed to a gas station. "There's a pay phone, dad. Do you want to call ahead and let them know we found him?"

Mr. Rossi wasn't certain that his young passenger wouldn't bolt if he pulled over to use the phone, but didn't want everyone else to continue looking if they called in. He pulled over to the side of the road and turned toward Angelo with a severe expression on his face.

"You stay put, young man," he commanded. "If I have to run after you, I will, and you won't like the consequences. Understand?"

Angelo looked up from beneath his long dark lashes with a guilty expression. "Yes, sir," he whispered before slouching down in the seat and training his gaze once again upon the knees of his jeans.
The phone call only took a few moments. Amadeo could hear Mrs. Di Marco's joyful shout.

"I'll tell you everything when I get there, all right?" said Mr. Rossi with a smile. "OK then, we'll be there soon." He hung up the phone, waited a moment, then pulled out another dime and called the police department. He explained how he'd run into Glen and Gage and how he'd promised to call them if the boy had been found.

The dispatcher, a woman named Amarilla, thanked Mr. Rossi kindly and promised to alert the officers immediately.

Mr. Rossi's smile disappeared when he glanced into the back seat and saw his young charge. He had no idea where the boy had gone but he had then disappeared for hours with no word to his family of whether he was alive or dead.

They arrived at the Di Marco home soon afterward. As soon as Mr. Rossi turned his engine off, Mrs. Di Marco ran out to embrace her son. Paul and Johnny joined them seconds later.

"Ma, dad just called. We told him Ange is home, he's on his way back," Paul announced happily.

Mrs. Di Marco pulled her youngest into a hug, only to wrinkle her nose and release him seconds later with a frown on her face.

"Fumare?!" she demanded.

Angelo wouldn't look at her.

"Vai in camera tua!" she commanded. She landed a sound smack to his backside when he turned soundlessly to obey her. "No! Prima andare a fare il bagno, lavare i capelli e ottenere che puzza di sconto! Lavarsi i denti. Poi vai in camera tua!" (Go to your room! No! First go take a bath, wash your hair and get that stink off! Brush your teeth. Then go to your room!)

It took the Rossi's several minutes to bring the Di Marco's up to speed. By the time Johnny Rossi finished, Mr. Di Marco had arrived. He repeatedly thanked the Rossi's for their assistance.
Mr. Rossi held a hand out to Mrs. Di Marco, who took it and drew the taller man into a grateful hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said fervently.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Di Marco," he said, returning the hug. "I think 'Deo and I need to get going though. Good night."

"Good night," the Di Marco's responded. They stood as a group and watched as the Rossi's backed down the dark driveway. When the car disappeared around the corner.

"Johnny, get Angelo a clean pair of pajamas, please?" Mrs. Di Marco asked.

Giani and Paul each gave their mother a kiss before going back into the house.

Mr. Di Marco turned toward his wife and gathered her into a comforting hug, stroking her hair and whispering in her ear. They stood that way for several minutes until he drew back, looking into her beautiful blue eyes which picked up the light from the stars. He had been calm up til that point, but when he saw the sorrow and worry reflected in her eyes he became angry again. He gave her a hug and released her a little more roughly then he'd intended before stalking into the house, slamming the door behind him.

"Angelo! Angelo!! Prendi qui. Ora!" he demanded. (Get out here. Now!)

The sounds of splashing reached their ears.

"Angelo! Ora!"

"Sì, papà! Sto arrivando!" came the slightly frantic reply. (Yes, dad! I'm coming!)

Julia walked over to stand in front of her husband. She took his face in her hands and gently forced him to look down at her. "Gio," she said softly. "Remember... never while you're angry. You are not your father, and you swore, you swore, never while you're angry."

Giosua focused on his wife's face. Calm. Serene. Understanding. Trusting. So beautiful. Her voice had an immediate tranquilizing effect on him and he wrapped her in another hug.
Angelo came out of the bathroom tentatively his hair still dripping, his face reflecting his guilt, remorse, and shame.

"Papa, per favor..."

"No, Angelo. We're not talking about this right now. It's too late and we're all tired," Giosua said sternly, not trying to disguise his disappointment in his son. "Get to bed now. We'll talk about it in the morning," he said, tiredly.

"Dad... mamma, I'm sorry," he said, near tears.

Giosua wrapped a loose arm around his son and dragged him into a quick hug.

Angelo clutched his father, fighting tears. "Please dad! I'm sorry! Don't hate me? Please?"

Joshua and Julia surrounded their son and hugged him tightly. "We don't hate you honey," his mother said. "We could never hate you, not ever." she reassured.

"Papa..."

"Bed, Angelo. We'll talk about this in the morning," Giosua said firmly. "Go on," he said, turning his youngest and sending him on his way with a sharp swat to his backside.

Giosua and Julia watched their son head to his room. They locked the doors and windows, and turned off the lights. Giosua put a comforting arm around his wife and walked with her to the bedroom, where they fell asleep, curled around each other, sleeping peacefully, knowing that their boys were all home and safe.
The next day was Monday, so the conversation between Angelo and his parents had to wait until his tutor, Mr. Lowsley, had finished with his lessons.

Mr. Lowsley could see that his student's mind was elsewhere. After Angelo distractedly answered three different questions with the same answer, he decided that his student had had enough and called it a day. He couldn't understand why the boy suddenly looked nervous.

"Angelo, are you all right?" he asked, concerned. "You seem a little off today. Anything I can help with?"

Angelo looked up at his tutor, a myriad of expressions running across his face but nothing that Lowsley could put a name to before another took its place.

"No sir. Thank you," the boy replied quietly.

"All right then, Angelo, for homework I'd like you to do the questions at the end of chapter fifteen in English Lit, the even problems on page 209 for math..." He stopped and looked at his student who was staring blankly out of the kitchen window and not writing down a word he'd been saying.

Angelo looked at his teacher as though just noticing that he was there. "I'm sorry, sir. What did you say?"

Angelo was a good student, and he was obviously distracted by something today, so Lowsley made a spur of the moment decision. "No homework tonight, Angelo. I'll see you tomorrow," he said, packing his books and papers into his satchel. "Mr. and Mrs. Di Marco, I'm headed out now. Have a nice day," he called, and with a smile and a wave he took his leave.

Giosua and Julia, who had been reading quietly in the living room as they usually did when the gardening was done and the animals had been tended to, got up and went into the kitchen. After the morning chores had been done they'd asked their two older boys to run some errands in town and didn't expect them back for a few hours.
Angelo looked at his parents from beneath his dark lashes with an anxious expression and licked his lips nervously. He felt his hands shaking so he placed them palms down on the table top.

His parents sat down across the table from him. Joshua with his hands clasped before him on the table, his wife, wringing her hands beneath to hide her anxiety.

Joshua fixed his son with a serious expression. "I'd like you to tell us now, where you were last night," he said, trying to keep his voice level.

"J-just out?" Angelo replied. He knew that his father wouldn't consider that to be an adequate answer but found himself unable to say more.

Joshua slapped the table angrily, making his son jump and causing the boy's large dark eyes to become even larger.

Angelo instinctively took his hands off the table and put them on his lap, leaving moist imprints on the clean wooden table top.

"Out where?! With who? Where did you go for seven hours only to come back smelling of cigarette smoke?" he shouted.

Julia, her hands still beneath the table, put a calming hand on her husband's thigh and squeezed gently.

Joshua took a deep breath and deliberately clasped his hands once again on the table top.

"Let's start again," he said more calmly. "Where were you? And don't tell me, 'Just out.'"

Angelo licked his lips and tried to answer. He believed in the saying 'Less said the better' and he knew he was a terrible liar. He was always found out, and he'd end up being punished anyway. He scrambled for a way to answer his father without lying outright, but also without having to admit anything.
"I went for a walk... around town?"

His father forced himself to take another deep breath. He and his youngest son had played this game before but that didn't make it any easier. "Where, around town?"

"Honest dad, just around," Angelo replied sincerely. "We didn't really have any place in particular in mind when we went out."

"That leads me to two questions. You didn't have a particular place in mind when you set out, but you had to have ended up somewhere that either took you seven hours to get to and from, or where you spent all that time. So first, where did you end up, and two, who're we?"

Angelo's normally light coffee colored skin went visibly pale. He opened his mouth to answer, but instead merely took a breath and let it out slowly, shaking his head slightly. Until then he'd been looking at his parents but now his gaze seemed to be glued to the table top where the imprints of his hands were slowly drying.

"Angelo. Where did you end up?" Still receiving no answer he continued. "If I count, you know where this is going to end up, so you had best tell me now."

"We... we... we ended up at the old, abandoned stoneworks factory?" Angelo replied. He knew he was in trouble no matter what now, but as his father had always told his sons, they would be in less trouble if they told the truth from the start, than if they lied and the truth came out later.

Joshua frowned, trying to remember where that was. His eyebrows shot up and he looked hard at his son. "Grayson's?! The one that's nearly in the next county?! What on earth were you doing all the way out there?! How did you get there? Who were you with? How did you get back?"

Angelo shrank back slightly in his chair, shoulders up around his ears, hands unconsciously imitating his mother's as they wrung helplessly beneath the table.

"Mi guardi, giovanotto!"  
(Look at me, young man!)

Angelo kept his head bowed but looked up at his father from beneath his lashes.
"Now you answer me. No more games, do you hear me? You will answer me directly, truthfully. Mi hai capito?" Joshua demanded. (Do you understand me?)

Angelo nodded.

"Answer me!"

"Yes, sir," Angelo said meekly.

"How did you get to Grayson's?"

"I walked, sir."

"And back?"

"I walked, sir."

Joshua, while pleased that his son hadn't gotten into a stranger's car, or into a car with a driver who might have been under the influence of some substance or other, was still concerned that Angelo had apparently been walking back into town in the wee hours, alone.

"What were you doing at Grayson's? Beside smoking?" he said, looking significantly at his son.

Angelo swallowed nervously but didn't immediately answer.

"Uno!"

"We just hung out at first," Angelo said quickly. "That... that's when... we were... smoking," he admitted reluctantly. "A couple of them were painting graffiti on the walls. Then some of them thought it would be fun to break windows, so they started to pick up stones and pieces of brick and
stuff and threw them. First it was to see who could break the most, then it was to see who could hit the smallest pieces, then they changed it to see who could break the highest ones."

The Di Marco's looked at their son, shocked. "Vandalism?" his father asked in disbelief.

The look his mother gave him nearly set him crying. "That's not how we raised you, Angelo," she said quietly. The disapproval in her voice and disappointment on her face was unmistakable and more painful than if she'd slapped him.

"I didn't paint any of the graffiti, honest!" he said fervently. "And I only lobbed the rocks I threw. If I hit anything it was only the side of the building, and that was brick. I didn't break any of the windows, I swear! The guys were even making fun of me that I threw like a girl but I just laughed it off and kept lobbin' 'em, making fun how I'd be lucky to hit the broad side of a barn with how bad my aim was. I was actually kinda glad when the watchman came running out, yelling at us to get lost."

He didn't mention the thrill of adrenaline he'd felt as they'd been throwing the stones, or as they'd run away, laughing after the watchman had said that he'd called the cops. He was sure that his parents would never understand it if he tried to explain how that had made him feel more alive than he had in months.

"Did you try to stop them?" Joshua asked.

"No sir?"

"Why didn't you leave when you saw what they were doing?" his mother asked.

"You knew it was wrong. Why did you stay and allow yourself to be involved with it?" his father inquired.

"And smoking, Angelo?" his mother added. "Where did you learn to smoke? Why would you take up such a dirty, smelly habit? Just because they were smoking didn't mean that you had to."

"Did they give you anything other than cigarettes, Angelo?" his father asked, suddenly fearful.
"No sir," replied Angelo, who up till then had been looking back and forth between his parents as they questioned him, unsure of who to answer first, and wondering if they even wanted answers.

His father stood and leaned across the table. He took his son's chin in his hand and forced the boy to look him directly in the eye. "The truth. Did they give you anything more than cigarettes?"

"One of em had a cigarette that smelled funny, but I didn't have any of that one. And S... one of em had a bottle of booze he took from his dad's cabinet, but I didn't have any of that either. Honest!" he said, making direct eye contact with his father which reassured the man that his son was telling the truth. "That stuff just smelled nasty, dad, there's no way I could'a drank it," he said with disgust.

The tone of his son's voice when he answered the last question nearly caused Joshua to smile but he fought it down. This was not the time for laughter. He looked at his son with a somber expression.

"Who are these boys?" he asked. "Where are they from? Do they go to your old school?"

Angelo once again dropped his gaze to the table top. "I-I-I don't know who they are. I just met em. I don't... don't know what school they go to."

"You're in enough trouble right now without adding to it with lies," his father said sternly. "Who are these boys? What are their names? Where do they live?"

"I... I... don't know. I... I... don't know." Angelo replied, hunching his shoulders once again. He'd dropped his gaze from the table top to his hands which were on his lap beneath the table.

"Last chance, Angelo. Who are these boys?" his father asked levelly.

Angelo hesitated, looking around at everything except his parents. "One of em is called... ummm... Pencil, cuz... he... he's tall and thin and has kind of orangey red hair. Another is... uh... Mugs... he's a short, kinda round white guy. Ummm..." His stomach felt as though it had dropped several hundred feet and landed in his pelvic region when he saw his mother silently get up out of her chair and leave the house without a word or a backward look. She had no problem administering the occasional spanking or swat with the spoon, but she couldn't bear to hear her sons cry when their father, on those rare occasions, decided that their son's had earned a more severe punishment. "One's... uh..." he gamely continued, even though he knew his parent's hadn't bought a word of it and that he was in serious trouble.
"Sei stato un ragazzo molto cattivo, Angelo. Sono molto deluso da te," his father said sadly. Joshua knew that using the word naughty was embarrassing for his son, but he'd sworn ever since he'd been a young boy in the same situation that he'd never call a child of his any of the other hurtful things his own father had called him and his brothers and sisters when they'd been in trouble. (You've been a very naughty boy, Angelo. I'm very disappointed in you.)

Angelo blushed. "Mi dispiace, papà." (I'm sorry, dad.)

Joshua pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

Angelo choked on a gasp as his father began to take his belt off. Eyes once again grown larger, Angelo stood up and backed into the alcove, hands raised in supplication. "No! Dad, no! Please! Per favor papà! Non la cintura! Per favore!" (Not the belt! Please!)

"Siete stati avvisati. Ti hanno dato più di una possibilità per dirmi la verità. Si sceglie di mentire, ora è il momento di prendere le conseguenze." (You were warned. You were given more than one chance to tell me the truth. You choose to lie, now it's time to take the consequences.)

"Please dad! NO!" Angelo pleaded. "I didn't paint the graffiti! I didn't break any of the windows! Please believe me!"

"I believe you, Angelo," his father said quietly, "What you did do was leave the house at night without telling anyone where you were going. What you did was disappear for hours, worrying your family and your friends. What you did was hang out with boys who you're too ashamed to name and admit to being with because they, and you by association, smoked, drank, and engaged in vandalism. Then you chose to top it off with lies. Che cosa stavi pensando?" (What were you thinking?)

"Non stavo pensando! Per favor! Mi dispiace!" Angelo said, already in tears, pressing more closely into the corner of the alcove. (I wasn't thinking!)

"Come here Angelo," his father said softly. "Don't make me come after you."

"Please don't?" Angelo tried one last time. "Not the belt? Please dad!"
"Come here. Now," was his father's only reply.

Angelo slowly approached his father, fruitlessly wiping the torrent of tears from his face.

Joshua took his son by the wrist and guided him over the table, which shook slightly with the force of Angelo's sobs.

The belt came down. Once. Twice. Three times, then Angelo stopped counting.

"Che cosa stavi pensando?" (What were you thinking?)

"Non stavo pensando!" Angelo cried, throwing his hands back to protect his backside. (I wasn't thinking!)

"Spostare quelle mani. Ora! Questa non è una risposta sufficiente. Che cosa stavi pensando?" (Move those hands. Now! That's not a good enough answer. What were you thinking?)

"Mi dispiace, papà! Mi dispiace!" Angelo sobbed, pulling his hands away and folding his arms beneath his head. (I'm sorry, daddy! I'm sorry!)

"Perché dovresti fare una cosa del genere?" (Why would you do such a thing?)

"Sono stato così solo per così tanto tempo! È stato bello avere amici ..." Angelo cried. (I've been lonely for so long! It was nice to have friends...)

"Le persone che vi incoraggio a fare le cose che sai essere sbagliate non sono veramente i tuoi amici!" (People who encourage you to do things you know are wrong are not truly your friends!)

"Volevo solo adattarsi! Volevo solo essere uno dei ragazzi!" (I just wanted to fit in! I just wanted to be one of the guys!)
"Hai Amadeo e Milo. Avrai altri amici, amici veri, se gli date una possibilità!" His father responded, delivering several more stripes. (You have Amadeo and Milo now! Soon you'll have more friends, real friends, if you give it a chance.)

"Cessare! Per favore, papà! Basta! Mi dispiace! Mi dispiace!" Angelo sobbed. (Stop! Please, dad! Enough! I'm sorry!)

"You stay away from those other boys, do you understand me?" his father demanded.

"I'll be good, dad! I'll be good! I won't hang around with those other guys ever again! I'll go back to school in September and give it another chance. Please? Please stop?"

Joshua stopped the punishment and helped his son up.

"Hai imparato la lezione?" he asked, holding his son at arm’s length so that he could look directly at him. (Have you learned your lesson?)

"Yes! Please no more? Please forgive me?"

"Va bene mio figlio, e tutto a posto oro. Sei perdonato. Ti amo," he said, pulling his youngest son into a warm hug, swaying slightly back and forth as he'd done when Angelo had been only a baby. (All right my son, it's all right now. You're forgiven. I love you.)

Angelo clutched his father and sobbed into his shirt front. "Ti amo, papà."
Angelo and Amadeo

Angelo and Amadeo

It wasn't until the following Saturday that Angelo was allowed to see his friends. Amadeo and Milo came to the house to pick him up. They were greeted by Mrs. Di Marco as though they were long lost friends and who sat them down at the table with glasses of milk and freshly made cookies. She placed another glass of milk at Angelo's usual place and went to the living room door to call him.

Angelo came to the door between the kitchen and living room where he stopped, head bowed, silent and unable to look at either of his friends.

Mrs. Di Marco walked back over to her son, pulled his head down and whispered in his ear. Whatever she said caused Angelo's eyes to become bright. He buried his face in the curve of her neck and hugged her. Neither of the other boys could hear what she said before she returned the hug tenderly, but they could see Angelo trying to get himself under control, so they turned their attentions to their milk and cookies, allowing him as much privacy as possible in the small room.

Julia rubbed her youngest son's back and then held him at arm’s length, holding his chin and making him look her in the eye. She smiled encouragingly and squeezed his arms before sending him in the direction of the table.

He stood by his chair, eyes focused on the table top, took a breath and said, "Guys, I'm really sorry about scaring you that night. I didn't mean to. I... I..." he faltered.

"Hey, it's ok, man," Milo said reassuringly. "We're just really glad you were ok."

Amadeo wanted to say something encouraging, words of reassurance, of forgiveness, but he was still somewhat angry. "Yes, we're glad you're all right. So, what do you guys want to do today?" he asked, taking a bite of the still warm cookie and washing it down with the milk.

Milo didn't pick up on the slight edge to Amadeo's voice, but it wasn't lost on Angelo, who gave his friend an anxious look.

They finished their snack and wandered for the rest of the day. To Amadeo's frustration, he was still under stricture to avoid strenuous activity, so baseball or football were out of the question.
They stopped at the park with a bag of day old bread to feed the ducks, laughing at the fish who would pop up to get their share. They stopped at the railroad station, where Amadeo had to admit that watching the trains come in was pretty cool. They went to the book stores to browse, making wish lists as they went along. At one point Amadeo's head began to hurt so they stopped at Grammarcy’s for burgers and cokes, where Angelo once again managed to gross Milo out by dunking his fries into his chocolate shake.

"Don't knock it till you try it, Mi! I'm tellin' ya!" Angelo said with a grin.

"If I eat that and barf you owe me new fries," Milo said brusquely, pointing an imperious finger at his friend.

"And if you like it, you have to...to...stand up on the chair and sing Surfin' Bird," Angelo countered.

Milo hesitated. He looked at Amadeo who merely sat with his hand poised thoughtfully by his mouth as was his habit, and raised his eyebrows in a way that clearly said, 'It's up to you.'

"Put up or shut up, man," Angelo said with a cheeky grin.

"Ok, deal," Milo replied.

"Deal." Angelo replied confidently, holding out his hand to seal the bargain.

Milo, sure that he had a free order of fries coming, picked up one fry, screwed up his face into an expression of distaste, dipped it into the shake and haltingly brought it to his mouth. He took a bite and chewed slowly. His eyebrows rose in surprise. He was just about to dip the fry again when he noticed the grins on his friend’s faces.

Angelo cleared his throat and grinned. "I believe you were just about to break into spontaneous song? Rather like a... like a bird, perhaps?"

"Awww, guys, c'mon..." Milo said, blushing and slouching down into his chair.
"You shook on it, Mi." Amadeo said reasonably. "You don't want to be known as a deal breaker, do you?"

Milo crossed his arms and gave his friends a distinctly unfriendly look. "I hate you guys. You know that, don't you?" he said in a disgruntled tone.

"Here, I'll get you started," said Angelo helpfully, "'Well everybody's heard, about the bird...'

"Oh!" said Amadeo, clicking his fingers as though just remembering, "Don't forget to stand on the chair so that we can see you."

"You're despicable!" Milo glowered, giving a fairly impressive imitation of Daffy Duck.

Angelo sat back in his chair with his hands clasped on the table, and looked at Milo expectantly.

Amadeo waved his hand with a flourish. "The floor is yours, Maestro. Or should I say, the chair?"

Milo stood on the chair and began to sing loudly, gyrating his hips and flapping his arms like a demented bird.

The manager, Mr. Gelson, interrupted him when he was about a third of the way through the first part of the song, politely asked him to sit on the chair like a human being and hush. He then informed the boys that they were officially cut off from any more cherry cokes for the rest of the day.

"Now, if I have to come back over here and talk to all y'all again I'm gonna call your folks. Hear?" he said sternly.

"Yes sir," the boys replied politely, exchanging amused glances and smothering giggles after the man had gone.

Several of the other customers gave Mr. Gelson a standing ovation as he passed by them. Gelson
smiled shyly and waved before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Saved by the sound of hearing," Angelo quipped.

Milo grinned self-consciously. "I'da finished it you know."

"We know, man. It's all good," Amadeo said with a smile.

"Oh shoot!" said Milo, glancing at his watch. "I was supposed to be home ten minutes ago! Aunt Sadie's coming to visit and I was supposed to be there."

"You won't be in any trouble, will you?" Amadeo asked worriedly. "We'll go with you and tell your folks it was our fault you lost track of time."

"Nah, don't worry guys. Mom'll probably give me a whack or two to make her point, and then Aunt Sadie'll rush over to me, give me a hug and a dollar and tell mom not to be so hard on me." Milo grinned. "Later gators," he said with a wave.

"Gee," Angelo said wistfully, "Wish I had an Aunt Sadie to give me a hug and a dollar."

"We're outta luck, man. Milo's got it made. We've got the sultry, Mediterranean good looks, but Milo and his little brother have those dimples, and there's just no beating the dimples," Amadeo said regretfully. "come on, let's head out."

Angelo and Amadeo bused their table, put their dishes in the basin and their trays on the stack and left. Mr. Gelson didn't ask his customers to do that, but he did reward those who did with little perks like extra pickles on a hamburger platter, or extra chocolate sauce or cherries on a sundae.

The two boys walked in silence for a while until they reached the park. Amadeo stopped and gently grabbed Angelo by the arm. "Hang on," he said, pointing toward one of the stone gazebos that dotted the park. This one was encased in overgrown vines to an extent that most people forgot it was there except for the occasional kid who wanted to sneak a smoke, or teens who wanted a private place to make out.
He walked over to where the entrance was and quietly pulled back the curtain of foliage to see if there were anyone inside. Seeing it empty he looked at Angelo and said, "Come on, let's sit down here a bit and talk."

Once they were seated on the stone ridge that ran around the inside, Amadeo turned toward his friend, right arm along the back of the sill, right leg bent slightly beneath his left, with a very serious expression. "I'd like to talk about last week when you disappeared," he said solemnly.

Angelo licked his lips nervously. They'd been having such a good time today that he'd hoped Amadeo would forget whatever it was that was bothering him that morning. He fixed his large, dark eyes on his friend and sat on the ridge, mirroring 'Deo's body language. "I'm sorry, Dae," he said quietly.

"I know, Ange," Amadeo said, putting up a hand to halt his friend's apology. "What I don't get is why. You have me and Milo, and there're a lot of kids in school who feel really crappy about the way they treated you, and even more who regret not doing anything to stop people from bullying you sooner. Some of the guys were talking in the cafeteria, asking each other why they'd been excluding you the way they had and what it basically came down to was someone heard something from someone else who heard something from someone else..." he shook his head.

"The point is that no one had any idea what had been said or by who, and everyone feels like complete heels. The confessionals have been overflowing since May. The funny thing is that there've been more folks going to the confessionals than belong to the church," he joked, trying to lighten the mood a little.

Angelo remained silent and kept his gaze on his hands which were clenched together on his lap.

"So, I just need to know why you had to sneak out to go back with these guys... what do you get from them that we can't give you?"

Angelo studied his hands for a while, then finally raised his eyes to look directly at Amadeo. "They were the only ones willing to be my friends," he said quietly. "They didn't want my money, or to take my lunch. They..." he stopped, searching for the right words. "They... When I came across them I was afraid at first. There were all of them and only one of me. They were older and bigger and I thought for sure they were gonna beat on me, take whatever they could and leave me in the dirt."

Amadeo sat quietly while Angelo gathered his thoughts.
"But they didn't hurt me. They didn't make fun of me. They didn't take my stuff and throw it around. They didn't trip me up and laugh at me and make stupid remarks." Angelo took a watery sounding breath. Amadeo could see, even in the dim light of the gazebo that his friend was close to tears.

"They asked me my name. They thought it was cool. One of 'em, Steve, put an arm around me and said I sounded like a good guy and asked me if I wanted to hang with them." He looked up at Amadeo, fighting back tears, "They'd only just met me and they accepted me just like that. I'd been in school for months by then and not one of those hayseeds would even say hello to me in the halls between classes," he said angrily.

"Ange? Your new friends... did any of them ever ask you to do things you knew were wrong? Or illegal?" Amadeo asked gently.

"Not... not really," Angelo replied hesitantly. "They'd do stuff, you know? I'd go along with em but I didn't do any of it myself. I... I mean... a few times they offered me a cig and I'd take a few puffs... they'd get a good laugh out of it cuz I couldn't do it right and I'd end up coughing my gizzards out." He winced, "I got sick a couple of times," he admitted. "But Ralph or one of the others would give me a slug out of their Coke, or pop one open for me, and I'd feel better afterward."

"What kinds of things did they do?" asked Amadeo, noncommittally.

"Well, like that night... Frankie and Parker were painting graffiti on the walls. Steve passed around a couple of cigs. One of em smelled funny so I wouldn't take a drag from that one. Mighta been stale or something I guess," he said thoughtfully, "Carlos was passin' around a bottle of whiskey or something like that, but it smelled so bad I couldn't make myself drink any of it."

"Did they force you to do anything you didn't want to do?"

Angelo looked at Amadeo with a guilty expression. "No, not really."

"What does that mean, not really?"

"They kept offering me cigarettes. I didn't want em but then they were kinda makin' cracks, you know? So finally I took a drag to make em stop. I kept gettin' sick if I smoked too much, so I'd only
take a few drags and pass on the rest. They'd smile and pat me on the back and call me a trooper."

"What else happened that night?"

"Not much, really. That night they were throwing rocks through the windows of an abandoned factory. The night watchman came out yelling that he'd called the cops and telling us to get out." Angelo said with a little smile of remembrance.

"What are you smiling about, Ange?"

Angelo shrugged. "I knew it was wrong, you know? But... there was this feeling... in the pit of my stomach... not bad like getting sick from smoking the cigarette but like a... a moth was trapped in there and... my head felt light... and I felt... happy. I was in trouble, but I was in trouble surrounded by my friends. It felt good," he said frowning. "Can you understand what I mean?"

"Is that why you went back to them that night? For that thrill?"

"I actually went to see them to tell them I wouldn't be back. I didn't figure I'd be gone more than an hour, but I didn't know where to find them, so it took me some time to scout em out. I finally caught up to em but then one thing lead to another and we ended up at the factory and then... well, you know the rest." Angelo said, bowing his head once again.

"All of us were scared, Ange," Amadeo said softly. "I kept imagining the worst. I thought for sure we'd never find you, or if we did you'd be dead. I... "

Amadeo took a deep breath and leaned down a little to look his friend in the eye. "Look, Angelo, I've been wanting to talk to you about something. There's this problem..."

"No. Don't," Angelo said, sadly. "I... I know what the problem is. There's something wrong with me. I've known it for a while now, and I guess you've figured it out. That's why I don't really try to make friends... cuz they eventually catch on... You don't want to hang out with me anymore and you're trying to give me an out. I get it. It's cool. No hard feelings," he said, getting up quickly and preparing to leave the gazebo.

"Whoa, what are you talking about? What's wrong with you? Catch on to what? What have I figured out?" Amadeo replied in confusion, rising to block Angelo's exit.
"You know! I know you figured it out! That's why you're dumping me!"

"Angelo! Who's dumping you? What's wrong?"

"I'm... there's something wrong with me!"

"Talk to me! I'm your friend. Tell me what's wrong!"

"I can't! I can't say it aloud. I'm sick. Sick in the head. I think I got it from my uncle Pat. I think it's contagious. Let me go, Dae! Just let me go?"

"Not til you talk to me. What are you talking about? Sick how? You said you never met your uncle in person, how could you have gotten anything from him?"

"Maybe it was on the paper he wrote his letters on, or on the pictures he'd send, and I caught it that way."

"That makes no sense, Ange," Amadeo said reasonably. "If he had anything contagious that could be transmitted through letters and photographs then your whole family would have gotten it, right? Come on now, calm down. Sit here and tell me what's wrong," Amadeo continued, taking Angelo by the arms and forcing the smaller boy to look at him.

"You won't want to be my friend anymore if I tell you. You'll be disgusted... you'll... tell everyone and I'll be back to... how I was," he sobbed.

"I'll always be your friend, Ange. Always. Trust me," Amadeo said, pulling his friend into a tight hug. At first Angelo resisted but his need for reassurance overwrote his fear of Amadeo's reaction.

"Talk to me, il mio angelo."

Upset and distracted, Angelo didn't notice the term of endearment. He disengaged himself from Amadeo's hug and walked a few steps away, back toward his friend, eyes on the leaf strewn floor.
of the gazebo. "Mi piacciono i ragazzi," he whispered.

"What was that?"

"Mi piacciono i ragazzi. Mi piacciono i ragazzi! Ho cercato di non! So che è sbagliato e ho cercato di non ma non posso farne a meno! It's sick! It's unnatural! I can't... I don't mean to... I don't want to but..." Angelo said, unable to stop his tears. He wrapped his arms around himself tightly, sure that Amadeo would either attack him or walk off in disgust. (I like boys. I tried not to! I know it's wrong and I really tried not to but I can't help it!)

"Angelo," Amadeo said quietly, walking over toward his friend, "Non c'è niente di sbagliato in te. Non sei malato. Non sei innaturale," he said, turning Angelo back toward him and gathering him up into a hug once again. (There's nothing wrong with you. You're not sick. You're not unnatural.)

"What do you know about it?" Angelo hissed. "Mr. Popular! Star of the wrestling and track teams! Everyone's favorite!" He struggled to get out of Amadeo's embrace but failed miserably. "Bet you've had every girl in the school. I see the way they look at you! Who wouldn't?"

Amadeo wrestled Angelo toward the stone bench, sat down and pulled the angry boy down onto his lap. "Il mio angelo, tranquillo ora. Tranquillo. Ascoltami. Non sono malati. Non sono innaturali. Non sei l'unico a sentirti sempre in questo modo. Silenzio ora e ascoltami," Amadeo said quietly. (My angel, quiet now. Quiet. Listen to me. You are not sick. You are not unnatural. You are not the only guy to ever feel this way. Hush now and listen to me.)

Angelo stopped his struggles and looked at Amadeo in surprise. No one had ever called him 'My Angel' except his parents. The words were the same, but there was something different in the tone which was what caught Angelo's attention.

"Mi piacciono i ragazzi troppo. L'ho conosciuto da quando avevo tredici anni. E c'è un ragazzo particolare mi piace un sacco. Mi sono innamorata di lui il giorno lo vidi attraversare la strada con il naso sepolto in un libro." (I like boys too. I've known it since I was thirteen. And there's one particular boy I really like a lot. I fell in love with him the day I saw him crossing the street with his nose buried in a book.)

"Me?" Angelo asked, afraid that Amadeo would answer by throwing him off his lap. Afraid that Amadeo would laugh cruelly before stepping over him to leave the gazebo only to run to his friends and tell them all about Angelo the Freak.
"You," Amadeo said with a tender smile and a sparkle in his eyes. "That first day when you showed me your garden, I wanted so badly to tell you how I felt, to touch your hair, your face... to kiss you. I thought I felt a connection, but I wasn't sure. I was afraid that if I was wrong you'd hate me and tell me to get as far away from you as possible, and I was afraid that if I were right I might scare you away if I moved too fast," he said, hesitantly placing a gentle hand on Angelo's cheek.

Angelo looked into Amadeo's eyes. A few years ago his mother had bought a clear glass coffee cup. At first she'd been afraid to use it, sure that pouring the hot liquid into it would cause it to shatter. She'd finally taken the chance and was pleased when the cup remained intact. She'd then held it up to the kitchen window so that the morning sunlight could hit it. The muddy looking brew was suddenly lit from behind. Shades of brown, black and gold swirled in the cup. Angelo had thought the colors were beautiful. He found them again now in Amadeo's eyes.

Much as Angelo's mother had done earlier that morning, Amadeo put his hand around the back of Angelo's neck and pulled the boy toward him. Their eyes never left each other, but even though Deo had never kissed another man in this way, his lips unerringly found Angelo's and seemed of their own volition to know what to do. Angelo's tears ran down his cheeks and Amadeo tasted them before kissing his love more passionately.

"I love you, Angelo Di Marco," he said softly. "Ti amo."
Angelo's heart was racing when Amadeo finally broke their kiss and once again looked at him with those amazing sunlit coffee eyes. It was too good to be true. He pinched his thigh to be sure he was awake. He'd dreamed so many times of kissing Amadeo and woken with an ache that only an ice cold bath had been able to cure. He lost count of how many mornings he'd had to run to the bathroom fearing that his parents or one of his brothers would be in the kitchen and see the remaining evidence of the most recent dream.

"Really?" Angelo asked in a whisper, searching Amadeo's face for any sign of teasing or deceit, hoping for and at the same time fearing the answer. "Swear?"

Amadeo smiled and wiped away the last of Angelo's tears. "I swear," he said, pulling the other close and placing his cheek next to Angelo's. He placed a hand on the opposite cheek and pressed their faces gently together, enjoying the feel of Angelo's skin against his, the scent of his hair. "I've wanted you for my own since the first day I saw you," he murmured.

Angelo dropped his head to the curve of Amadeo's neck, fighting back tears. He hated it when he cried but he seemed to do a lot of it lately. "I was so scared. I've been alone for so long," he said breathlessly, "Carrying this... feeling... this secret and not being able to talk to anyone about it. I had some friends in New York who I could talk to. There was one guy... he was kinda my boyfriend, I guess, but about three months ago he stopped answering my letters, and he doesn't have a phone. I'm not gonna keep after him, you know? But here? Here I was constantly afraid that someone would find out and... I'm afraid to even talk to my folks about it. They always say there's nothing I could ever do that would make them hate me but this... I don't know. Mom always said about Uncle Pat but... what if she doesn't feel the same about me? What if my folks do end up hating me? What if they kick me out? What if they disown me? My family means everything to me, Dae, even my bossy brothers."

Amadeo didn't have an immediate answer. He'd struggled with the same questions and concerns from the day he'd first discovered he was 'different' than his brothers and friends. He'd faced the same problem of having no one to talk to about it. Being one of the minority of Catholics in their predominantly Protestant little town he already knew the church's stand on homosexuality, so he knew that talking to Father Kelly, or Father Ryan, a tiny man from Texas with a big, booming voice, was out of the question. He also knew that his family loved him, but he'd been afraid to talk to any of them about it. Like Angelo, he worried that they'd reject him. He'd been tempted, on occasion, to try to talk to Milo about it, but the idea of his best friend turning his back on him was just as painful as the possibility of losing his family.
"We have each other," Amadeo reassured his friend, hugging him tightly, rubbing Angelo's back with one hand and petting his hair with the other. "I know we're not the only two who feel this way, and some day we might meet more, but for now we have each other and we can talk about anything. All right?"

Angelo nodded against Amadeo's neck. He felt as though a stone had been removed from inside of his chest.

"Ange, tell me something... you were talking about your uncle. You said you worried you'd caught something from him. You worried you'd contracted this 'condition' from his letters and pictures? What do you know about him? Is, I mean, was he, like us? What made you think so?"

Angelo slid off of Amadeo's lap, just in case someone walked by, to sit once more on the stone ledge that was built along the walls and served as a bench. "Mom always had this look on her face when she talked about him, happy and sad at the same time, if you can imagine that," he said quietly. "I heard her and dad talking a few times about him after we'd get a letter or a call from him. One time she was talking to dad. She was upset, almost crying, about how gran and gramp Lombardi had kicked him out of the house when he was seventeen. She was saying, 'They just couldn't see how wonderful he was. How special, how sweet. But they just couldn't get past his...' then she saw me nearby and she changed the subject."

"He'd send pictures now and then. They were always of him somewhere on the farm. Sometimes there'd be another guy in the picture, sometimes there'd be four of them, all happy and smiling, leaning on each other, or on a rake or a hoe, holding up a prize winning vegetable or hog. I asked once who the other guys were. Mom pointed to each one, kinda joking and she said 'Angelo, this is Noel. Noel, I'd like you to meet my youngest son, Angelo.' And she did that all the way down the line. They all looked like really nice guys. I asked a couple of times if we could maybe someday meet them in person, but mom would get this odd look and say it was a small farmhouse and there was nowhere for Uncle Pat to fit all of us."

"Johnny asked her once where their wives and kids were. Mom got this look on her face, I can't describe it, and then she said they were just old, confirmed bachelors who spent so much time working the farm they'd never had time for anything else."

"The first time I heard about how Uncle Pat was, I was around twelve. Iggy was going to the local community college and still lived home. Luke, Johnny and Paul were older so they got to stay up later than I did on school nights. They were all in Iggy and Luke's room, talking." Angelo gave a little chuckle. "They thought they were being so quiet but all I had to do was stand on the bed and put my ear next to the air vent and I could hear every word they said. I learned a lot that way."

Amadeo smiled, remembering all the things he'd learned while listening to his older brothers and
"Well anyway, Luke was talking about a guy in his class who was... well he was... you know, like us, except he kinda acted like a girl according to Luke. Swishy, is how he described it. That's when Iggy spilled the beans about Uncle Pat and his friends. That was the first time I ever heard the word 'homosexual'. Luke said he didn't mind people like that, as long as they didn't go all strange like the guy in his school. He said that from what he could see, Uncle Pat and his friends might be queer but they weren't swishy and could pass for real men at a distance. He said that from what he heard, being homosexual was a sickness, and that there were hospitals that treated that kind of thing."

"So that's why you thought you might have caught it from your uncle?" Amadeo said thoughtfully.

Angelo shrugged, an embarrassed expression on his face. "I guess. I couldn't figure out how else I'd gotten it. But I was afraid to talk to anyone about it. I was afraid of going to the hospital. I mean, how exactly do they treat that kind of thing? Is it painful? How long does it take? Would I be normal afterward? What if they couldn't cure me, is there a place they send people like us, like a leper colony, if we can't be cured? You know, like that episode of the Twilight Zone where people we would consider to be beautiful were considered hideous? So I figured, since I couldn't talk to anyone about it, I'd just try to be as normal as possible, and maybe when I got old enough I could hitch hike here and join Uncle Pat on the farm. But then he died before I got the chance."

"Then I got worried again last week, when Luke and Rosalia came for a visit for a couple of days to see the house and farm," Angelo said. "We were all sitting down in the living room looking at some photo albums. We came across some pictures of Uncle Pat and the others. Mom was kind of hedging around like she always did when she talked about them. It was Rosalia who came right out and called the lot of 'em fags. She said for everybody to just get over it and call a spade a spade, or a queer a queer."

"Mom got really upset, telling Rose not to use words like that and Rose said, in this really slimy sounding tone. 'Lukie always says you say you loved your brother. He says you get upset about how horribly and unfairly your parents treated him, but in my opinion, what it comes down to is you're too embarrassed to admit, to yourself or your kids, that your brother and his friends were a bunch of homo's who were living in sin and going to hell."

"Luke looked like he was going to get sick and kept trying to get her to shush up. He was trying to grab their jackets and drag her out of the house but she pulled her arm free and got this really ugly look on her face... she was smiling but it was... it was like her face was twisted up like in a fun house mirror... and she kept saying horrible things about Uncle Pat and his friends, all self-righteous and haughty. I looked at her and all of a sudden all I could see was that horrid red lipstick she wears. Her lips always looked so smooth before but all of a sudden I could see how wrinkled they were, how wide her mouth was, how thin her lips were, how she'd been globing on the lipstick..."
past where they actually ended to make them look fuller. It was like watching a cartoon."

"Then mom... wow, 'Deo you hadda see her. Rosalia now, she's taller and's gotta outweigh mom by at least a hundred pounds. Mom gets up and advances toward Rosalia like a lion after a gazelle. She gets right up in her face... well, as much as you can with a six inch difference in height, and she says, 'You didn't know my brother or his friends, so you have no right to judge them. Ever! I could say a few things about you... you... thing, but I was raised to be a lady, and no matter what I think, if it's not complimentary, I don't say it! It's called being considerate! Something I doubt you even know how to spell let alone be!"

"So, Rosalia, she gets all het up and starts sputtering, 'Well I never...'

So mama says, "Since we're being honest now, from what I heard about you there's not much you never! For someone like you to stand in judgement of decent, kind, hardworking folks goes way past pots and kettles. The only difference between you and a common... lady of the evening... is that you found my son to pay for you on a daily basis instead of having to stand on the street corners and take your luck that way!"

Then she turned to Luke and said, "'And you need to start using your brain..." she said, thunking Luke on the head with her fist, "and open your eyes! Then you'd see what a low life, gold digging, piece of trash she is!' Then she gets up, grabs her coat and starts out the door. We all ran after her and asked her where she was going, she was so upset and we were worried about her. Her face was red as a beet. She said 'I'm going for a walk, and I want that' she said, pointing to Rosalia, 'out of my house by the time I get back. Oh,' she says looking back at dad, 'Make sure you count the silver.' "

'Deo's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Mrs. Di Marco was so sweet tempered and gentle, he had a hard time believing she could lose her temper like that, she was normally so soft spoken and sweet. He admitted though, that had it been him, he'd have done much the same.

"So Rosalia packed her stuff ranting the whole time about how it was a constitutional right to speak and she hadn't been aware that the farm was in a country that didn't allow it. I almost died laughing when I heard Luke tell her to shut up and finish packing. She kinda gave this huff and said, 'Well, if that's the way you feel about it, I won't say another word. Ever!' and then Luke mutters 'Promise?'"

Amadeo nearly laughed but suppressed it. "So, what's going to happen with Luke and Rosalia?" he asked.

"Hopefully mom got through to him and he'll kick her sorry butt to the curb on trash day," Angelo said with a smile.
Amadeo sobered and looked seriously at his friend, "Ange, your mom sounds open minded. I mean, if your uncle was really like us and she defended him all the time, wouldn't you be able to at least talk to her about it?"

Angelo sighed. "I thought about that. But I'm still afraid. What if it's different because he was her brother and not her own son? And it's like that b... uh... nasty piece of work said. If mom wasn't embarrassed by him, she'd have been more open about it. Johnny and Paul didn't say much of anything, neither did dad, so I don't know how they feel about it. Sure as hell Rosalia didn't approve of it, and if Luke stays with her after this I'm pretty sure that'd mean he feels the same way."

Amadeo thought for a moment, then he looked at his friend. "I don't believe your mother was embarrassed about her brother. From what you've said, it sounds to me like she was protective of him. We both know that feeling the way we do isn't socially acceptable, even now, so it had to have been even worse thirty or forty years ago. Even then it wasn't something that could be spoken about to just anyone."

"Right!" Angelo agreed, "But he obviously went to gran and gramp, hoping they'd understand and love him no matter what, and they threw him out! He was their son, their first born, and they rejected him. From what I heard, only mom and her two sisters stayed in contact with Uncle Pat afterward. His two brothers haven't spoken to him ever since. I think I'd die if my brothers stopped talking to me, no matter how annoying they are. If they shut me out of their lives like that..." he smiled when Angelo managed a laugh through his tears, "then you just let him be. He'll either come around or he won't. You can't control it." He wiped the tears away from Angelo's eyes and tentatively brushed his lips against the other boy's. When Angelo didn't pull away, Amadeo kissed him harder, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend... his boyfriend! and held him close.

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Reference to The Twilight Zone episode: "The Eye of the Beholder" originally broadcast as "A Private World of Darkness" on Nov. 11, 1960
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The two boys made their way back to Angelo's house. Amadeo took deep, appreciative breaths as they walked down the dirt drive, loving the mixed scents of moist earth, wild flowers, things green and growing, the slightly sour tang of the blackberries that had fallen to the driveway and were fermenting in the heat of the day. He smiled at the soft, contented sounds of the hogs who rolled in a freshly watered mud wallow, and the muted clucking of the chickens who had once again taken refuge in the barn.

"Mama, Pop! We're back!" Angelo called as they entered the house. "Paulie? John?"

"There's a note on the table, Ange," Amadeo pointed out.

Angelo picked it up and brought it near Amadeo so that they could both read it. "Umm, shoulda known dad would've had to work today. He's still trying to find a viable office space. So far everything he's suggested has had something wrong with it. He's starting to think he's going to have to search in another city entirely," he sighed. Then he laughed as he read his mother's request that he start dinner. "She's feeling brave today, isn't she?"

Amadeo smiled. He knew his friend was a pretty good cook, and he knew that Angelo knew it as well, but that didn't stop his friend from fishing for compliments.

"So what shall I prepare tonight? Salmonella on a Stick? Ptoamine Tartare?" Angelo asked his friend as he held his hand above the stove top to see if it were still hot enough to cook on. He gathered up some kindling and old paper and arranged them in the stove, then picked up several pieces of wood and placed them carefully in as well, watching to be sure they caught before closing the door again.

Amadeo shrugged. "As long as it doesn't bite back, I don't think they'll care," he replied with a serious expression.

Angelo's laughter was happy and relaxed. "OK then, let's see what we've got," he said, turning toward the quietly humming refrigerator. He opened the freezer and looked in. "Eh, nothing here will thaw by dinner time. Did you know that when mom and dad first came here there wasn't a fridge? Uncle Pat and..." Angelo hesitated, unsure of what word he should use. "Well, anyway,
they had an ice box! Did you ever see one?"

"My nonnie and papi had one, yeah. It was pretty cool. No pun intended," Amadeo said quickly, grinning as he saw the look on his friend's face.

"Well, anyway, when mom and dad first came out here there was no electricity. At all! When dad came out he did most of the electrical work, installing outlets and light fixtures and all, and then some guys from the electric company had to install the poles and run the lines from the street down here," he said, rummaging through the refrigerator, pulling out onions, carrots, celery, and a variety of fresh herbs.

"Hey, Dae, would you look in the alcove there, look in the pantry and see if we have any pasta?" Angelo asked, gesturing over his shoulder with his chin, as though Amadeo didn't know where the alcove or the pantry were. "Under the sink is a big pot mama makes her sauce in, and another one that's a little smaller, and the frying pan... can you get those too, please?"

Amadeo did as he'd been asked, wondering what it was his friend planned to make as Angelo placed the first selection of vegetables on the table only to return to the refrigerator to take out another arm load.

Angelo added them to the pile, unconsciously maneuvering past Amadeo in much the same way that his father did while helping his mother to cook, and picked up the cutting boards, several bowls, a jug of oil, and a couple of paring knives. He placed all but the oil on the table, picked up the large pot and frying pan, put them on top of the stove, added a bit of oil and left them to heat.

"Would you start by chopping up the garlic and onions for me, Dae? Or if you don't like them then start with the carrots and celery, please?"

Amadeo stood there, bemused for a moment while Angelo kept going, not waiting for an answer one way or the other. He watched his friend open the door that lead to the back porch only to return moments later with an armful of potatoes which he dumped in the sink to wash.

"Ummm, how do you want the onion chopped?" Deo asked, peeling it before running it under the cold tap.

"Not too small and not too big," Angelo replied.
Amadeo fought off a grin. He sat down, chopping the onion as he'd seen his mother do countless times. He scraped the pieces into a bowl and began to peel the cloves of garlic. "How do you want the garlic chopped?" he asked.

"Not too big and not too small." Angelo answered distractedly, scrubbing the potatoes with enough force to take the skins off without the aid of a knife.

Amadeo ducked his head and tried to hide another grin before chopping the garlic. He felt four large cloves were plenty so he scraped the pieces into the bowl with the onion and pulled the carrots over. He picked up the paring knife and began peeling them, careful not to get the peelings onto the floor. He brought them to the sink and began peeling them, glancing with interest at how his friend was doing with the potatoes, then brought the carrots back to the table to begin that task.

After Angelo finished with the potatoes he picked up several more pieces of wood and carefully added them to the stove, then he joined his friend at the table, where he carefully dropped the potatoes. He returned to the table, sat down, and began deftly chopping the denuded potatoes into neat, bite sized squares.

"So anyway, next month dad is replacing Old Smokey," Angelo said, picking up the thread of the conversation they'd been having earlier as though there had been no interruption, and gesturing over his shoulder toward the stove with his knife, "with an electric stove. Mom wanted a gas stove but when she found out how much it would cost to run a gas line out here she said electric was fine."

He laughed. "You had to see her eyes when she heard the estimate, I thought they were gonna just pop right out. I know dad felt bad though, because there was a really pretty gas range mama liked and really wanted. But honestly, Dae, it was huge, and I'm not sure it would have made it through the door, let alone fit into the kitchen without knocking out the wall between here and the living room," he quipped. "It had eight burners and a thing on the side where you could put plates to keep the food warm. She figured with so many kids and grandkids that when we were all here for holidays a stove that big would come in handy."

He finished chopping the potatoes and went back to the refrigerator. He took out a covered plate of chicken breasts, pulled off the skins, and began to use a scissor to cut them first into strips, and then into bite sized portions as well.

Amadeo looked at his friend curiously. "I've never seen anyone cut chicken with scissors before. Does it help?" he asked casually.
"Oh yeah!" Angelo replied quickly. "See, when I use a knife, no matter how sharp it is, the chicken wiggles all over the place and the pieces end up all skinny in some places and too thick in others and the pieces don't cook the same, so some end up kinda rubbery and some end up kinda chewy, you know? This way I get them pretty evenly cut, I can trim off any fat, and honestly I think it just makes the food look better when you serve it," he said laughing.

He stopped midway through the chicken to carefully scrape half of the onions and garlic into the large pot, stirring them quickly with one of his mother's myriad of wooden spoons, scraped the rest into the frying pan and stirred those before tapping Shave and a Haircut on the rim of the pan. Still standing, he pulled the herbs over and began chopping up the fresh basil, oregano and parsley. When that was done he put them aside and began coring and cleaning the red and yellow peppers, washing them thoroughly, before slicing them lengthwise and then into bite sized pieces. He once again split half of the peppers into the pot and the rest into the pan, stirred them, then tapped Shave and a Haircut on the edge of the pan before putting the spoon down.

Amadeo had finished the carrots and celery by then and had begun cutting the ends off of the string beans and halving them. "Well, you did say it was nice for heating the kitchen in the winter," he said, raising an arm to wipe the fine sweat off of his forehead with a sleeve.

"Oh yeah, sorry Dae! Gimme a sec," Angelo said apologetically, running back into the hallway which led to the back porch. He returned quickly with two electric fans, plugged one in on each side of the kitchen and turned them on. He opened the windows wider, opened the kitchen door, and then opened the hallway door to create a cross breeze. The temperature in the kitchen became noticeably cooler, for which Amadeo was grateful.

Angelo quickly washed his hands and hurriedly finished cutting the chicken. He scraped the chicken pieces into the frying pan, and sprinkled the chopped herbs in, stirring them quickly to prevent anything burning in the hot oil, added a little salt and pepper which stood in decorative cellars on the back of the stove, stirred that, stirred the contents of the large pan, and once again tapped the Shave and a Haircut pattern on the edge.

He went into the alcove and Amadeo could hear him running the tap. Angelo came back moments later with another large pan full of water, which he carefully poured into the large sauce pan. The oil inside protested loudly at the intrusion of it's arch nemesis, but it was quickly overwhelmed and subsided with an annoyed, 'SSSSssssss.'

Angelo returned to the kitchen, filled the pot again and added more water. Once again he went into the hallway, returning this time with several glass jars full of home canned tomato. He opened each jar, which, with a pop and another hiss, reluctantly gave up it's contents, and emptied them into a bowl. "Hey, Dae? Would you put the potatoes, carrots and celery in the big pot please?" He then began to use a knife to slice up the tomatoes without waiting for Amadeo's reply.
It didn't bother Amadeo at all, he was quite happy to be in the role of chef's helper, and enjoyed how intense Angelo became while he was cooking.

Amadeo carefully slid the vegetables into the pot, and then proceeded to clean the cutting boards, utensils and surfaces while Angelo worked his magic, while still managing to keep an eye on what his friend was doing. Amadeo had no idea what Angelo was cooking, but it already smelled fantastic.

Angelo filled the next smallest pot which Amadeo had brought him with water and placed it on the stove top. He then picked up the frying pan and spooned the contents into the large sauce pan.

Amadeo carefully took the frying pan. Angelo smiled at his friend's silent offer to clean it and handed it over before digging into the cabinets once again for something else. He came up shortly with a couple of small bottles of home canned red kidney beans. He popped the jars open, dug out a few with his fingers, tossed them into his mouth and poured the rest into the large pot which Amadeo was sure would over flow if Angelo tried to put one more thing into it.

With a satisfied smile and a more exuberant rendition of Shave and a Haircut on the edge of the large pot, Angelo turned to his friend and said, "And for now, we're done! In about a half hour or so I'll put the pasta on and it should all be ready when everyone gets home."

"Well, it smells great!" Amadeo said. "What's it called?"

"Huh?"

"What you just cooked. Is it some New York thing? What's it called? I don't remember my mother ever making anything like this and I bet she'd love the recipe."

Angelo shrugged. "I dunno," he said offhandedly. "I just sort of threw stuff together?" then he smiled. "But it does smell good, doesn't it? Wish I could remember whatever it was I did," he laughed.

Amadeo couldn't help but to laugh. "Si dado!" he teased. (You nut)
Angelo bowed. "Thank you! Thank you! Applause isn't necessary, just throw money!" he said, taking an imaginary hat off of his head and holding it out to receive the donations.

"Get a job, ya bum!" Amadeo joked.

Angelo replaced his imaginary hat and wiped an equally imaginary tear from his eye. "Ahhh, how I miss New York! You just made me horribly homesick, Dae. All that's missing are the honking of the car horns, the smells of burnt rubber, oil and gasoline, hot asphalt melting in the summer sun, grumpy, sweaty, grizzled old men shouting at the kids to go home to their mothers and learn some manners. Ahhh, those were the days." He gave an exaggerated sigh and wiped away a few more tears.

Amadeo laughed and clapped his friend on the back. "All right then, now that we've taken our stroll down memory lane, what would you like to do for the next two hours?"

Angelo shrugged. "I'm kinda tired of the board games, and I don't think there's much on this time of day worth watching. I know the animals are taken care of, and I'm pretty sure all the gardening's been done or mom, Johnnie and Paulie wouldn't've left."

"Well, hey! I have an idea! I've been dying since I met you to see all of the pictures on the wall in your living room, and you still never took me down into the cellar. Can we do all that now?"

Angelo shrugged again. "Sure, I guess. Come on," he said, leading Amadeo into the living room. He went to the far left edge of the wall and pointed to the picture on the top left which showed a young, clean cut gentleman man in a dark jacket, high white collar held in place with a neatly tied wide, striped tie, hair short and parted on the left side. Amadeo took several minutes to admire the picture. There was a placid expression on the man's face and he was looking to his right, at what, Amadeo could only guess. And the expression in his eyes... Love? Peace? Pleasure? It was a little difficult to decide what was going through the man's mind while the picture had been taken.

"That's great grandpa Di Marco," Angelo said, laying a gentle finger on the corner of the frame. "And this is great grandma."

Amadeo's eyes opened wide. There were Angelo's large dark eyes and full lips. The woman was wearing a head piece made of what looked like coins which went from the crown of her head to her chest. What could be seen of her hair was dark and wavy. She seemed to be wearing several layers of what might have been brightly colored clothing. A thick choker made of beads of some sort encircled her neck. A circular pendant made of the same beads hung from it. Her eyes were striking, large, almond shaped and dark, much like Angelo's. She had some sort of mark or tattoo.
on her forehead, between and just above her eye level. She looked shy and a little sad, and Amadeo asked about it.

"Great grandpa met her in Morocco. His ship was at docked at the Port of Nador and the guys were on shore leave and he saw her. The story goes that he was a typical sailor and had a girl in every port and when he saw her he forgot about all the rest of them and couldn't keep his eyes off of her. He walked up to her and tried to talk to her, but she just smiled at him, said something he couldn't understand, and walked away. So he decided he was going to learn whatever her language and just casually start up a conversation with her next time he saw her."

"How long was he on shore leave for?" Amadeo asked, surprised.

"Ummm, about three days I think?"

Amadeo smiled. "He was determined wasn't he? How'd he expect to learn a language in three days?"

"He had a gift for languages?" Angelo replied as though it should have been obvious. "He could pick up on a language within a few hours of hearing it. Made him really valuable in the Diplomatic Corp when he retired from the Regia Marina. He wouldn't have been one hundred percent fluent in it in three days but he'd know enough of it to get by, and then study up more later. Dad can do the same thing. He speaks six languages," Angelo said proudly.

"So anyway, he asks around and finally runs into a native who spoke English, and the guy says to him 'Well, you're in Morocco, so what do you think we speak, insufferable American.' So great grandpa goes around asking where he can learn Moroccan and people were either, probably, telling him they didn't speak English, or giving him these amused looks, and finally one lady whispers to him that the language is Moroccan Arabic and then asked if he were in some sort of trouble with the law or did he perhaps need a translator to help with a business transaction, because for a small fee she would gladly have her son act as translator for her."

"He was so happy to have someone else who spoke English and seemed willing to help, he scanned the market place and saw the girl again. So he pointed her out and explained his situation."

"Well the woman took one look at great grandma and said 'Berber. I wish you luck, sir, but I find it unlikely that the women here would be interested in an American.' So great granddad smiles and says, 'Well that's good then, because I'm not an American.' and he wished the lady a good day and went to the local pub where the sailors all hung out. He got a quick course in Arabic and Berber, of course there were different dialects and he knew he couldn't learn all of them in one day so he just
learned as much of the two most common," Angelo giggled.

"What's so funny?" 'Deo asked.

"Well, it turns out that French is, I think the second or third most widely spoken language in Morocco?"

Amadeo looked uncomprehendingly at his friend for a moment and then laughed. "Did his buddies know that? And I'm guessing he spoke French and they knew it?"

"Yep," said Angelo with a laugh. "So there was poor great grandad trying to stuff Moroccan Arabic and at least one dialect of Berber into his head in one night and all that time there was a good chance that she spoke French all the time," he laughed again.

Amadeo loved the sound of Angelo's laugh, and thought again how lucky he'd been to find this wonderful boy. "So did she? Speak French, I mean."

"Yeah, turns out she did. So anyway, great grandad goes out the next day and he's looking all over the place for her. He finally finds her, right? He went up to her and started trying to speak Arabic to her." He frowned, I really need to find his journal, I think I'm telling it wrong. 

"We can find it later, tell me what you remember now, as far as I can tell you're doing fine," 'Deo encouraged him.

Angelo sighed, frustrated with himself, sure that he was 'messing it up', and continued, "Ok, so he started speaking Arabic and according to his journal she was just looking at him, and then she started to smile a little but she was polite and didn't interrupt but she didn't answer either. Then he tried the bit of Berber he'd learned and her lips twitched even more and he could see she was trying really hard not to laugh. He said in his journal that he could feel his ears getting hot like they'd do whenever he was embarrassed. That's when she smiled at him and asked him in French if he spoke the language. He wrote that she had the loveliest smile."

"He was so glad that they spoke a common language, and that's when he asked her how badly he'd been speaking the languages. She ducked her head a little and he knew she was trying not to laugh again. That's when she told him he'd asked how her goat was. He'd remarked that she had a very pretty bucket of beans, and he'd asked if he could treat her to a cup of camel. Then when he'd switched to the Berber he'd complimented the sandwiches on her feet and said that she had very
Amadeo couldn't help but to laugh, and Angelo joined in.

"So anyway, I guess they stood there in the market place talking for a while when her mother and one of her aunts came running out of a shop with baskets full of stuff and great great grand mother started yelling at her daughter. Great grandad said he only understood part of what she was saying since it was in Berber but he tried to explain to Kenza, that was great great granny's name, in French, that his intentions were good, and that he'd like to marry Imane, that was great grandma's name."

"Well he said the looks on their faces were priceless. He said Imane didn't know whether to be angry or flattered, and he could see Kenza's eyes raking over him, and little lira signs, or in her case perhaps 'darahim', glinting in her eyes. He said great great auntie Najwa, Kenza's sister, gave him the hairy eye the whole time they stood there talking. Or would that make her my great great great auntie? Ah well."

"So anyway, they allowed the courtship. It was pretty much unheard of back then, but considering how many kids they had and what the prospects of finding a suitable husband for all of their daughters were like in Morocco, he was as good a choice as any. Plus even Najwa said afterward that she liked the look of him. I think they liked that great grandad only had another day left too, so that they could have more time to think on it. When he shipped out he promised to write, and every time he wrote he'd send Imane a little token. He sent her something that was a little strange, all things considered, but from what I read, Imane was thrilled with it."

"What was it? Don't keep me in suspense." Amadeo laughed.

"It was a picture made from his hair."

Amadeo smiled, confused, but waited for his friend to continue the story.

"It was... jeez it's hard to explain... I think mom has it in one of the boxes down the cellar, along with the journal. It was kinda like... fronds? And there were little flowers made of the hair with little pearls where the center of the flower would be, and the, uh, bouquet? Was held together near the bottom with a little gold band with more little pearls on it. There were little squiggles of gold wire, and a little butterfly made of the wire."

"Yeah, that does sound unusual. Really pretty though. Um, Ange, do you think you should stir the, uh, dinner?" Amadeo prompted, unsure of what to call the concoction they'd thrown together.
"Hmm? Oh! Yeah, I forgot. Gimme a sec," Angelo ran into the kitchen, stirred the contents of the pot, accidentally spilling some on the stovetop which hissed and gave off a burned smell for a few moments, and then he was back moments later.

He picked up the thread of the conversation once again. "So the next time great grandad..."

"What was his name?"

"Huh?"

Amadeo tried not to laugh. Angelo tended to get so involved in one thing that he'd forget everything else, and he didn't want his friend, no, make that boyfriend, to be self-conscious about it.

"What was his name? You said your great grandmother's name was Imane, what was his?"

"Oh! Matteo. Matteo Donato Di Marco." Angelo smiled. Then he frowned. "Dang, now I forgot what I was saying." He laughed self-deprecatingly.

"We have Matteo and Imane and he's sending her little gifts and the next time he..."

"Oh yeah! Thanks! So the next time his ship docks she's there with her mother, her aunt, her father, two of her brothers and three of her sisters are there ready to greet him at the dock."

"So this was the second time they met?" asked Amadeo.

"Oh, no, sorry, his ship docked regularly at Nador, like every six months or so, so he'd seen her two or three times, and then there was about a year he didn't see her and that's when he sent that... ah... picture, but he kept sending letters every month or so, and photographs. Or rather, he'd write letters every month but sometimes she didn't get them til a few months after. The mail service wasn't so hot back then I guess. And then, just before he went to visit that last time he sent a dowry, money, silks, fine china, linen, a suit made especially for great great grandad and a pretty traditional dress for great great granny, jewelry, silk shoes. He even sent stuff for her brothers and sisters, and even something for however great aunt Najwa."
"How many brothers and sisters did she have?"

"There were twelve kids in the family. Eight boys and four girls. Imane was the third youngest. Poor Imane," he said, suddenly serious, "she went from wishing she'd been an only child or at least a member of a smaller family to nearly crying when she was finally married and on her way to another country with different customs and a different language."

"How old was she? And how old was Matteo?"

"Great grandad, Matteo, was twenty four and Imane was eighteen. Sorry, my oldest brother's name is Matteo so whenever I talk about great grandad I see Matty in my head. It gets a little confusing sometimes," he laughed again.

"It's like that in my mother's family too," said Amadeo. "You can't turn a corner in her family without running into an Anthony, even some of the girls are named Tonia, Antonia or Antoinette. I asked once, mom said he was the patron saint of lost things, and that it was just a traditional family name, which is why none of us is named Anthony," he laughed.

"Hang on, let me show you something before we go on with the wall," Angelo said animatedly. He went to the corner of the room and picked up one of the larger books that were stacked in the corner between the armchair and the couch, behind the lamp, which all stood about knee high. He grunted slightly with the effort of lifting such a heavy book at a bad angle. "C'mere, Dae," he said, sitting down with the book on his lap.

Amadeo sat and Angelo opened the book, half on his lap, half on 'Deo's.

"So who are these folks?" Amadeo asked, pointing to the photos.

"OK, here're some more pictures of the great greats," Angelo said, giving his friend a chance to look at the pictures before he turned the pages. "This is them on their honeymoon, and whenever they went on a vacation they'd have a picture taken." The people in the pictures changed slightly with each photograph, hair, clothing, sometimes smiling, sometimes serious. "Then all of a sudden, BANG!" Angelo said, startling Amadeo. "All of a sudden the two of them have a baby," he turned a few more pages and suddenly as if by magic the infant they'd been holding in the previous picture was a toddler being held by her father while an infant was being held to her mother's breast, only to be replaced with a picture of the adults with a child of about four, a toddler and another infant.
"That's their oldest daughter Stephania," he said, pointing to the pretty, beruffled, dark eyed child who stood by her father, "Great grandad was holding Amina," he said pointing to the toddler in Matteo's arms. "And great gran was holding Vincenzo. Then came Kenza, Lucia, Kalid, Emanuele, Kaoutar; except people would call her Cuter as a nickname, Margherita, Ismail, Salvatore, Rania, dad, Rachid, and finally Domenico," Angelo recited as he turned the pages to reveal more and yet more baby pictures.

Amadeo laughed out loud. "Holy cow! And I thought I had a big family! That's great!"

Angelo smiled, pleased at his friend's, no, boyfriend's reaction.

"Then these are just some photos of them as kids," continued Angelo, pointing to various photos of little children holding cats or dogs, playing on the beach, pulling each other in a little wooden wagon or trying to hitch a dog up and make it pull. Amadeo wondered how that little experiment had gone, and how long the person taking the picture had allowed it to go on. He blushed a little at his own memory of trying to dress his mother's cat in an old shirt and socks when he was two.

"Then these are pictures of them in just about every grade from first to eighth, and then another book full of pictures of them in high school and college, the ones who decided to go. We have a bunch of other books full of pictures of their weddings, honeymoons, vacations and kids as they came along," he laughed again. "Want to see those?"

"Let's finish the wall first, ok? And um, I'll go stir the food this time," he offered. The food smelled great but he was sure Angelo's family didn't want to come home to a burned mess. With a grin he tapped out the familiar rhythm before putting the spoon down and rejoining his friend in the living room.

When he returned to the living room, Angelo picked up on the wall where they'd left off. "Now what we have here is Gran and Gramp Di Marco, Maria Elisabetta and Renato," he said, pointing to two photos side by side.

"She looks like an angel," said Amadeo appreciatively. "She's wearing ballet slippers? I've never seen anything like that before."

Angelo nodded, "She was really beautiful. She was really graceful. I don't remember much about her, but I do remember that. Her hair was like silk," Angelo said meditatively, then he chuckled, "And gramp looked like he was running for mayor. I never said so cause I'm sure he'd've been hurt
but honestly, doesn't he look like he's running for office somewhere?"

Amadeo looked at the man in the dark tails, pin striped pants and top hat and had to agree.

Suddenly self-conscious, Angelo pulled away and pointed to the next photograph. "This is nonnie and papa Lombardi," he said, gazing wistfully at the picture. The man had short black hair and a mustache. He wore a black suit and was seated, while his wife, also in what looked like a black gown, stood beside him, her hands clasped loosely on his shoulder. The only thing indicating that it was a wedding picture and not a funeral were the white cuffs and high collar held with a white cravat on the grandfather, and a matching white scarf or bow at the grandmother's throat, and the lace veil which stopped about mid-calf and which was topped with white flowers. Her long dark hair hung down her shoulders in silky ringlets.

Amadeo looked at his friend, concerned.

Angelo noticed the look and shrugged with a little smile. "They were who they were. I only wish..." his voice died away. He took a breath and then pointed to another framed photo of his grandfather, this time much older. "This was taken about a month before he died. He was seventy four."

Amadeo didn't say anything but he was shocked. The man in the picture looked as though he were in his late eighties, mid-nineties even, but certainly older than seventy four.

Angelo didn't need to hear the words, the thought was plain on his friend's face. "Yeah, I know. He really loved her. He didn't give a damn about his own son, but he did love his wife. When she died he just didn't want to go on living. Amazing that anyone capable of that kind of love couldn't..." Angelo stopped abruptly, anger and sadness warring for dominance.

Amadeo stepped closer and put an arm around his friend. Angelo laid his head on his friend's chest.

"It hurts to know they'd have hated me, too. They'd have disowned me just like they did him," Angelo whispered.

"It's all over and done with, Ange. There's no sense getting upset or angry anymore. Your uncle is past it now, and no matter what else happened, he still had not only his sisters but his... his partner and his friends, and his nephew, who never met him, knew the worst of him, and loved him anyway. And you," he said, looking down into Angelo's dark eyes, "have me, and I'll be willing to
bet your family will stand beside you too, and Milo. You have people who know the worst of you and love you anyway."

Angelo turned into Amadeo's hug and laid his forehead against his friend's chest, silent, sad tears running down his cheeks.

Paul turned quietly away from the door between the living room and kitchen and silently left the house.
May drew to an end, June was well on its way, school was nearly out for the summer. Amadeo had been studying especially hard even though he'd been given extra time to study and take the tests. Other than school he hadn't seen Milo much at all, and he hadn't had much time to visit Angelo either.

Weekend visits were no longer morning 'til night affairs. When Amadeo was over at the Di Marco's it was usually from after lunch until just before dinner, at which point one of his brothers or sisters would come and pick him up. When he groused at the limitations, his sisters Teresa or Carmie, twenty four and twenty two respectively, could be counted on to tell jokes, funny stories, or tickle him until he cheered up.

His brothers, Gabriel, twenty, and Con, now a senior at the same high school, would give him a swat, or a punch on the arm and tell him to get over it. He much preferred his sister's methods.

Another irritation was the time limit that Mr. Rossi had set regarding the length of phone calls.

Johnny silently and repeatedly thanked his wife for convincing him that a private line would be more effective than a party line, which he'd considered since it was supposed to be less expensive. But with four other children vying for phone time, as well as calls from his and Natie's friends, a time limit was necessary. He had a separate line for his business calls in his study, but it was strictly for business, so he also used the house phone for informal conversations, strictly observing the time limit.

It didn't stop Amadeo from chafing at the restriction which lately seemed made only to inconvenience him. He was frustrated by the fact that his father would make him stop studying at nine, even when he was on a roll and didn't want to stop, and make him go to bed at ten o’clock whether he was tired or not. In an uncharacteristic act of defiance he would pull the covers up over his head and continue studying by flashlight. His parents made sure he was up, washed, dressed, fed and out at the same time every day.

That particular morning, Wednesday the tenth, Mrs. Rossi had had to scold her youngest several times, frowning in equal parts concern and frustration. She had asked many times, finally demanded, that Amadeo tell her what was wrong, but he insisted he was fine and would say no more as he scowled at his plate.
His brother Con, had at first griped at his little brother to cool it with the attitude but had been silenced with a look from his father. As a result he sat quietly, eating his breakfast, and shooting the occasional unfriendly look at his brother.

Mr. Rossi had finally told his youngest son that he didn't have to tell them what was wrong if he didn't want to, but three days of his foul mood was more than enough. He threatened Amadeo with a bottom warming if he didn't stop scowling and growling at everyone, at which point the boy subsided into sullen silence which in a way was worse than the previous behaviour. He was sent on his way by his mother with a kiss, and his father with a warning to behave himself.

The routine was the same as usual. Classes went on as usual. The teachers reviewed the year’s lessons in a valiant effort to prepare their students for the finals. Students sat at their desks as usual. The tough guys feigning boredom, some propped their chins on their fists warding off sleep. One artistic girl had made a mask out of paper. She'd used her makeup to make it look like her face, complete with a hole for her nose, and wide awake, attentive eyes, held in place with her glasses, while she dozed behind it. Others took notes earnestly as though they didn't already have all the information they needed in their notebooks and texts.

Several teachers had been concerned by Amadeo's unusual behaviour and had tried to approach him but he'd insisted that he was fine and had excused himself quickly. As the days wore on his teachers' concern had turned to frustration and then anger as his manner hadn't improved noticeably from the day before, or the day before that.

He'd been reprimanded several times by teachers for his inattention and his attitude. He'd offered hollow apologies in a tone which left no doubt that he was only humoring them, resulting in his being written up for disciplinary action.

Two visits to Barne's office had been unproductive. Barnes had been unwilling to remand Amadeo to Mr. Cobrane, not because he didn't feel the boy had earned it but because Amadeo's record until then, barring the incident with Fishburn, which had turned out to be a valid issue, was spotless. The boy had also recently been through a lot and was obviously struggling to catch up to his other year mates academically, so despite the rules, Barnes was willing to cut the boy some slack.

Lunch came, the only time Amadeo could sit and relax with his friends who all joked and laughed, seemingly unaffected by the upcoming finals which for them would be held in two days’ time.

"S'matter, Dae? You been draggin friggin thunder heads around with you all week. What's wrong?" Milo asked finally when a joke elicited no more than a faint smile, before Amadeo turned back to glower at his carton of milk which had apparently done something to displease him.

"Nothin', Mi. Everything is friggin sunshine and buttercups." He growled before getting up,
snatching up his tray and stalking to the trash bin to dump the remains of his lunch. After that he did the unthinkable. He strode out of the lunch room before dismissal, opened the main doors to the school and went outside, without permission, during school hours. He walked down the steps and into the tree filled courtyard and stopped in the middle of the walk way. He closed his eyes and put his head back, his face to the sun, and stretched his arms out, palms up. The sun warmed his face and shoulders, and he willed the energy and warmth into his body.

He was so tired. His body felt much as it had when he'd first woken in the hospital. Heavy and sore. His head felt as though it were filled with cotton batting. It was hard to think. He didn't want to think. He was tired of thinking. He was tired of studying. He was tired of having so many restrictions placed upon him. Sure he'd had rules to follow all of his life but lately he felt like a prisoner. He was tired of rules. He was tired of school. He just wanted to lie down in the sunshine and listen to the birds. Think of it as a Science project. Nature Study.

"Mr. Rossi!" Came the one voice guaranteed to send a shot of freezing cold down his spine regardless of the warmth of the day. "What, may I ask, do you think you're doing?"

Amadeo put his arms down but kept his face to the sun and his back to the DOD. "I'm think I'm standing in the sunshine." He turned to finally look inquiringly over his shoulder at the vice principal, "Why, what do you think you're doing?" he asked conversationally.

Mr. Cobrane's eyes narrowed. He stepped aside and pointed back toward the school. "You will return to the school this minute, Mr. Rossi. You will meet me in my office, immediately."

"Can't," replied Amadeo, closing his eyes and turning his face back toward the sun.

"What do you mean, 'can't'?" asked Cobrane, becoming quite angry.

"Well sir, you said 'immediately', and unfortunately immediately came and went so fast that it was already past before you could even finish the word."

If there was one thing he disliked about being a high school Vice Principal it was having to deal with the smart alecs, whose clique Amadeo Rossi had apparently decided to join. Cobrane advanced on Amadeo, who hearing the footsteps, seemed to come to his senses rather quickly and took a few steps backward. The older man leaned in toward the boy, taking deep breaths near his face and his clothes and hair.
When Amadeo realized what the man was doing he burst into laughter. "I'm not that stupid, sir. And I'd like to believe that if I were that stupid, I wouldn't do it at school."

"Then you and I will return to the school together, Mr. Rossi. And we're going to have a discussion about your behaviour today," the older man said, taking the boy by the wrist and leading him briskly back toward the school.

Amadeo either didn't notice or chose to ignore the gaggle of students who stood, whispering, against the walls in the hallways or crowding each other in doorways. Others peered around their friends, and gawked as Cobrane escorted him back into the school. He didn't even protest the slight manhandling from the older man as he was dragged into the vice principal's office. Once the boy was out of sight the teachers, who had been futilely attempting to get their students back under control, ordered them back to their desks, closed the doors and resumed their lessons.

Cobrane stood Amadeo dead center in his office and called Mrs. Jennings, asking her to contact Mr. Barnes and requesting that the two of them come to his office. It only took a few moments before the two of them arrived, Mr. Barnes looking stern, and Mrs. Jennings with an impassive expression, carrying a clipboard containing several sheets of paper and a pen. They stood unobtrusively against the wall by the door while Mr. Cobrane sat on the edge of the desk. He pinned Amadeo with a severe look and crossed his arms.

"Mr. Rossi, for the past few days, your teachers have been complaining about your negative behaviour and attitude in their classes. This has happened once before, if you recall." He waited for Amadeo to acknowledge his words. Amadeo, for his part, stood silently, not acknowledging, agreeing or disagreeing with Cobrane's words, his gaze focused on the picture behind Cobrane's desk.

"If this behaviour had occurred after your injury, as we were informed it might, then we would have understood and tried to help you in whatever way we could."

"However," he said sharply, "your conduct upon returning to school several weeks ago, so far, had been within normal parameters for you. None of your teachers had complained of any untoward behaviors, your attitude and work ethic had been up to their usual standards, your willingness to help fellow students and teachers, and the fact that you were able to find alternative school programs to engage in in lieu of wrestling and track," he couldn't help but notice the tightening of the boy's jaw when he said that, "have all been laudable."

"In the past few days, your attitude has," he paused to pick up a sheet of paper and began to read, "has been defiant, belligerent, impolite, abrasive, inconsiderate, quarrelsome, disrespectful... in short Mr. Rossi, you have been behaving like a sulky, grumpy, ill mannered, spoiled, naughty child," he said pointedly, pleased to see the flush of embarrassment on the boy's face. "Until now
you have been getting by on your past academic record, and history. The demeanor you've been exhibiting lately must stop, and I'm afraid, sir, that your credit is no longer good here."

So many of the young men called into his office kept up their tough guy facade until the last swat. Some maintained a stoic expression, shrugging the punishment off as no more than a mosquito bite. Cobrane despaired for those boys who were too afraid to be boys even in the privacy of his office where none of the other students could see them. He wondered if Amadeo would turn out to be one of those boys.

He saw Amadeo's jaw muscles clench, and his Adams apple bob as he swallowed nervously. The boy's expression, however, didn't change. Cobrane glanced over his shoulder to see what held the boy's attention. The painting on the wall featured roiling masses of silver-grey clouds above a field of grass and flowers, bending in the wind. A single lightning bolt reached from the sky, apparently ready to destroy the beauty below it.

"You will receive six swats, Mr. Rossi, for your bad behaviour, disrespect and attitude over the past three days."

Amadeo's eyes widened, but rather than feigning disdain, or becoming fearful or nervous as so many other students had in the past, Amadeo became angry.

"Six! Six?! The cowards who stood by and watched Angelo getting the crap beat out of him only got three and detention! Yeah, I've been rude but I didn't nearly allow someone to get killed, and I get six?!"

Cobrane took a step toward Amadeo, who swallowed convulsively and took a step backward, still angry but now afraid that he'd crossed the line. Rather than grab the boy and begin the punishment, the Vice Principal walked calmly past and drew a chair away from the wall.

"Sit, Mr. Rossi. Now," Cobrane said, quietly but in a tone which told the boy that however politely it had been said, it was not a request.

Amadeo sat and looked anxiously up at the older man. Cobrane went back to his desk and sat on the edge, one leg on the desk, hands clasped loosely on his knee, and looked down at the child before him.

"I'd like you to take some deep, slow breaths and try to calm yourself. Then we can converse like
two rational people," Cobrane said, still in that same quiet voice. "Breathe in, please. Slowly now. And out, slowly," he continued as the boy did as he was told. "Again, please."

Cobrane could see that Amadeo was calmer than he had been, but he could still see the anger in the boy's eyes and the tension in his shoulders. He was tempted to tell the boy to breathe again but was fairly certain that that would only set him off again.

"Now, Mr. Rossi, are you able to speak to me rationally and in a normal tone?"

Amadeo gave the man a sullen look but replied, this side of respectfully, in the affirmative.

"First of all, I'm curious. Where did you learn of the disciplinary action taken against the boys who stood by and watched? That was privileged information."

"Someone told me," Amadeo replied defensively.

"May I know who?"

"No," Amadeo replied shortly. "Sir," he added quickly as he saw the dangerous narrowing of the man's eyes.

"Very well, Mr. Rossi. My next question for you is whether or not you believe you've earned punishment. Not..." he said, holding a hand up to forestall Amadeo's quick response, "Not whether you've earned six swats specifically, just whether or not you believe you deserve to be punished. Do you believe that your behavior, manners and attitude toward your teachers and fellow students have been acceptable for the past few days?" He saw the hesitation on Amadeo's face and added, "An honest answer, Mr. Rossi. Despite everything else that has happened recently, no one has questioned your integrity. Please don't destroy my good impression of you by lying now."

"Yes sir. I believe I've earned it," Amadeo said softly, once again focused on the painting behind the desk.

"Look at me please, Mr. Rossi," Cobrane said in a gentle voice, then continued when the boy looked him in the eye. "Your fellow students, who were punished for standing by while another student was in danger, were given three swats each, and two month's detention to be served in its entirety for them to be eligible for graduation. If I were to give you the same punishment, you
would then be ineligible for promotion to the next grade even when you pass your final exams."

"Your behaviour should have been addressed before now, but you've been allowed leeway because of your past history. You're a good student, well liked, not normally a trouble maker, respectful, attentive, honest, as I've said, helpful. However, lately something has been eating at you, and you've allowed it to manifest itself in inappropriate language and behaviour. You've been unwilling to talk about it to any of your teachers or fellow students, nor even your parents."

Amadeo's eyes widened a little in shock that Cobrane knew that little fact.

"Yes, Mr. Rossi. I know. I've spoken to your parents, who, like your teachers and friends, have been very worried. I suggested to your parents that a little more structure to your day would be helpful. Not allowing you to study yourself to exhaustion. A set, enforced bedtime...."

"You did that?!" Deo shouted, slapping the palms of his hands on the armrests of the wooden chair as he stood to face the older man.

"Mr. Rossi," said Cobrane in the tone that froze students, and even some teachers, in place. "Sit down. Now." he paused to allow Amadeo to do as he'd been told.

Amadeo continued to stand, outwardly angry and defiant, but inwardly shaking with equal amounts anger and fear.

"If you insist on behaving like a petulant child throwing a tantrum, then I have no qualms about treating you as such. Sit down, sir. One more outburst on your part and I will have you stand in the corner until you are calm enough to hold a rational conversation. Do I make myself clear?"

Cobrane said silkily, cold, black eyes trained on the young man before him.

Amadeo searched Cobrane's face and found nothing to indicate that the man was joking or bluffing in any way. He glanced over to where Barnes and Mrs. Jennings had been standing silently. Mrs. Jennings wrote furiously. Her job was merely to record the discussion between the DOD and the student as proof that the student had been informed of and understood the proposed punishment and the reasoning behind it. She would leave as soon as Amadeo signed the form, whereas if the student had been a girl she would have stayed and Mr. Barnes would have gone. Thankfully the majority of girls preferred detention to paddling, so she was rarely called on to serve in that capacity.

Mr. Barnes stood quietly, an impassive expression on his face. He was only there as a witness to the discussion and punishment, to verify that the student understood the charges, to make sure that
he was given only the punishment that Cobrane had dictated, and to verify that the student was in good health afterward.

Amadeo's first thought was to turn and storm out of the office. Naughty? Petulant? Spoiled?! Put him in the corner, for God's sake?! Had he somehow, unknowingly, been thrown into a time machine and been transported eleven years into his past? Did everyone here now see him as a five year old? This was ridiculous! They couldn't treat him like this!

"If you choose to walk out rather than take your punishment, you will be automatically expelled, Mr. Rossi," Cobrane said with finality, dropping the anvil that Amadeo had been expecting. "Now I suggest you do as you were told. Sit down, mind your manners, and we can finish our discussion."

It was bad enough that he'd been written up and had actually ended up in Cobrane's office. It was bad enough that he was about to have his hindquarters blistered, and certainly bad enough that his parents were going to hear about it first by phone and then in writing. This was definitely not a school paper that his parents would tape to the refrigerator.

For all of that he'd doubtless be grounded for the rest of the year, if he were lucky. But if he were expelled on top of it all, his father, kind as he was, would murder his youngest. The murder would be deemed justified and fair, and no court in the world would convict him.

Amadeo blushed and sat down quietly, hands palms down on his thighs and his gaze on his hands.

Once again Cobrane read the list of complaints against Amadeo, including the infraction regarding leaving the school without permission, and explained why and how his decision had been made. "Do you contest any of these complaints, young man?" he asked.

"No sir," Amadeo said quietly.

"Do you understand how the proposed punishment was decided upon?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you understand why your punishment is not the same as those of your school mates?"
"Yes sir."

"Do you have any protests you'd like to raise at this time?"

"No sir."

"Do you accept the punishment which has been chosen for you?"

Amadeo tried not to swallow and lick his lips nervously but failed. "Yes sir."

"Is there anything else regarding this disciplinary action or the events leading up to it that you'd like to expand upon?"

"No sir."

"You do understand that your punishment is to be six swats with the paddle?"

"Yes sir."

Mr. Cobbrane nodded to Mrs. Jennings who came forward with the completed forms. "Read these, Mr. Rossi, to be sure that our conversation was recorded correctly, and sign both copies at the bottom, please."

Amadeo scanned the pages. There were two sets, both said the exact same thing, written in Mrs. Jenning’s impeccable cursive. He sighed heavily and signed the forms.

Now he knew how Eddie, Jim, Charlie and Dennis had felt. He supposed they'd meant to make him feel better by telling him their stories and apologizing profusely the Friday before, and he'd accepted their apologies. But over the weekend, the more he'd thought about it the angrier he'd become.

He was angry at the four boys who had come to him with their stories. Angry at the student population in general who must have known, must have seen, must have heard something, and had
done nothing. Angry with the teachers, all of whom had stood by and allowed his friend to be abused time after time. There had to have been signs.

There had to have been marks on the kid afterward. Bruises. Dirt on his clothes. Hadn't anyone noticed that he was frequently alone in the lunch room and possibly going hungry because some jerk had turned his lunch into ant food?

The teachers hadn't noticed how often Angelo had come in without his homework, or that it was messy, or dirty, or torn? What had they thought Angelo had been doing to his homework that he would turn it in in that condition? Or had the poor kid been sitting, alone as usual, before classes, rewriting all the work from the night before.

He thought back to the day his father had spoken to him, and assured him that what had happened to Angelo hadn't been his fault. Johnny had reminded his son that he couldn't have done more than he had, and that if he'd known sooner he would have helped sooner. He'd pointed out that he had, in fact, jumped in and helped when he did know. That his actions had spurred other students to take action. That he should be proud of himself.

But he wasn't. He wasn't proud of himself. Not in the least. Inside, Amadeo still blamed himself. He felt that he'd failed this boy, his boy, Angelo, whom he'd only known for a couple of months now, and who had come to mean so much to him. More than a friend, more than family. As though Angelo were somehow part of him, as though he filled an empty space Amadeo hadn't known he had, as though he somehow resided in him.

"Mr. Rossi. Mr. Rossi!"

Amadeo blinked and focused his attention on Cobrane who looked both annoyed and concerned. "I'm sorry sir. I guess my mind wandered for a moment. What were you saying, sir?"

"Are you ready to begin?" Cobrane asked for the fourth time.

Amadeo licked his lips and nodded. "Yes sir."

"Stand up then, please, and empty out anything you may have in your pockets."

Amadeo stood up and glanced around. Mrs. Jennings was gone but Mr. Barnes still stood quietly by the now closed door.

"He is only here to make sure I don't injure you inadvertently. Understood?"
"Yes sir," Amadeo said, removing his keys and wallet from his pockets.

"Very well then, Mr. Rossi. Lean over," he said gesturing to the desk. "Place your elbows on the desk, palms down. You may count if you like but you don't have to. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," replied Amadeo as he did as he was told.

"Spread your feet a little wider apart, Amadeo," Cobrane said, voice once again gentle. "About shoulder width. You'll have better balance that way."

Once again, the boy did as he was told. He felt the slight pressure as Mr. Cobrane tapped the paddle across his backside gently for aim. Amadeo thought of Angelo tapping Shave and a Haircut on the rim of the pan and tried not to laugh. This was definitely not the time for laughter.

The first swat made Amadeo grimace, but he managed to remain silent, but only just. That paddle stung like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

The second swat elicited another wince and an involuntary hiss. Amadeo could feel his toes curling in his sneakers.

The third swat forced him up onto his toes. He grimaced, stood up, and covered his backside, clutching the stinging, burning cheeks to alleviate the pain.

"Back into position Mr. Rossi." Cobrane said sternly. "If you get up or interfere with your punishment again I will start from the beginning. Do you understand?"

Amadeo drew a deep breath and replied, "Yes sir," on the exhale.

The fourth caused him to gasp. He had to fight his instinct to get up and clutch the burning cheeks again.

"Very good, Mr. Rossi. Two more now. Nearly done. Are you all right?" Cobrane asked.
Amadeo wanted to get up and yell at the man. 'No! I'm not all right! Do I *look* all right? How about if I take that blasted thing and use it on you and then we can see how all right you are! Jackassssssss!' "No! I'm not all right! Do I *look* all right? How about if I take that blasted thing and use it on you and then we can see how all right you are! Jackassssssss!'

Deciding that he wasn't yet ready to die he ground out, "Yes sir."

He hadn't meant for it to happen, but the fifth swat tore a muted yell from him. He felt the tears running down his cheeks and was grateful that it would be over soon.

"One more, Mr. Rossi. You're doing very well," Cobrane said quietly. "Are you ready?"

Amadeo gulped, took a deep breath and tried to answer, but all that came out of his throat was a tiny, strained sound that a mouse would have had trouble hearing. He cleared his throat, took another breath and managed to say, "Yes sir," in a nearly normal sounding voice.

"Last one, Amadeo," Cobrane said gently. "Ready?"

Amadeo nodded and braced himself but it wasn't enough. Another sound was forced out of his throat with enough pressure to cause it to feel as though he'd swallowed sandpaper.

C obrane allowed the boy to gather his composure a little before helping him stand upright. He handed some tissue to the child, who took it gratefully, excused himself, turned his back on the two men and wiped his face and nose as quietly as possible.

When he felt he was more himself, Amadeo turned back toward the two men. He was surprised and confused by the look of approval on Cobrane's face. Mr. Barnes now stood beside them with more tissues, offering them to Amadeo who took them with thanks and put them in his pocket.

"All right now, Amadeo?" Mr. Barnes asked kindly. "Do you feel the need to see the school nurse for any reason?"

"No sir. I guess I'm as fine as I can be, considering," Amadeo replied in a shaky voice.
"One last formality then, Mr. Rossi. This form says that the punishment was administered and witnessed, and that you are in good physical health. You need only sign beneath Mr. Barne's signature. One copy will be kept here in our files and one will be sent home to your parents. Understood?" Mr. Cobrane said, placing the paper and a pen on the desk that Amadeo had just been leaning on.

"Do I have to sign it sir?" Amadeo asked curiously.

"No, you don't. We won't force you to." Cobrane replied quietly. "You will, however, be required to visit the school nurse and be checked out for any injuries or bruising so that she can make a record of it in case you have any problems in the future as a result of this punishment. Do you need to see the nurse, Mr. Rossi?" he asked, concerned. "Are you experiencing extreme pain, or undue discomfort?"

"No sir," Amadeo replied. Oddly enough, he felt much better than he had before the paddling.

"It's up to you young man. We won't coerce you," Barnes said kindly. "Are you, in clear conscience, willing or able to sign the form?"

Clear conscience. That's what it was. His conscience felt clear. The anger he'd felt, and the weight he'd been carrying since the previous Friday seemed to have been lifted. "Yes sir," Amadeo said, bending down to sign, wincing a little as the material of his jeans scraped across the tender flesh beneath. He picked up his keys and wallet and looked up at Cobrane with still slightly reddened eyes. "May I go now, sir?"

"Actually, Mr. Rossi. Since the day is nearly over and you would be disrupting your last class by walking in halfway, I would like to take this time to talk with you. Are you willing?" Cobrane asked.

"Yes sir. I guess so," Amadeo replied, curious as to what his Vice Principal would want to speak to him about, and grateful that he wouldn't have to go out into the school with puffy eyes and a red nose.

"Excuse me, Shandon. If you don't need me any more I'll get back to work," said Barnes with a smile. It was a standing joke between them that Cobrane seemed to forget who the boss was occasionally.
Cobrane favored his boss and friend with one of his rare, genuine smiles, and with a mischievous look in his eyes he said, in an imperious tone. "That will be all for now, Hugh. Thank you."

The two men saw the look of confusion on Amadeo's face and laughed, clapping the boy on the shoulders to include him in the joke.

Barnes picked up the papers and with a slight bow and a smile and left the office.

Cobrane went to the leather couch which sat against a far wall in his office and retrieved a pillow, which he fluffed up and placed on a chair. "Have a seat, please, Amadeo, and let's talk," he said with a smile.
Angelo and Amadeo Chapter 21

"Have a seat, please, Amadeo, and let's talk." Cobrane said with a smile, gesturing toward the chair.

Amadeo looked at the chair as though it was covered with spikes rather than a pillow and glanced at his Vice Principal sheepishly.

Cobrane didn't need the boy to say aloud what was obviously on his mind. "Let's try the couch, Amadeo. It's considerably softer." He said, picking up the pillow and bringing it back toward the couch. He placed the pillow in the corner between the back and arm where it had been and gestured for the boy to sit. He then sat casually on the opposite side of the couch in much the same position as he had done on the desk.

Amadeo unconsciously rubbed his backside, took a breath and sat gingerly on the couch. It was indeed broken in and very soft, not to mention that the leather was cool and felt wonderful against his still hot bottom through his jeans.

"All right now?" Cobrane asked.

"I could use a block of ice to sit on, sir, but I'm OK." 'Deo joked, pleased that his voice was, little by little, returning to normal.

Cobrane smiled again. Amadeo was struck by the way the man's features softened when he smiled. Once again one of his genuine smiles, and not that dangerous one he used on the students that made them feel as though they'd been dunked in a freezing pond. He'd never noticed before the sparkle in the man's eyes, or the slight crinkling at the corners. But then, like most students, he had avoided looking directly into Cobranes eyes whenever possible.

"Now 'Deo," Cobrane said, testing the nickname out on his tongue and looking at the boy to see how he would react to the use of it, "I'd like you to tell me what has been eating at you for the past few days. It was as though there were suddenly two Amadeo's, and the one we know had disappeared. To the best of my knowledge you don't have an evil twin, nor had an inter-dimensional rift appeared through which your opposite had escaped. I was also unaware of any alien pods in the area so I was at a loss to come up with a plausible explanation as to what would cause you to behave the way you have been."
'Deo studied Cobrane's face. The man's features were serious, business like, but there was that sparkle in, and slight crinkling around his eyes that made him look much less severe. He couldn't believe that Cobrane had cracked a joke.

He licked his lips again and looked at his hands as he gathered his thoughts. Little by little he relayed to Cobrane the things that had been eating at him since the Friday before. Since the first day he'd seen Angelo and the resultant conversation with an unnamed friend. Since the altercation with Freddie and Brice. He tried to remain calm but the more he talked the more upset he became, and Cobrane had to remind him to stop and breathe a few times during his dissertation.

"I know they meant to make me feel better. I know they meant it as a compliment, not only telling me how impressed they'd been by what I'd done but also by trusting me enough to tell me that it had been them." Amadeo paused and began again, a little bitterly, "But then they wanted me to extend their apologies to Angelo, and explain things for them. I told them..." he stopped and looked sheepishly up at Cobrane, "Well, it doesn't matter what I said exactly, I guess, only that if they were brave enough to go to you and fess up then they should extend the same courtesy to Angelo and apologize in person." 'Deo said finally.

"Do you feel better now?" Cobrane asked quietly.

Amadeo gave a wry smile and replied, "Mostly, sir, yes. At least from the waist up." he said as he shifted slightly to find a cool section of couch.

Cobrane returned the smile. "Do you still feel guilty?"

Amadeo looked sharply at the older man. He was fairly certain he hadn't mentioned his feelings of guilt.

"I know, Amadeo, because the entire staff feels that way. We all try to keep an eye on the students and keep them safe, but there is no way that we can be in all places at all times. And if *we* can't be in all places at all times to provide protection to all of the students, than neither can you." Once again he held a hand up to forestall the boy's objections. "We adults are not perfect, no human being is. We are all flawed and we all make mistakes. As long as we learn from our mistakes and try to avoid them in future, then we're that much better than we were before. Not perfect. Never perfect. But better than we were." he said gently.

"Even as Vice Principal, I do not know every student by name. Some draw attention to themselves by excelling in academics, athletics, art or music. Some draw attention to themselves by being the class clown, or the school wit, the bully, the smart alec, the ones who are hailed as the prettiest or
most handsome."

"Others are little more than shadows who go unnoticed even when someone else trips over them. Those are the shy ones, the misfits. The ones who want to remain unnoticed rather than fall prey to the class clown's jokes, which can sometimes be cruel, or to the bullies who nearly always are. Then there are the ones like Angelo. The kids who are new to the school, who are distinct, unfamiliar faces in a crowd of folks who know each other as well as they know themselves." he sighed.

"I dislike comparing human beings to animals but there is, as distasteful as it is, a pack mentality among close knit communities, and children, teenagers especially, can be territorial, driven by developing hormones, afraid or wary of anyone new or different. Sometimes the pack will accept the new member, sometimes it will ostracize him. Angelo fit into the second category. He wasn't allowed to blend in for one reason or another, and he had no way to hide."

"I'm not saying this to make you feel worse, 'Deo." Cobrane said as he noticed Amadeo's bowed head. "My point is that there is no way you can blame yourself. And that is exactly what you were doing. You were angry at everyone for their neglect or abuse of Angelo, but especially at yourself for not seeing it and stepping in sooner."

"You said yourself that you had no classes with him, the only common area between the two of you was the lunch room which is usually quite crowded and noisy. How do you expect you were going to see one boy out of hundreds? The people who teased and picked on him were certainly not going to brag about doing so, as it is against school code, and if they'd been discovered it would have resulted in their being disciplined or suspended."

Amadeo blushed a little at the memory of his best friend bragging about how he and some other students had 'convinced' Angelo to stop asking questions in class.

"So there is no logical way, Amadeo Rossi," Cobrane said sternly, "That you can blame yourself for what happened to your friend. Do you understand me?"

Amadeo nodded, unsure of where the Vice Principal was headed.

"Lately, however, I believe you've been suffering from what my father called the Avalanche Effect, and I'm afraid that my interference exacerbated it rather than helped."
Amadeo looked at the older man, confused.

"First there was the incident with Misters Crighton and Argus, your own injuries, your lengthy hospitalization and recovery which is still incomplete. Add to that, the enforced restrictions on your usual physical activities. I know that you were heavily involved in track and wrestling, as well as enjoying baseball and football, so not being allowed to do the things you enjoy, through no fault of your own, had to be frustrating at the very least. Am I correct?"

"Yes sir." the boy said quietly.

"I know that you are a good student, and that you've been exempt from having to make up the class work as a result of your hospital stay, however you still have to catch up on the book work. Your teachers have given you study guides, but there is a lot of material to cover in several subjects, which you have to get through in relatively little time. That is why I suggested limiting the amount of time you spend with your friends, at least until you've completed your finals." He waited to see if the boy had anything to say, but the child remained silent and attentive, so Cobrane continued.

"I know that your parents have been making sure you eat, that you close your books at nine and are in bed by ten every night. However, I suspect that you've been studying under the covers once they've gone. Am I correct?" Cobrane asked. Once again that knowing glint appeared in his eyes, making Amadeo blush at being seen through so easily.

"You show many of the symptoms of someone who has been getting inadequate sleep," Cobrane explained, "You've been stressed and angry, at everyone around you, at yourself, feeling guilty over things you had no control over. All of these things started as, for example, a stone kicked from the top of a mountain. The one little stone knocks loose several others, which then dislodge more. Eventually what began as a single stone falling had turned into an avalanche, thus your uncharacteristic behaviour over the past few days."

Cobrane wanted very badly to reach out and put a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder when he saw the look of embarrassment and shame on his face.

"Amadeo Rossi," Cobrane said gently, tilting his head down to see the boy's face better. "You have nothing to be ashamed of, do you understand me? Everyone has limits, and you merely reached yours today. I know that we've only touched the surface of all of the things that are bothering you,"

'Deo glanced up quickly to look at the man. Was Cobrane somehow psychic? He'd heard of people claiming to have the ability, but he'd never met any, nor had he really believed in it. However, this man seemed to know so much even though nothing specific had been said.
"And there is much more beneath the surface." he continued. "I would like it, if in the future you feel the need to talk, to release some of the pressure that's building up inside you, you would come to me and let me help rather than let it build until it explodes. Understood?"

"Yes sir." 'Deo said softly.

"Do you have any questions or anything else you'd like to say before you go home for the day?"

Amadeo looked searchingly at the older man. "Sir, what do you do to relieve pressure, if I can ask?"

Cobrane smiled slightly. "I go for a walk in the woods, as far as I can to get away from whatever is stressing or upsetting me. Sometimes I'll bring an axe and a hand wagon and chop up fallen trees for fire wood. That particular method has the added benefit of providing me with ample firewood during the winter."

"Sometimes? What do you do the other times?"

Cobrane glanced toward the still closed door, leaned confidentially toward Amadeo and said with that same mischievous glimmer, and whispered, "I yell. At the top of my lungs." he grinned wider and lowered his voice even more until 'Deo could barely hear him despite the relatively small distance between them, "Sometimes I curse blue blazes."

Amadeo stifled a laugh and grinned at his Vice Principal.

"Now, Mr. Rossi," Cobrane said, straightening up and assuming a more business like air. "I'm not condoning foul language mind you, but what I am saying is that there are things you can do to feel better when you feel overwhelmed, rather than keeping it bottled up inside. Understand?"

"Yes sir." 'Deo said with a smile.

"Do you have any other questions, young man?"
Amadeo sobered up quickly and asked, abashedly, "Well, sir... I... well I wonder how you deal with it... being DOD. I mean, you... you come off all... forgive me... but you come off really frightening at times, and the kids are mostly afraid of you."

"But you're a really nice guy. I'd never have believed that I'd be sitting with you, talking like this, like... forgive the presumption, like friends, kinda," he said, blushing a little. "I mean, I know we're not friends," he amended quickly, "but... you know what I mean? You... how can you be so nice in private and... I'm sorry, sir, I know I'm not saying this right."

"I understand what you mean, Amadeo," Cobrane responded with a rueful smile, "Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes I would very much like to be one of those teachers that the kids admire and talk to voluntarily. But someone has to maintain discipline in the school, and unfortunately, other than staff members, I can't show my real self. Think of it as a trip to the doctor's office. When a baby goes in for vaccinations it's usually the nurse that gives them, otherwise the child learns to become frightened of the doctor who then can't do his job. Does that make sense?"

"Yes sir. I guess so." Amadeo replied thoughtfully.

Cobrane smiled again, a little sadly. "I am, for all extents and purposes, the school's nurse to Mr. Barne's doctor. I do not, in any way, shape or form enjoy administering punishments, but it's a necessity, and it is one of my less popular roles as Vice Principal." he cleared his throat and became business like again, "Now, I believe that was the last bell of the day and you should be going home. I do hope you'll take me up on my offer some day. Have a good day, Mr. Rossi."

Amadeo stood up and extended his hand to shake. Cobrane took it, somewhat surprised, and the two shook. "Thank you, sir." 'Deo said as he left the office.

Two weeks later Elias walked out of their back door and nearly tripped. "Shan! *Shan!* Why'd you leave the cart full of wood by the back door? I nearly went heels over head!"

Cobrane joined his partner, confused. He always added the wood to the pile in the back yard and put the cart in the shed. He couldn't for the life of him figure out how he could have left a cart full of wood on the back porch.

The wood was inexpertly cut but had been stacked neatly. Tucked in between some of the kindling was a piece of paper. Cobrane took the paper out gently so as not to tear it and unfolded it. On the paper were written the words, 'Thank You'. It was unsigned, but it didn't need to be. He knew who had written it. He smiled, took his partner around the waist and brought him back into the kitchen.
NOTES:

Reference to alien pods:
Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Release date: February 5, 1956
Based on The Body Snatchers by Jack Finney
Distributed by Allied Artists Pictures Corporation
Directed by Don Siegel
Produced by Walter Wanger
Screenplay by Daniel Mainwaring
Starring Kevin McCarthy, Dana Wynter, Larry Gates, King Donovan, Carolyn Jones
Music by Carmen Dragon
Cinematography Ellsworth Fredericks
Editing by Robert S. Eisen
Information by Wikipedia

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Angelo and Amadeo

Angelo and Amadeo Chapter 22

Angelo, Paul and John came through the kitchen door, laughing and joking, playfully punching each other on the arm or trying to give each other wet willies. Angelo let out a sound of disgust as his two older brothers double teamed him and got him in each ear.

The two older boys didn't know what was funnier, the sounds their little brother was making or the contortions he was going through to wipe the moisture from his ears without actually having to touch it. "Eeeeeeaaaaaaaaaa- uuuuuuuugggghhhhhhhhh!" he bellowed, scrunching his shoulders up and trying to wipe this ears on his t shirt.

Their father finally got their attention when he reached into the junk drawer, pulled out a whistle and blew it with enough force to cut through the noise they were making. The boys winced and covered their ears, even Angelo who had grabbed a hold of the hem of his t shirt and had pulled it up and was using it to absorb his brother's spit. He was grateful that the wadded up material also doubled as convenient, impromptu ear plugs.

The boys immediately quieted and shot their father slightly disgruntled looks as their ears continued to ring even after he'd stopped blowing.

Giosua, ignoring his son's displeasure, put the whistle down with a smile and clapped his hands. "Now that I have your attention, I have some good news! I found the new Georgia office site! They were so pleased in New York that they gave me a bonus and have authorized me to begin renovations on the site immediately."

"That's great, dad!" "Finally!" Paul and John said excitedly. "Where did you find it?" asked Angelo.

"Actually, it's the old Grayson's Marble Works." Giosua said with a smile toward his youngest.

Angelo flushed a little, gave another swipe at his ears with his t shirt then asked with a cheeky grin, "Do I get a finder's fee?"

"You're gonna get *something*, little boy." Giosua said jokingly.
"Why didn't you recommend it sooner, dad?" Johnny asked.

"There was a lot of clean up involved, not only the left over stone and dust but the broken windows, graffiti, and other damage as well." Giosua replied, ignoring his youngest son's deep blush. "There's the removal of old, rusted machinery, the remains of years’ worth of human, rodent and avian residents to clear out. There is some structural damage that has to be repaired but nothing that would make the purchase of the building a bad idea. My concern was that the cost of the cleanup would actually land the company in the red and cause a deficit that would take years to dig out of."

"However, the size and overall condition of the building are perfect. Plenty of space for offices, research and development. Plans have even been made for the stone to be polished and turned into sculptures. The machines will be dismantled and junked. I'll be hiring cleanup crews and people to come in to repair the dry wall, paint and such, and we'll be in business by January." he finished with a smile.

The boys went to their father and offered smiles, hugs, congratulations and pats on the back.

"So boys, wash up, go to your rooms, polish your shoes, and get into your nice clothes. We're all going out to celebrate!"

Angelo looked askance at his father. "Tonight, dad?"

"Yes, tonight." Gio replied with a slightly puzzled expression.

"It's just that I was gonna go out to the A&W with 'Deo and Milo and a few other guys."

"Your friends will understand, and you have all summer to hang out at the A&W with them."

"Can't we go out another night?" Angelo pleaded.

"This is a family celebration, Angelo," Giosua said mildly, "So go on, get dressed, now.

"But they're expecting me." Angelo protested, trying to control the whine in his voice.
"Then call them and explain that you can't make it tonight." Giosua said with a little more force.

"But dad..."


Not bothering to hide his sulk, Angelo turned toward his room, stopping at the phone to call Amadeo to tell him he couldn't make it. "Dad found rocks, so we have to go out and celebrate." Angelo replied grumpily to his friend's question.

"Angelo." his father said in a low voice.

"Gotta go." Angelo sighed. "Talk to you tomorrow." He hung up the phone, gave his father one last petulant glance and hurried to his room to change when he saw his father take a step toward him.

Julia emerged from her bedroom, fastening an earring but otherwise ready to go. Joshua looked at his wife with admiration and love clearly written on his face. "You look magnificent, my love. You'll be the envy of every woman, and the desire of every man." he whispered, leaning down to run his arms around her waist. She looked up at him, ultramarine blue eyes sparkling. He kissed her tenderly and drew back again, wanting this moment, this picture to be engraved in his memory forever.

Julia blushed happily. She'd been worried about the dress. It was at least three years old although it was in good condition. A pale blue silk with darker blue, floral accents from hem to bodice. The knee length skirt was flared, the sleeves fitted and ending just above her elbows. Her shoes were nearly the same color as her eyes and had been dyed specially for her in New York.

Joshua went back into the bedroom to finish dressing and came back several minutes later in a dark blue suit, pale blue shirt, and a midnight blue tie with white polka dots. His black shoes shone with a recently applied coat of fresh polish buffed to a military shine. He carried his wife's clutch, wrap, gloves and hat.

Johnny was the first to run down the stairs with a wide smile on his face. He spread his arms and turned in a circle. "Eh, dad? Whadda ya think?" he said proudly.
Joshua looked at the shined shoes, the charcoal grey slacks which had been pressed into a razor sharp crease, the pale blue button down shirt with the grey, black and blue striped tie at his throat.

"Very gentlemanly." Joshua complimented. "Now just lose the leather jacket and you're all set."

"Awww, dad! The jacket pulls the whole look together!"

"Then unravel it. Now." he said with a no nonsense expression.

Johnny managed not to huff as he turned and went back upstairs to change his jacket.

A moment later Angelo strode into the kitchen with a grin on his face.

"I thought I told you to put on your good clothes?" Joshua asked, slightly perturbed.

"Well yeah, dad, you did, but I figured this would be a really good compromise. See, I wear my best, darkest jeans, which if you don't really look at them closely look like dress pants. Then I put on this polo cuz it has a collar, and this sweater dresses it up," he continued happily, gesturing to each item. "Then after we're done at the restaurant you drop me off at the A&W, I pull the sweater off and I'm ready to roll!"

"Go do as you were told." Joshua said simply.

Angelo opened his mouth as though he were going to continue to argue. His father cleared his throat. Angelo turned on his heel and went back to his room where his parents could hear him banging around. Julia put a gentle hand on her husband's arm when he took a step in his son's direction and gave a slight shake of her head. He smiled sheepishly at his wife who then stood on her tip toes while pulling him down toward her for a quick kiss on the cheek. She gently wiped lipstick off of his face and smiled up at him before turning to see one of her sons enter the room.

Paul entered the room wearing a smart, light grey suit complete with vest, and a little handkerchief folded neatly into the breast pocket. He wore a tie similar to his brother's but with more muted colors and thinner stripes. His shoes gleamed. His hair was parted on the left and neatly slicked back. He blushed, pleased, when his mother wolf whistled at him.
John entered the room seconds later, leather replaced with an attractive, dappled grey suit jacket.

"Much better." his father complimented.

"Now if we could just get that sulky look off of your face you'd be perfect." his mother teased, running a finger down the length of his nose and tapping his lips.

Johnny, even now at the age of twenty, was not able to explain it, but that was one thing his mother did that always cheered him, and he was grateful for it now. He smiled shyly, leaned down and gave his mother a kiss on the cheek.

"Where's Ange?" Paul asked.

Before his parents could respond, the youngest Di Marco re-entered the room in a dark blue suit that was nearly the twin of his father's. His shoes had been haphazardly shined but were passable. His tie, a blue version of his older brother's, was askew over his white dress shirt. His hair was mussed, and he carried his gym bag in his right hand.

Joshua looked at his son with a raised eyebrow but didn't say another word, causing Angelo to blush.

"Got your bat and glove in there, Satchel?" Paul quipped.

"Yes, Angelo, what is in that bag?" his father asked finally.

"J-just my grubs and treads. S-see when we're done at the restaurant you drop me off at the A&W and I..."

"You are *not* going to the A&W tonight." Joshua said with that dangerous hint of iron that would creep in when he was reaching his limit. "Put the bag down and straighten your tie."

"But..."
Before things could disintegrate further, Julia approached her youngest, took the bag gently from his hand, placed it on the floor and lead him toward the bathroom. Once there she went behind the door, retrieved a hair brush which she put on the table. She tipped her son's chin up slightly so that she could adjust his tie, picked up the brush and tamed his hair. She stood back to get a good look at him, nodded in satisfaction, turned him toward his father and delivered a smack to his backside with the flat of the brush.

"There, don't we look the picture!" she said proudly as she admired her men, ignoring the sullen expression on her youngest's face.

"OK everyone. Into the car." Joshua said, jovially.

"Where are we going, dad?" asked Paul as the family trudged out of the house.

"Considering the reason for the celebration I thought we'd go to The Drover tonight."

"Wow, I heard that that's a really fancy place! I've always wanted to go there." John said animatedly.

"Yeah," added Paul as they slid into the car. "I've seen it from the outside. It looks really nice."

Angelo didn't say anything but at that point his father was happy with the silence and the fact that he wasn't able to see the sulky expression on his son's face in the twilight gloom.

Joshua turned on the radio and the rest of the drive was spent with the bulk of the family alternately singing along with the radio, or talking about what they'd like for dinner.

Angelo didn't add to the conversation but simply admired the open expanse of fields as they passed. He imagined himself jumping out of the car, rolling in the grass that looked thicker than even the thickest carpet, and just lying there, admiring the stars. Anything had to be better than sitting in a stuffy, formal restaurant 'on best behaviour or else'. He sighed and rested his chin on the palm of his hand.

They finally arrived at the restaurant and filed in, Julia with her hand on Joshua's arm, the boys trailing along behind like ducklings, oldest to youngest. Angelo once again considered making a break for it but knew that he would eventually have to go home and then there'd be all he-ck to
"Oh, this is lovely," Julia breathed as they entered the restaurant. The dark wood covering the walls shone as though recently polished, and were dotted here and there with paintings in muted colors. The carpet beneath their feet was spotless and of an oriental design. The tables were all covered with clean burgundy cloths which picked up the colors of the carpet. A pillar candle surrounded by flowers at the base stood in the center of each table. The silver was carefully wrapped in clean linen napkins that complimented the table cloths and were held by rings of polished wood.

The host greeted the family at the door with a professional yet friendly smile and guided them in and toward one of the larger tables which was adorned with two candles. He handed them each a menu, and promised that their server would be there shortly to take their drink order then took his leave with a slight bow.

"Well," said Joshua, opening his menu and perusing the appetizer section. "No limits tonight, Di Marco's. You order whatever you like." he said with a smile. It wasn't often they had the opportunity to celebrate things other than birthdays or anniversaries and he was very happy to finally have found a site the big wigs in New York approved of.

"I'd *like* an A&W root beer," muttered Angelo just this side of petulantly, "But it doesn't seem to be on the menu."

Paul nudged his little brother under the table with his foot but kept his eyes on his menu.

Johnny smiled and said that for him a cup of tea would really hit the spot right now.

Joshua and Julia examined their menus and ignored their youngest.

"Pop, is steak all right?" Paul asked.

"The sky's the limit tonight." his father smiled back. "Order whatever you like but make sure you can finish it." He leaned in and whispered, "At these prices I don't want to end up feeding the seagulls out back."

Paul and Johnny laughed, then went back to studying their menus.
"Well, mia bellezza." He said, tilting his menu toward his wife and pointing at the seafood section. "They have several lobster dishes, and I know how much you like lobster. Do you see any that appeal to you?"

(My beauty)

"Gio," she whispered, "It's so expensive! I couldn't!"

"Mia dolce, it's not like you ask for things like this all the time, or at all for that matter." he whispered back. "Allow me to treat you. Don't worry about the price. If you see something you like, then you go ahead and order it. Understood?" he asked in mock severity, gazing softly into his wife's eyes. (my sweet)

After several more minutes John and Paul put aside their menus, as did Joshua and Julia. Angelo however, continued to look at his menu with a sullen expression.

"Anything appeal to you, Angelo?" his father asked.

"Yeah, I'd like a chili dog and onion rings, please." he replied, setting aside his menu.

Johnny frowned. "There's nothing like that on the menu here. What are you talking about?"

"Well, those things would'a been on the menu if we'd gone to the A&W." he said petulantly. "And if we'd gone there we could'a worn more comfortable clothes." Angelo griped, tugging at the collar of his shirt.

**

Joshua took a deep, calming breath, leaned in toward his youngest son and said quietly, "If you don't stop bugging me about the A&W I'm going to take you over my knee right here in the restaurant. Do you understand me?"

Angelo blushed and looked around surreptitiously to see if any of the other diners had heard the threat. Paul grinned widely and said in a moderate but delighted tone, "Keep bugging him! Keep bugging him! For me? Keep bugging him!"

Angelo shot his brother a hostile look, and Joshua silenced him with a raised eyebrow, but that didn't keep his boy from grinning behind his hand.
Julia leaned over and whispered in her husband's ear. Angelo heard the words 'fancy restaurant' and 'can't do that'. Joshua looked unhappy but let the subject drop.

"Now, young man, tell me what you want to eat." Joshua said evenly.

Emboldened by his mother's words, Angelo took one final glance at the menu, closed it, set it aside and then said, "I'd like a Papa Burger, fries and a chocolate shake, please."

Joshua pushed back his chair, removed the linen napkin from his lap and neatly folded it. Angelo looked at his father apprehensively. Was he going to actually spank him in the middle of the restaurant despite what his mother had said? Suddenly that last little dig didn't seem as funny as it had in his head.

"Angelo, it just occurred to me that you haven't washed your hands." Joshua said conversationally as he stood up.

"Yes I did, papà. Honest." the boy replied uneasily, looking with wide eyes up at his father who suddenly seemed to have grown a couple of feet taller.

"No. No, I'm sure you haven't. Why don't you come with me now? I'll show you where the men's room is."

Angelo swallowed and licked his lips. He realized that he was sitting on extremely cold hands. He had no memory of when he'd slipped them beneath his bottom and he could feel the cold through the material of his pants. Unfortunately the warmth of his body did nothing toward dispelling the icy feeling in his hands.

"I'm good, papà. My hands are clean, honest." Angelo said meekly, peering with his dark eyes at his now ten foot tall father through the curtain of his eyelashes. He glanced at his mother, hoping that she would intervene, but she was wearing her 'You did this to yourself.' look, so he knew there was no help coming from that quarter.

Joshua leaned down, took his son by the wrist and elbow, urging him to stand. "Come with me. Now." Joshua said quietly but firmly, directly into Angelo's ear.
Angelo reluctantly stood up, once again shooting his brothers, who could barely stifle their giggles, an unfriendly look.

Joshua pinned his two older sons with a look and said, "If you two find it that amusing perhaps you'd like to be next?"

"No sir." they chorused quietly, immediately losing the grins and focusing their attentions on their water glasses.

With that Joshua put a friendly arm around his youngest son's shoulders and led him to the men's room, herding the boy ahead of him and stopping casually by the sinks. He stood Angelo in place and then quickly checked out the spaces under the stall doors. Seeing that none of them were in use, he turned toward the door and locked it, then he went to the basket which contained a stack of clean hand towels. Taking one he wiped down the surface of the marble sink, then gestured for Angelo to lean down over it.

Angelo licked dry lips with a dry tongue and tried to swallow, but his throat was as dry as the rest of his mouth. "Papà, please. I'm sorry! Really. I'll stop. I didn't mean it. I was just joking!"

Joshua advanced on his son who took a few steps backward before he fetched up against the wall. He took the boy by the arm and led him back toward the sink, gently but firmly manipulating his son into position. Once Angelo was there, he folded the boy's jacket up over his back and pulled the hem of his shirt out of his slacks.

If Angelo could have kicked himself for pushing it to this point he would have. He hated that he was about to get his bottom warmed but good in a public place. He hated the fact that he wasn't quite tall enough, so the edge of the sink pressed in under his ribs uncomfortably. He hated that in this position he had no choice but to look at himself in the huge mirror behind the sink while his father blistered his backside. But what he hated most was the surety he felt that everyone in the restaurant would be able to hear, would see him coming out of the men's room with a red face and eyes, at which point he'd have to endure looks and snickers that even his father wouldn't be able to do anything about.

Before he had a chance to worry about anything else, his father's hand came down with a sharp, resounding smack.

Angelo didn't make a sound but immediately threw his hands back to cover his backside.
"Uno..."

Angelo quickly moved his hands, clasping them and resting his forehead against the resultant fist.

The second smack came down louder and if possible, harder than the last.

The boy took a deep breath, trying to relax his body because he knew that tensing up would only make it hurt more, but before he could release it on his own it was forced out of him by a third, stinging whack.

Joshua had delivered six of those stinging, burning smacks, and Angelo was on the verge of tears when a knock sounded at the door. Joshua stopped, picked up another towel and soaked it in cold water before wringing out the worst of it. He handed it to his son. "Straighten your clothes out, wipe your face. I'll wait for you." he said quietly, gesturing toward one of the stalls.

Angelo scurried into the stall and Joshua unlocked the door, apologizing to the waiting man for the inconvenience.

Angelo unbuttoned his slacks and tucked his shirt in neatly, taking care with the tail. He buttoned up, laid the cool cloth on his face and turning it to the cooler side twice while waiting for the man who had knocked to finish up, wash his hands and leave before coming out of his stall. His father looked at him appraisingly, took the towel and refreshed it. Angelo took the towel and laid it gently on his face again. After a few moments his father took the cloth and pressed it gently against his son's cheeks and neck.

"Meglio ora?" Joshua asked kindly, his expression soft.
(Better now?)

"Si." Angelo replied humbly, gaze trained on the dark marble floor.

Joshua pulled his son into a warm hug and kissed the top of his head. "All right then. If you can behave for the rest of the night we can have a nice dinner. What do you say?"

"Yes sir. I'm sorry dad, really." Angelo said, penitently.
"I hear they have Chocolate Mousse for dessert here." Joshua said casually, washing his hands and pretending to inspect himself in the mirror. He did his best not to laugh when he saw his youngest son's eyes light up. The boy loved chocolate. Julia often joked that if there were even one piece of chocolate in the house, Angelo would be drawn right to it.

"With whipped topping?" the boy asked hopefully.

"Well it would be positively sinful if they didn't!" Joshua said in mock outrage. "We'll just have to demand whipped topping, won't we?"

Angelo grinned at his father and they exchanged a quick hug before they rejoined the rest of the family.

AN:
Reference to Leroy Robert "Satchel" Paige
Baseball Hall of Fame
Born: July 7, 1906, Mobile
Died: June 8, 1982, Kansas City

Leroy Robert "Satchel" Paige (July 7, 1906 – June 8, 1982) was an American baseball player whose pitching in the Negro leagues and in Major League Baseball (MLB) made him a legend in his own lifetime. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971, the first player to be inducted based upon his play in the Negro leagues. Paige was a right-handed pitcher and was the oldest rookie to play in the MLB at the age of 42. He played with the St. Louis Browns until age 47, and represented them in the All-Star Game in 1952 and 1953. He first played for the semi-professional Mobile Tigers from 1924 to 1926. Paige began his professional career in 1926 with the Chattanooga Black Lookouts of the Negro Southern League, and played his last professional game on June 21, 1966, for the Peninsula Grays of the Carolina League.

Most information supplied by Wikipedia

The Drover, to the best of my knowledge, is a fictitious place.

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Amadeo had passed his finals, as expected, with flying colors, and was looking forward to a summer of nothing much to do when his father woke him up most unpleasantly on June 28th with a list of chores to be done before he could get around to his nothing much plans. He rolled his eyes but didn't complain. It was just as Johnny had told his children many times over the years, the chores will be completed faster if you don't take up a half hour whining about it first, and much faster if you don't have to do it with a sore backside.

He didn't really mind doing the chores. He usually took the time to meditate and think, imagine things, make up stories in his mind. Sometimes he would hum a marching tune, or sing the latest song he'd heard on the radio and complete the chore in time with the beat. Sometimes he wouldn't do any of those things but would merely relax into the repetition and lose himself in the sounds and smells, keeping only enough of his brain power on the job at hand to avoid accidents.

His first chore was mowing the lawn. He groused about it a little for appearance sake but privately cheered. He loved to mow the lawn. He loved the smell of the freshly cut grass, the way the color changed behind him compared to what was ahead, the faint impression of his treads, changing the color even more.

Today he reveled in the feel of the sun on his face and the faint breeze that blew, cooling the mild sheen of sweat which had been forming on his forehead and upper lip. With a smile and a glance around to see if he were alone, he snorted, lowered his head and 'charged', grinning as he reached the edge where the grass met the front walkway and turning to make the next pass, pretending that the whir-shush of the blades on the push mower was the sound of the matador flapping his red cape, and the clacking was the cheers and clapping of the audience.

Imagining the chore as a bull fight made it go that much more quickly. His father had recently been discussing buying a gas powered mower but Amadeo hoped that didn't happen. The things smelled terrible and sounded worse. He'd seen neighbors struggling to get theirs started, tugging the starter until they were exhausted and sweaty.

He rinsed the blades, carefully wiped them down and oiled them, then he put the mower back in the shed. He went inside, washed his face and hands and mixed up a cold glass of Tang before beginning his next chore.

"Amadeo?" his mother called.
"Yes mom?"

"Did you finish the lawn?"

"Yes mom." he replied, taking a long cold drink and preparing to make another glass.

"I need you to bring the wash out for me so I can hang it up on the line."

"Yes mom. I'm just having a drink. I'll be right there." he called.

"Take your time, hon. Finish your drink, bring the laundry out, and then I'd like you to sweep up this trail of dust and grass cuttings you left on the floor." she said as she followed the trail into the kitchen, looking appraisingly at her son who still had cuttings stuck to his trainers and the cuffs of his jeans. "Next time you forget to dust yourself before you come in here I'll do the dusting for you. Got it, ragazzino?"

(little boy)

With an innocent smile, Amadeo replied, "Ah, but you see I *did* dust! You said yourself that I left a trail of dust, therefore I did exactly as you asked, I dusted! So you have nothing to be upset about. Now, if on the other hand you wanted me to *un*dust, then you should have said that!" he quipped. He'd read the book Amelia Bedelia to Con's girlfriend's six year old sister one night when he'd been asked to baby sit, and he'd been as amused and enchanted with the character as little Jo Lynn had been. They'd read it twice before he'd tucked her in.

Preparing to make a third glass full, he put down the pretty blue tinted tumbler and nearly knocked it over in surprise as his mother gave him a swat on his backside. He turned back toward her, throwing his hands back to rub even though the smack hadn't really stung that much. "I was just kidding mamma!" he protested.

"Nobody likes a smart alec, il mio bambino." His mother replied easily. "Now finish your drink and bring those clothes out for me, please, honey." she continued, giving her son a quick kiss on the forehead. "Then you can sweep the floor and get started on the dishes."

Amadeo scowled as he went into the laundry room and moved the wicker laundry basket closer to the ugly pink washing machine. He opened the door and began scooping the wet laundry out. They'd only recently gotten rid of the old washer because the mangle had broken for good and all,
and his mother had happily picked out this eyesore to replace it. At least the clothing came out of
the machine, ugly as it was, damp, and was low enough for him to just scoop the clothes out and
directly into the basket

He groaned inwardly as he remembered that his father had promised to buy a matching dryer
which could be placed either above or beneath the washer to save space, rather than placing them
side by side. He supposed he could live with the color if that meant he didn't have to go out in the
winter and hang clothes which would sometimes freeze on the line, although he had to admit to
himself that he would miss stacking the towels on top of each other and carrying them in like
boards.

He lugged the basket out into the back yard for his mother and turned back toward the house to
begin his other chores singing 'Yakety Yak' under his breath. The lyrics made him smile despite
himself.

"'Deo! That reminds me," his mother said, as though they'd been having a conversation that had
been interrupted. "Did you invite Angelo and his family over for the Fourth of July weekend?
You're always over there and I only ever see Julia at the grocery store. I keep meaning to ask them
over for dinner or game night but there's never been the time. I'd like to show them a little Rossi
hospitality."

"Ma," Amadeo said slowly, trying to choose his words carefully. "The Di Marco's are really quiet
folks. I don't know how they'd be with a house full of..."

"Nonsense honey! It's the Fourth of July! There's no such thing as quiet on the Fourth of July!
Now, you invite them! I asked you to do it two weeks ago! It's been far too long. Understood?"

"Yes mamma." Amadeo replied reluctantly.

Her eyebrows knit in concentration as she checked off a list in her head. "I know Milo and his
parents are coming, and the Young's, the Allen's, the Shelsher's and the Mitchells. Gage and Glen
are coming with their wives and kids, and they said they'd bring their portable grills and help with
the cooking so that people aren't waiting for their food all day. Brandon and Haley Silsbury said
they could only stop by for an hour or so because they have other plans..."

"Mamma, where are we going to put all of these people?" 'Deo asked, stunned at the expected
turnout.
"Don't worry honey, Casper James and Kirk Southway are going to bring and set up canopy tents from the back and side yards. Virgil, Travis, and Marcus Lee are going to erect picnic tables. Wayne Bell and Tyler Watts are going to scrounge up as many chairs as they can and bring them over in their trucks. Father Ryan volunteered the fold up chairs from the dining hall on the provision that he gets the first slice of Martha Jackson's triple layer, strawberry-chocolate cream cake."

"The Kinlan's, the Thompson's will bring hot dogs, hamburgers and cheese, the Davis' and Mrs. Witt are going to bring fried chicken. The Cabrera's, the Wilson's are bringing vegetable salad, and the Clayworth's are bringing potato salad, and... oh, well I can't remember exactly who all else is bringing what but we're gonna have plenty of it." she laughed.

"Your buddies from the wrestling and track teams are coming. And Mr. Perdue, Mr. Morgan, and the Ravensdale's said they'd bring the fireworks. Oh! And don't forget to invite Eddie, Jim, Charlie, Dennis, and their folks, if you haven't already. And those other two boys you've been hanging around with lately, what are their names again?"

"Felix Garruson, and Aiden Johannson." he replied.

Once he'd gotten over his initial anger at the lot of them, and taken the time to talk and get to know them, he'd found them to be pretty decent guys. After hearing their stories, he'd thanked Dennis for kicking the knife away, and Eddie for trying to keep Freddie from picking it up again.

He'd thanked all of them for coming forward, regardless of the reason, and testifying against Freddie and Brice. He'd thanked Felix repeatedly for running for help. Felix had blushed, shamefaced, and said that it was the least he could have done, he only wished he'd done it sooner. Aiden admitted that he'd felt so badly for not doing anything that he'd gone home and told his father, who had in turn given his son a good hiding.

The longer they talked, the more they found they had in common, and they'd become friends. They did worry though, how Angelo would react to 'Deo being friends with the boys who had stood by and watched as Freddie and Brice played volleyball with him starring as the ball. Amadeo had been gracious enough to accept their fervent apologies, but they knew that Angelo was his best friend, and if it came to a choice between them or Angelo, there was no contest.

They had admitted to Amadeo that they were afraid to call Angelo for fear he'd just hang up on them, and they were even more afraid to go in person because if anyone had a right to be ticked off it was Angelo, and if he hauled off and punched the lot of them on the nose he'd have every right to, but none of them particularly wanted to be punched. Amadeo had replied that he was sure that Angelo wouldn't become violent, and that most likely the worst that would happen is that he'd decline the apologies and shut the door in their faces. He suggested that they should at least make the attempt.
A couple of weeks after school let out, Aiden, Felix, Jim, Eddie, Dennis and Charlie had appeared at Angelo's door unannounced. All of them had looked uncomfortable and they were sweating, although it was hard to determine whether that was due to nervousness, the long walk to Angelo's house, or the mid-June temperature. Angelo stood quietly as each stammered an apology. At first 'Deo thought that Angelo would throw their apologies back in their faces as hurt and anger fought for control of his, and he put a comforting hand the other boys shoulder.

Angelo had closed his eyes, taken a deep breath, released it slowly, looked at the six and said calmly, "I hated you. I hated you all with a passion for standing there, watching. Afterward it gnawed at me. I couldn't eat or sleep for the longest time." he continued, observing the guilt and regret on the faces of the boys before him, "But dad sat and talked with me for a long time one night, and he told me something. I had to think on it for a while, but the more I considered it, the more it made sense."

"He said, 'Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.' So I'm not going to hold onto the anger. I'm not going to hate, it takes too much energy." the boy said tiredly. "I thank you for your apologies, and for the things you did do. You can go home and tell your parents that you apologized. Now if your consciences are at ease, goodbye."

He'd begun to close the door slowly when Jim put out a hand to stop it. Angelo, who had been worn out from the emotions warring within him during the conversation, was surprised and a little angry and prepared to slam the door shut in their faces.

"Angelo, wait!" Jim said earnestly, "I know you're hurt. You have every right to be. We... we were a buncha cowards. We were more worried about our own skins than tryin'a help you keep yours intact. I think it's really big of you to accept our apologies rather than spittin' in our faces. After what happened I wouldn't blame you if y' had."

"Yeah, I can't say that if it'd been me that I couldn't done it." Eddie said, "But please, Angelo, please believe that we mean what we say. And honest, our folks didn't make us come here, we came 'cause it was the right thing to do. We woulda done it a long time ago but word was that... well, that you didn't want to see anyone. And I don't blame you for that." he finished uncomfortably.

Dennis interjected, shame plain on his face, "Angelo, you're right, we... well at least I, was really hoping to feel better. But I don't. I wish I could go back in time and fix it. Undo it. Make it different than it was. Stop it sooner. Say something sooner," the boy paused, looking distressed. "I can't. I wish to God I could but I can't. Too much happened to pretend it never happened, but if you'll let me, I'd like to start fresh," he tentatively extended his hand, "Angelo Di Marco? My name is Dennis Granger. I'm real pleased to meet you, and I'd be right honored if you'd be my friend. Will
you?" he asked, fearful that the other boy's response would be to slam the door shut and that he wouldn't get his hand out of the way in time.

The other boys looked on mutely, hoping for the best and fearing the worst.

Angelo looked at Amadeo. 'Deo returned the look levelly. He didn't move, or say a word, but that little spark that Angelo loved so much was in his eyes, and the corner of his mouth quirked up just slightly. That was all the response Angelo needed. He took a deep breath, put his hand out and shook Dennis' hand solemnly. Each boy extended his hand and Angelo shook each one as it was offered.

"Well," Aiden said, self-consciously rubbing his sweaty hands on the seat of his jeans, "I guess we'll be going then. Thanks again for talking to us, and for accepting our apologies."

The six boys had turned to leave when Angelo cleared his throat and said, "'Deo and I were about to have a snack. Wanna come in?" The boys were surprised. Had they truly been forgiven so quickly, or would Angelo laugh and slam the door in their faces after all? Charlie smiled uncertainly.

There was only one way to find out. He took a step toward the door. Angelo moved and Charlie braced himself for the other boy to slam it shut. Instead he moved aside, opening the door wider to allow his friends in.

Angelo's parents walked in later that evening to find the eight boys playing a complicated looking card game that had them yelling good natured insults, laughing, cheering or groaning as they won or lost a hand, while the dinner that Angelo had considerately started singed on the stove.

****************************************************

"So did you?"

"I'm sorry, what was that?" 'Deo asked, slightly befuddled.

"Honesty Dae, where is your head today? I asked you if you'd invited all of your friends."

"Oh, sorry mom. Um, I didn't ask Ange or the other guys yet but I will when I get back into the
"Don't forget to sweep up that mess, now." she reminded him sternly.

"Yes ma'am." he replied sheepishly.

"And get to those dishes!"

"Yes, ma'am." he replied, shooting a snickering Con who was weeding the flower garden, a dirty look.

"Constantin, stop dilly dallying over that garden, now. You still have to trim the bushes and do the raking, then there's the outdoor furniture that needs to be cleaned."

"Aw, mom! I thought Gabe was doing the lawn furniture!" he complained. He hated the smell of the outdoor furniture after it had been in storage all winter.

"Gabriel is washing the car, then he has to do a thorough clean on the inside." his mother replied calmly, pinning clothes to the line. Constantin was a good boy for the most part, but he hated to do chores and always felt that whatever she'd assigned to his brothers or sisters were easier than whatever she'd given him to do. "After that he's taking a run to the store for me."

"What about Carmie and Terri? What are they doing! Sitting in their rooms painting their toenails, gossiping and giggling like a couple of guuuurrrruluulss, I'll bet." he said sarcastically.

"Carmie is washing the windows upstairs and down, emptying the trash and dusting in each room. Terri is doing the laundry, washing, folding and putting away as they dry, and in between loads she's cleaning the bathrooms and changing sheets on the beds. Now, if you keep on complaining I'll tell them to go to the movies and you can do it all. How does that sound?"

Constantin grumbled something which earned him a warning look from his mother, after which he settled down to his task.

Once inside, Amadeo called the Parkers, Greys, and Barkis', who all happily accepted and asked if
they could bring anything. Amadeo said he'd ask his mother to give them a call but he was pretty sure everything was covered. When he called the Grangers', Dennis answered. He called the news to his parents who responded, sounding quite pleased. He came back to the phone and thanked 'Deo for the invitation, the smile evident in his voice.

"Felix and Aiden don't have phones, but they only live just a stone’s throw from me, so it's no trouble to stop by and ask 'em and save you a trip." he offered.

"That'd be great! Thanks! See you on the 4th then, if not before. I have to find out when my sentence is up and I can stop doing chores and get out of the house." he laughed.

Angelo was excited at first and Amadeo could hear him relaying the invitation to his parents. Suddenly his friend's voice became muffled, but not so much that he couldn't hear as the excited tone turned to one of inquiry, which then turned to pleading which eventually turned to whining.

Amadeo couldn't hear exactly what was being said, but he did hear Mr. Di Marco's sharp tone which put an immediate halt to the whining. Angelo put the phone back to his ear, and with a heavy sigh, had to decline. "Dad made plans for the family to go to the shore a few months ago. He rented a house and everything. He said that since he'd done it on the spur of the moment the only house he could get was a little cracker box that'll barely fit the five of us or he'd've asked you to come too. Sorry, Dae."

"Don't worry, Ange. It's my fault. Mom told me to invite you a couple of weeks ago. Have a good time. Maybe you can all come next weekend? My brothers and their wives and kids can't make it this weekend and were going to come next weekend instead, so you'll get to meet them. Sound good?"

Amadeo thought that that would be a better arrangement anyway, all of his brothers and sisters and their kids alone would take up the entire kitchen and living room. His sister in law, Beth Ann, was very, very pregnant and would take up quite a bit of space all by herself. The doctor had told them that they were expecting twins and she was due in three weeks. Gabe had joked that it looked as though she were trying to smuggle watermelons underneath her dress. Con dared him to say so to her face. Gabe had laughed and replied, 'No way! I enjoy my life! If she didn't kill me then Dan would.'

Angelo covered the mouth piece to the phone and then came back moments later, "Mom and dad say yes! Next weekend will be great!" he replied excitedly.

"Super." replied Amadeo with a grin. "Uh, I should warn you though that my family can be a little loud."
Angelo made a derisive sound and said "That's the price of having a big family. So I'll see you next weekend! Have a happy!"

After they hung up Amadeo looked around the kitchen. Taken as a whole it was a daunting project so he decided to treat it as an archeological dig and divide it into sections. Dishes first, he decided. Focusing intently on them, he finished in record time. Picking up one of his recently washed glasses he decided to make himself another glass of Tang, and then decided that peanut butter on toast would tide him over until lunch. He was tossing back a second glassful of Tang when the smell of burnt bread reached his nose. He jumped up and manually pushed the lever up to get the bread out faster.

The bread was just warm. Amadeo frowned at it, then smacked himself on the forehead. He unplugged the toaster, brought it over to the kitchen door and dumped all the burnt crumbs that had accumulated on the bottom into the back yard for the birds. When he returned to the kitchen he sighed as he saw crumbs on the counter and floor.

He quickly smeared peanut butter on his half toasted bread, washed it down with the rest of his drink, rewashed the glass and knife and then proceeded to clean the toaster and counters. He took the Electolux out of the closet in the living room and vacuumed up the trail of grass and dust he'd dragged in earlier, doing the entire kitchen floor and hallway leading to his parent's and sister's rooms as well since his mother had been going to sweep and mop them when she came in anyway.

Feeling silly for leaving an obvious streak in the center of the living room he did the entire floor, going so far as to move the furniture, hunting the dust bunnies which were hiding beneath, and finding forty cents for his troubles. He took the brush attachment and attacked the furniture, tossing the cushions aside to vacuum under them. He grinned when he found two more dollars in change.

When his mother came back into the house she stood in the doorway, shocked. Amadeo had vacuumed and straightened out the living room and kitchen and was in the process of sorting expired food from good in the refrigerator. He'd taken out some beef to thaw for dinner and it was on a plate in the sink.

"All right, young man. What do you want?"

Amadeo looked up at her, confused. "Huh?" he said, without thinking. Mrs. Rossi raised an eyebrow. She seriously disliked what she considered to be 'cave man' speech, and she gave her son a look.
"Oh, sorry mom." he said with an embarrassed grin. "I mean, 'What was that, ma'am?"

"Smart alec." she said with an affectionate smile. "Now, I'm going to ask again. What do you want?"

Amadeo shook his head, a puzzled expression on his face. "I really don't know what you mean."

"No one does extra chores without being asked unless they want something. So... what do you want?" she asked, giving him the look that all mothers seem to be adept at. That look, passed down and improved upon from generation to generation. That look which seemed to see right into their children's heads and straight out the back.

Amadeo paused for a moment, considering. "I want a castle carved from ice," he said quietly. "I want to live in a place where it's always sunset in Autumn. I want to wake up every morning and see the sun rising over the ocean. I want to lie down on thick green grass and watch the clouds moving across the sky. I want to travel the world. I want to fly like a hawk, with the wind lifting me. I want to ride on the back of a porpoise. I want to drive a race car. I want to ride a horse." He looked up at his mother who had a soft smile on her face. "And if I can't have any of those things then I want Con to come in here and finish cleaning out the refrigerator."

Taken off guard, his mother let out a burst of laughter. "Now that I can give you." she replied, bending down to kiss the top of his head. "You're a smart alec, little boy, but you're my smart alec, and I love you."

"Ditto." Amadeo said with a smile.
Amadeo grinned broadly when he saw Angelo the following Friday. The Di Marco's had been having such a good time that they'd asked the owner if they could extend their vacation for a few more days. The owner had been thrilled. His house was so small that there wasn't a great demand for it, and the next couple wasn't due till the weekend. He was so pleased that they wanted to stay that he'd only charged them half rent for the next three days, and had given Joshua the option to sign up early for the July Fourth weekend again the following year, which he did with pleasure just before joining his family in the truck.

The younger boy's light coffee skin was darker, almost bronze, making his teeth look whiter than they usually were. "Dad confiscated my books, tossed me out of the house with my watch, a beach bag, a towel, a fiver to buy drinks, a pail, a bottle of suntan lotion, and a threat that if I came back to the house before lunch without a respectable collection of shells in the bucket he was going to tan my hide." Angelo had laughed as he showed his friend his shell collection.

He winked at Amadeo, checked the living room to see if anyone was nearby, closed the door and whispered, "I walked for what felt like forever looking for shells and stuff, and there it was, Avalon!"

At Amadeo's puzzled expression Angelo explained. "I found this great used book store? I bought almost two dozen really great used books for like two dollars, and on the way back I saw these little kids collecting shells and stones and offered them a buck for whatever they had, bought myself a Coke, spread out the towel and sat there reading."

Amadeo gave his friend a mock stern look before the two of them burst into laughter again. When they stopped laughing, he stood there for a moment, admiring his boy. He cracked open the door to peek out again and grabbed Angelo into a fierce hug, kissing him until they were both breathless. "I missed you so much." he whispered.

Angelo looked up at 'Deo with a slightly dazed look. His heart was racing. "Let's go somewhere." he suggested. 'Deo kissed Angelo behind the ear sending a tingle down his neck. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before walking into the kitchen where his mother and father sat, drinking lemonade.

"Mamma, Pop, we're going to head out for a bit, okay?"
"You're going to see him all day tomorrow, Angelo!" his mother protested half-heartedly.

"Just for a little while, mamma, please?" Angelo pleaded, widening his large, dark eyes just enough, coupling it with a boyish, charming smile.

"Get going, brat. Be home by lunchtime. Understand me?" his father said with a no nonsense expression.

"Yes sir." Angelo smiled, waving at his parents before running out the door with Amadeo close behind.

Julia looked at her husband, the corner of her mouth quirking up slightly, "I thought I was the soft touch." she said pointedly.

Joshua watched through the door as Angelo and his best friend ran down the driveway and into the woods, then stood up and walked closer to his wife. "You are, my love. Just one of your many endearing traits. You must be rubbing off on me." he growled as he gently drew her up from her chair. She giggled as he began to kiss the curve between her neck and shoulder and working his way up.

***WARNING: The following section contains reference to consensual, intimate relations between under aged boys. If this disturbs you, feel free to skip over it.
(The X is not the rating but merely denotes the beginning and end of the scene if you wish to skip it.)

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Angelo felt as though he would burst if they didn't find a safe, quiet place soon. The longer he had to wait the more the pressure built up inside him. He lead Amadeo deep into the nearby woods at the end of his driveway, to a clearing that he had made the summer before where he often went to read and think without being disturbed. They stopped in the sun dappled clearing and found themselves entangled, kissing desperately, tugging off and tossing aside each other's t shirts and fumbling with the button and zipper of each other's cut offs as they heeled off their sneakers.

"Wait! Wait!" said Amadeo breathlessly.
"Wait?! I don't wanna wait, Dae!" replied Angelo, eyes wide in disbelief.

Amadeo kissed his boy deeply and stood back, desire and the sparkle plain in his sunlit coffee eyes as he took in the sight of his flushed and slightly petulant boy. "Just wanna put the shirts down, we didn't bring a blanket." he answered, a tiny smile of understanding, deep affection and amusement lifting the corners of his mouth.

The two picked up their discarded shirts, turned them right side out, laid them on the ground carefully but quickly and finished kicking off their cut offs and shorts. Angelo then dove in to kiss the amusement off of Amadeo's lips.

Neither of them knew how or when they ended up on the ground and neither cared. Neither had ever touched another male intimately or had ever had sex. Although each of their parents had given them 'the talk' years ago and they both knew the basic mechanics, neither of them had any idea how it would work between two men so they went by instinct, kissing, caressing, fondling, getting lost in the feeling of being skin to skin until neither of them could tell where one of them ended and the other began. Lips, teeth and tongues found places that had the other gasping.

Amadeo had never before found the fragrance of shampoo and soap to be intoxicating, but those combined with the scent that was just naturally Angelo aroused him in a way he'd never experienced before.

Angelo was sure that he had to be dreaming again, but he swore that this was by far the best one yet and he prayed fervently that he didn't wake up from it any time soon.

Afterward they laid in the warmth of the sun and each other, sweaty and sated, their breathing slowly returning to normal, Angelo with his head on Amadeo's chest. His senses seemed heightened. He could hear the sound of 'Deo's heart, each breath as he inhaled and exhaled. He took pleasure in the pleasant, spicy odors of clean sweat and soap that were Amadeo. He giggled as he heard Amadeo's stomach growl, and again as his own growled in response. He glanced at his watch.

"It's five of twelve. We're gonna be late for lunch." he said softly. "We should head back at some point."

"Ummm." 'Deo breathed.
"Pop's gonna smack me for being late." he said, grinning into 'Deo's chest. But boy was it worth it, he thought to himself.

"We'll tell him he's gotta smack me too then, deal?" Amadeo quipped.

"Yeah, right." Angelo replied with a chuckle. "Oh man, I just realized..."

"What?"

"We're kind of a mess."

Amadeo huffed in laughter. "Ya think?" he asked, smiling down at his boy and planting a kiss on the top of his head. "Come on, put your things on, I have an idea."

Angelo gave Amadeo a curious look but reluctantly got up and dressed, after which Amadeo lead him further into the woods.

The two boys walked along a faint and narrow path, which eventually gave off onto a wider and much clearer route. "Ever been here?" Deo asked.

"I've seen this but I didn't know where it lead." Angelo replied.

"You're in for a treat then. It's actually on the Ketterly's property but they've always allowed the kids around here to use it."

"What's 'it'?" Angelo asked curiously.

"Come on, you'll see." 'Deo said with a grin.
They walked for another five minutes until they came out into a larger clearing. Amadeo gestured grandly as though he'd discovered the place himself. "Ketterly's Pond." he said proudly. "Ah," he said quickly, seeing Angelo beginning to take his sneakers off, "I'd keep those on, and your clothes too. The edge is a little slippery until kids really start using it," he explained.

"Take your watch off though." he said as he removed his own, placing it carefully in the shade of a nearby tree.

Angelo shrugged. "It's water resistant."

"Perhaps," Amadeo responded with a mischievous glint in his eyes, "But if you take it off you won't have a tan line on your wrist where it was."

"That doesn't bother me." Angelo laughed.

Amadeo sighed, loving his boy more and more for his complete lack of guile. "If you have a tan line then you won't be able to tell your father that you didn't know what time it was while we were swimming." he said, once again feeling a surge of affection.

It took Angelo a moment or two to register what his friend was suggesting. He couldn't tell a convincing lie if his life depended on it and everyone who knew him knew it. "You're a very devious person, you know that don't you?" Angelo retorted, awed and delighted as he removed his watch and placed it by Amadeo's.

The boys gripped each other by the wrist and ran into the water, which was still slightly chilly despite the July sunshine. They dove in, wrestling and splashing, taking turns dunking each other, swimming laps, and racing. Other boys came along, some wearing trunks, others unselfconsciously stripping down to shorts and joining the fun. Most stayed, some did a quick lap and left, cooled off for the time being, admitting with a guilty grin that they were AWOL from chores and had to get back before they were missed.

Eventually Angelo and Amadeo dragged themselves out of the water, soaked, happy, and pleasantly tired. They retrieved their watches, and waved goodbye to the other boys. Once they were out of sight of the others they walked hand in hand through the woods as they meandered back toward Angelo's house, stopping occasionally to enjoy a kiss, but the closer they got to Angelo's house the more nervous the boy became. Amadeo noticed his boy worrying his lower lip with his teeth.
"Ange," he said worriedly, "Is it going to be really bad when you get home?"

"I don't know, Dae." Angelo looked at his watch. "I thought we were only in there for a little while! We're so late! Pop's gonna blister me! I don't think he's gonna... do what he did *that* night... you know." he replied uncomfortably. "I don't mind getting smacked I guess. I guess I deserve it. But what if they say I can't come over tomorrow?" Angelo responded, looking anxiously up at his friend. "What if I get grounded for the rest of the summer or something?"

Amadeo put a comforting arm around his friend and gave him a quick hug. "Let's go face the music, then." he said quietly before releasing his friend to walk beside him.

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They arrived at Angelo's house minutes later and Amadeo's stomach plummeted down to rest with jarring force in the vicinity of his pelvic bones. His father's car was parked in it's usual spot near the fence between the barn and the house. He took a deep breath and patted Angelo on the shoulder.

Angelo's parents and Amadeo's father, who were sitting at the table drinking coffee, looked up at their sons, expressions of relief turning to irritation and anger.

Joshua turned in his chair so that he was directly facing the boys, his jaw clenched and his mouth little more than an angry slit. "Where. Have. You. Two. Been?" he asked icily.

Angelo licked his lips and swallowed nervously. "Papà..." he croaked.

"Lunch time in this house is noon, not three o clock." he said sternly. "We were about to go out looking for you again if you didn't show up soon."

"Again?" Deo asked, trying to calm his nerves.

"The two of you left here this morning at nine, and I know I told you to be back by lunch time. When you didn't show up by one thirty I called Johnny here and we started to search for you. Around two thirty we ran into one of the boys who'd been at the pond and he told us you were there but by the time we got there you were gone. We had no idea where you actually were." Joshua scolded.
"What were you doing for six hours?" Johnny Rossi demanded, looking pointedly at his son.

Angelo's eyes widened just a bit and he took a breath, but Amadeo interjected, unconsciously stepping in front of Angelo as though to protect him. "It was all my fault Dad, Mr. and Mrs. Di Marco. We were messing around in the woods for a while. Angelo told me that it was close to lunch time but we were all dirty and sweaty, so I took him to the pond to cool off and get clean, we only meant to be there for a little while. When we got there he told me his watch was water resistant but I told him to take it off anyway, I took mine off too, and we left them under a tree. I'm sorry," he blushed slightly, "We weren't watching the time. It was my fault."

Joshua Di Marco pinned his youngest son with a look. "Angelo..."

Angelo looked at his father from beneath his long lashes. "Yes sir?"

"Look me in the eye, ragazzino. Is that what happened?"

Angelo only took a second to think about it. Longer would have been a giveaway, and the way that Amadeo had phrased his narration, he'd told the truth. He raised his head and looked directly into his father's eyes. "Yes sir."

"Except?" Joshua prompted. Assured by the direct eye contact and quick answer but looking for something more.

Angelo looked at Amadeo whose reply was an uncertain expression and a quick shake of his head. He then looked back at his father, faint inquiry on his face.

"Did Amadeo twist your arm and force you to go to the pond?"

"No sir," Angelo replied nervously.

"Did he force the watch from your wrist?"

"No sir," he said quietly.
"Did he threaten you in any way or prevent you from leaving so that you could be back in time?"

"No sir," He knew where this was heading and decided to end the game. "It was my fault too, that we're late. I'm sorry for not paying closer attention to the time and for worrying you all," he said with a sigh.

"So what do you propose we do about it, Angelo? This isn't the first time you've wandered off, is it?"

Angelo looked at his father with a pleading expression. "But Dae was with me this time, dad! I was safe, really! It's not like the other times, honest!"

"Amadeo, I think it's time we went home. I'd like to talk to you about what happened today," Johnny said firmly, giving his son a meaningful look as he stood and put his hand on the door knob.

"Yes sir," Amadeo replied quietly.

Johnny Rossi looked over at his friends with a smile. "Still on for tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Joshua replied, also standing, and placing a firm hand on his youngest son's neck. "Camera da letto. Ora."

(Bedroom. Now.)

Angelo tried to smile as he gave a small wave goodbye to his friend. He turned and went toward his bedroom with the air of a man walking up the gallows stairs.

Amadeo's stomach knotted. "Mr. Di Marco, really, it was all my fault. Please don't..."

"Amadeo," Joshua began gently, "It was my no means *all* your fault. My son has a mind of his own, and he frequently decides to do things that he knows I don't approve of, whether it's something he chooses to do on his own, or whether it's something he allows himself to be lead into. Either way he has to take responsibility for his actions. Understand?"
"Yes sir," Amadeo replied reluctantly.

"Let's get going, 'Deo," Johnny said before his turned to his friends, " Julia, Joshua, we'll see you tomorrow then?" He smiled when he saw them nod and wave before going into their house.

Amadeo followed his father to the car, eyes downcast. Once in the car he sat on his hands which were oddly cold considering the time of year.

Johnny paused before starting the car. He gave his son a searching look.

Amadeo saw his father from the corner of his eye and then quickly trained his gaze on the frayed cuffs of his cut offs.

Mr. Rossi started the car and headed home. He and his son were going to have a serious discussion that evening.
Joshua walked into his son's room to find the boy, now in warm, dry clothes, sitting nervously on the edge of his bed, chewing his lower lip as he frequently did whenever he was nervous. Joshua tried not to laugh. No one could get dressed faster when he put his mind to it than his youngest son.

The older man closed the door and stood there for a moment, feet braced shoulder width apart, arms crossed as he looked at his son. Angelo returned the look warily from beneath thick eyelashes, his hands wringing in unconscious imitation of his mother whenever she was upset.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Joshua asked quietly.

Angelo's gaze dropped to his hands. "Nothing sir?" he whispered.

"Nothing?"

"I... I'm sorry?" Angelo replied hesitantly, choosing his words carefully. "I know I should have kept a better eye on the time. I promised to be home for lunch. I know I worried you and mamma again, and I'm sorry. It...it won't happen again?"

Joshua walked over to his son's bed and sat down beside him. Angelo moved over slightly to give his father room, and while he didn't look directly at him he did position his body so that he was at least facing his father.

"Angelo, look at me." he said gently.

Angelo looked up, then away, unable to maintain eye contact with his father.

Joshua sighed, he supposed this was as good as he was going to get for the time being. "Angelo, when I was a kid I lived in what everyone considered to be a nice neighborhood. A safe neighborhood. Everyone knew everyone else and most of us were related in some way,"
"One of my friends was from a very large family, larger even than great great grandpa Di Marco's." He held back a smile at his son's shocked expression.

"One day my friend's brother, Niccolo, who was about your age, had a big fight with his father. His father was going to punish Niccolo for being disrespectful, but the boy ran out of the house. For days no one knew where he was, and Patrizio, his father, searched and searched. His family, the whole neighborhood, searched. The neighborhood, the city, the police station, and the hospital. Eventually they went to the morgue." He stopped and looked at his son to see if the boy understood where he was headed with the story. Angelo was pale under his tan.

"That's where they found him. I won't tell you any more about that, Angelo, but the point is that it happened in what was supposedly a safe place, a familiar place, a place of family, and no one could believe that something that... like that... could happen." Joshua hesitated, he wanted to tell his son the story but didn't want to reveal the more gory details of that day. "No one could understand *how* something like that could have happened. No one could imagine who would do a thing like that. Niccolo was a good boy and everyone liked him, so no one could understand how he came to be where he was. No one remembered seeing any strangers around so the only other conclusion was that it had to be someone he knew, but of course no one came forward. None of us ever found out what really happened."

"It was worse back in New York, so big, so many people. Even in the neighborhood surrounded by people we knew, I worried. Even here, every time you leave the house I worry. I worry that you won't come back. I worry that I'll find you..." Joshua couldn't finish that thought. "You go off on one of your walks and lose track of the time, which is why I bought you that watch in the first place, but even with the watch you still disappear for hours, apparently with no thought that you might be worrying mamma and me."

"I'm sorry, papà." Angelo said apologetically. "I didn't know."

"I know, il mio angelo. You're so young in so many ways, I never wanted to tell you that story, but I want you to understand. One well-meaning but tactless neighbor said to Patrizio on the day of the funeral that he was blessed because he had so many other children that he wouldn't miss one.

Patrizio turned around to the neighbor and said 'If I had a hundred children the loss of even one would leave a hole in my heart that could never be filled even if I were to have a hundred more.'

You think a family of six is large, perhaps, but did you ever think of what it would be like if we ever lost another one of you?"

Angelo was near tears as he was reminded of his older brother Peter, just a toddler at the time, whom he'd never met. "I'm sorry, papà. I really am. I'll try to do better from now on." His older
brother, Paul, had had a twin who had been born with a heart condition. There wasn't a year that went by without some remembrance of his lost brother who he knew quite well through pictures and stories.

"I know you will." Joshua said quietly. "But there's still the matter of you disappearing again today to deal with, isn't there?"

"But dad, I was with 'Deo! I was safe, and I wasn't lost or anything, and I wasn't really wandering cuz I was with Dae, and it wasn't like last time where it was early in the morning, and I wasn't hanging around with those guys you told me not to, and he got me home as fast as he could when we realized what time it was, and..."

"Angelo."

His name, spoken quietly, in that tone, was enough to stop his tirade.

Angelo looked up at his father. "Are you going to... sp... p... you know. Are you?"

Joshua hesitated a moment, "No, I don't think I need to now, do I?"

""No, you don't, honest! Thanks dad!" Angelo said, surprised,"

Joshua grabbed his son by the arm and dragged him across his lap.

"You said you weren't going to!" Angelo protested, squirming a little in an attempt to get loose.

"I *lied*." Joshua replied, emphasizing the word with a solid spank to his son's backside. "*Doesn't*. *Feel*. *Very*. *Good*. *Does* it?" he asked emphasizing each word with a hard swat.

"No sir!" Angelo responded, wriggling, crossing and uncrossing his ankles in an effort to alleviate the sting, gripping his bed spread to keep his hands away.
"Then *Don't.* *Do.* *It.* *Again.* *Under.* *Stand.* *Me*?" he demanded firmly, following those up with eight or ten more solid smacks.

"Yessir! *Sì, signore*! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Owwwwieeee! Basta, papà! Per favore! Please stop?" he asked plaintively.

"*Did I*. *Get my*. *Point across*. *This time*?"

"Yessiryessiryessir*yessir*!!" Angelo quickly and fervently assured his father.

"All right then," Joshua said, righting his son who quickly got up from his seated position to hop in place to gingerly rub the injured area, teeth clenched and eyes scrunched closed.

Joshua tried again not to smile. The boy really had a flair for the dramatic when he put his mind to it. He stood up and wrapped his arms around his youngest. He bent down to kiss the top of his son's head.

"You're a little nut, you know that?" Joshua said kindly, giving his son a squeeze and another kiss, "Right off the top of the tree."

"Then your hand is the trunk." quipped Angelo with a hitch in his voice as he found himself crying and laughing at the same time.

Joshua hugged his son again and laughed as he heard Angelo's stomach growl and felt it through the front of his shirt.

"Come on Little Nut. Are you hungry?"

Angelo had nearly laughed himself as his father’s laugh had caused his head to bounce up and down against the larger man's stomach. "Yes sir."

"All right then. Come have a snack. Only carrots, celery and radishes for you though, since you weren't home in time for your actual lunch. Capire?" (Understand?)
"Rabbit food? I'm not a rabbit!" Angelo replied, going along with the joke. Even if Joshua were serious, he knew that Angelo loved vegetables, especially carrots and celery.

"That reminds me, you're not allowed to eat them like a rabbit today!" Joshua replied, referring to the way that Angelo would nibble around the carrot to get to the sweet inside to eat that separately, nibbling off the skin of the radish to eat the center separately, or to see how long he could get the celery 'strings' before they snapped.

"That's just mean!" Angelo complained, pretending to be outraged.

"You heard me, young man, eat like a human or you don't get any vegetables." Joshua replied with a grin, wondering how many other parents had to fight with their kids NOT to eat vegetables.

"Papà?" Angelo said, looking anxiously up at his father before they left the room.

Joshua didn't need to hear what his son was thinking. His other sons always understood that the end of a punishment was the end, but Angelo had always needed a little extra reassurance.

"Siamo tutti in questo momento, tesoro. Promessa." he said quietly as he looked into his son's remarkable, large, dark eyes. He gave his son a hug around the shoulders to lead him toward the kitchen.
(We're all right now, sweetheart. Promise.)

Julia wasn't much for punishment, other than a whack or two with her hand or the wooden spoon. She tried to imagine life without Angelo in it. If she'd lost him, somehow... she thought back to New York and her neighbor, Batya, whom everyone called Betty, and her heart ached once more.

Batya Feldman, had always called Angelo 'boychick', which simply meant boy or young man, but which she'd explained always meant more to her.

"To me it means, sweet boy. Pleasant boy. Nice boy. Like my Yaakov, my little Jacob," she'd say, looking into the distance to see her long gone son, "Such a good boy he was. Such a smart boy. Your boy is such a boy. Sweet and sensitive he is, our boychick. A good boy, is our Angelo," she'd say with a quavering smile. Then she'd give herself a little smack on the forehead and excuse
herself as she'd remember she'd been in the middle of doing something. "Hard it is to get old these days!" she'd complain, "No room on this earth for the old, forgetful ones. If this old head weren't stuck on tight, forget it, I would."

She'd laugh and smile as Joshua would take her hand and kiss it, assuring her that she was neither old nor forgetful, and that if he were not already happily married he would snap her up in a heartbeat. He'd been shocked to hear that she was only about fifteen years older than he and his Julia were.

A hard life had taken it's toll and had made her old before her time. Except for her smile. The older woman had a beautiful smile, almost as beautiful as his Julia's. And her laughter was light as any young girl's. Years were erased when she laughed and smiled which made the rare times that she did it more precious to the Di Marco's. Julia had been heart broken when they'd moved. She'd tried to convince the older woman to move with them, but 'Betty' had tearily declined.

"My home is here now. This is where my Efrayim is buried. And my Samuel I might still see some day. If I keep moving around like some nomad," said the older woman who had been in the same apartment since 1944, "How will he ever find me, I ask you?" she said, referring to her youngest son who had gone missing in Vietnam a year and a half earlier. Everyone knew that she kept a light on in the window for him every night, just in case.

With a final hug, father and son went back into the kitchen where they saw a plate of sandwiches, homemade pickles and iced tea, and a bowl of chips. Mrs. Di Marco was just coming in again with a handful of fresh carrots.

Mr. Di Marco gave his son a gentle pat and a shove in his mother's direction. The pat wasn't meant to hurt but it landed on a still tender backside.

"Ah!" Angelo hissed, "You could'a just said." he complained softly over his shoulder toward his father before heading toward his mother to give her a quick hug and a kiss.

"I'm sorry I worried you again, mamma. I'll really try harder not to do that anymore." He apologized sincerely.

Julia held him at arm's length and looked him over closely. "That's what you said last time, Angelo," she said softly.
"I do try, mamma," he protested quietly, "I really do, I just... I just get caught up in whatever I'm doing or thinking and nothing else seems to really matter at the time. I don't mean to scare you... and Dad explained to me about his friend. I'm really sorry mamma, mi dispiace. Mi perdona?" he asked, hopefully, holding her hands.

Mrs. Di Marco grabbed her son to her then as though saving him from an incoming missile, tucking his head down against her shoulder. Angelo, while only average height for a sixteen year old, was bent down still more to accommodate his tiny mother's grip. He knew she was talking because he could feel the soft vibrations of her voice, but all he could make out were the words, 'Lose you.'

He hugged his mother more tightly. "I'm not going anywhere any time soon, mamma," he murmured back, then in a softer tone that she completely missed, he said, "Unless you want me to."

"Hey," Joshua said, breaking into their thoughts as they stood there hugging, "The carrots are getting dried out. You better eat them now before they end up in the salad tonight." He'd washed the carrots and cut the tops off while they'd stood there, lost to the world around them.

"Not until he washes his hands!" Julia scolded, turning Angelo in the direction of the bathroom and grinning as she aimed a swat at his backside which missed completely as Angelo tucked his backside away quickly with a grin he ran into the bathroom and locked the door.

Julia turned toward her husband and whispered "You told him about Nicky?!"

"Not the whole story, no, my love. Don't worry," he replied, fending off his tiny wife's threatening finger. "Just enough to get the message across," he continued, taking the shaking finger in his hands and opening the others to plant a reassuring kiss on the palm of her hand.

"All right then," she replied quietly, glancing toward the bathroom. "He's still just a baby in so many ways, Gio, there's no need to tell him more about the less attractive side of human nature than he's already heard." she said, allowing herself to be drawn into a hug.

"I agree, il mio dolce. I agree." (my sweet)

*****************************************************************************
Several miles away in town a slightly different scene was playing out at the Rossi household.

Amadeo and his father had arrived home and 'Deo immediately began worrying when his father made him stay in the car while he was parking it rather than letting him out first. Then by taking his arm and escorting him into the house.

Johnny closed the door and delivered a whack to his son's backside that caused the boy to go up onto his toes. "Study. You know the drill."

Amadeo scurried to the study and stood before his father's desk at attention. He'd stand there until his father came in and gave him permission to stand at parade rest or... well, he hadn't been spanked in years... but he had to admit it didn't look good for him. The clock was on the wall behind him so he glanced quickly to see what time it was and kept track of the time by counting it's ticking.

Twenty minutes later his father came in, and for another five minutes did nothing but stand behind 'Deo. No one could stand more quietly than Gianbattista Emanuelle Rossi once he was of a mind to do it. 'Deo knew why he did it but it didn't stop him from giving a little shiver. If his father was going to spank him then why didn't he just get on with it!

"What was that?" Johnny asked, circling around to stand before his son, arms crossed, head tilted just slightly.

Amadeo tried not to notice the tanned, muscular legs above the sandals and the tanned, muscular arms beneath the sleeves of his father's polo shirt. He avoided looking at the darkly tanned face under the dark hair cut in the military style his father had worn for as long as he could remember. Even while seemingly doing nothing more than leaning casually against his desk with his arms and ankles crossed, Johnny Rossi was an imposing figure and not someone to be messed with.

"Repeat yourself." Johnny barked, the long dormant Drill Sergeant alive and well.

Theeeeeeerrrrrrrrrre it was.

"SIR! I said if you were going to spank me then you should get on with it. Sir!" 'Deo barked back, clicking his heels as well as he could for wearing a worn down pair of canvas sneakers rather than a sharply spit polished pair of combat boots.
"Do you really think this is the time to get a smart mouth, young man?" Johnny barked again, leaning into his son's space.

"Sir! I'm already in trouble, I don't think there's much else I can do to make it worse. Sir!"

"You think so, do you?" his father asked.

A shiver went right down Amadeo's neck, down his spine and into his pelvic region. What the heck! Had he been taking lessons from Cobrane? Amadeo shot his father a quick sideways look to make sure it really was his father.

"Eyes front!"

"Sir, yes sir!" Amadeo shouted back, unconsciously licking his lips nervously, keeping his eyes forward by great force of will.

Johnny Rossi was having difficulty refraining from laughing. He'd seen that same look on the faces of so many new recruits. So many tough youngsters had come to him only to find out that they weren't so tough after all. Some of them had been crying for their mothers by the time he'd gotten done with them. He had no intention of reducing his son to tears, his wife would kill him, but it was still a good feeling to know that despite his sass the boy was still, mostly, respectful.

He returned to his perch on the desk and once again looked at his son for another five minutes before he barked the command "At ease!"

Amadeo took a breath of relief. His neck and back were beginning to cramp up standing at attention for a little over a half hour now. It took all of his will power not to flex his muscles and twist his neck back and forth to get the blood flowing again. He stood at ease.

"It might interest you to know that I hadn't intended to spank you. Until you sassed me," Johnny said conversationally.

"Oh," Deo said weakly.
"Oh," his father repeated. "Now, perhaps you'd like to tell me what exactly was going through your mind when you convinced your friend to do something you know upsets his parents. Why would you want your friend to get into trouble, 'Deo, can you tell me that?"

"I didn't mean for him to get into trouble, sir," Amadeo said penitently. "It was the last thing I wanted for him. It's just that we were having such a good time, just the two of us, no brothers or sisters, no other friends around... we don't get a lot of time just to ourselves without Milo or one of the guys or Con or Ange's brothers..." he realized he'd just about slipped up.

"Why is that so important, Dae?"

"He's the only other one who speaks Italian. I haven't really had the chance to speak it outside the family for years and it's just nice to sit there and brush up on the language, learn things I didn't know before, things from the New York perspective. We've been here so long that sometimes I forget there are other places and people out there. Other points of view, other ideas. Angelo is like, I dunno, opening the windows after a storm and letting all the fresh air in, you know?"

Johnny and Natie had both noticed a difference in their son when he came back from visiting Angelo and his family. But then, he also had to admit that visiting the Di Marco family was much as his son had said, they were like fresh air after a storm, and just as quiet. Even when their kitchen was full the noise level was never as deafening as it could get in the Rossi household, but the company never lacked even though the volume did.

Johnny sat on the edge of the desk much as Cobrane had, and he crossed his arms again, looking at his son. "There are two things I'd like to tell you, Amadeo Christophoro, and then I'm going to ask you a question to which I expect an honest answer. Agreed?"

'Deo bit back the reply that he hardly had a choice in the matter. More sass was not the answer. "Yes sir," he replied respectfully.

Mr. Rossi leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and told his son the story of Niccolo, not thrilled at the look of horror on his son's face but glad that he'd gotten the message across without having to divulge the full details.

"And now I'd like to know if Angelo ever told you about his brother Peter?"

"Peter? He didn't mention a Peter, no, sir. There's Matthew, Iggy... Ignacio, Luke, John, and Paul."
"There was also Peter, Paul's twin brother. The little boy was born with a heart defect. The doctors said he wouldn't live long enough to leave the hospital, did you know that?" Johnny asked his son.

"No sir, I didn't know," Amadeo answered respectfully, the desire to be a smart mouth completely gone.

Seeing the light dawn, Johnny continued with his story. "When they were pregnant for the fifth time, they were only expecting one child, Pietro. They knew that that child's heartbeat was erratic, sometimes weak, and thready, sometimes strong. The doctor's weren't sure it would survive the birth process. They had no idea that there were two babies until the Di Marco's went to the hospital to deliver, at which point the doctors had to do an emergency C section to remove the babies because the cord was wrapped around the two of them, basically tying them together. The doctor worried that trying to cut the cord to deliver each baby separately would result in the stronger one dying as well. After that, they told Mrs. Di Marco that she'd never have more children. Did you know that, 'Deo?"

"No sir," Amadeo replied quietly, feeling worse and worse as his father spoke.

Mr. Rossi had nearly laughed when Josuha and Julia told him that Paul had nearly been named either Philippians or Philemon in an effort to give both boys a name that began with P that also kept the family's impromptu tradition of using the books of the bible as their children's names. Luckily, despite the haze she'd been in from the anesthetic, Julia had kept her head and decided on the name Paul, very quickly, just before she'd passed out from the accumulated efforts of trying to give birth, the news about their twins and the anesthesia.

"Little Petey died just a few months before he turned two. The Di Marco's were, of course, devastated. Then on December 22nd that same year, Peter and Paul's birthday, Mrs. Di Marco got the news that she was pregnant again. The doctors told her repeatedly that she'd never carry to term. Then when she went into labor a month early they told her the baby would be born dead or impaired. One year to the day that his brother died, Angelo was born. Small, but healthy and perfect."

"So now you can see, Amadeo, why the Di Marco's go a little... nuts... where their kids are concerned, especially Angelo."

Amadeo forgot that he was supposed to be at parade rest and bowed his head. Johnny Rossi didn't comment on it.
"I'm sorry dad. I really am. I feel like such a... an irresponsible, selfish..." he made a sound of disgust, "I really can't come up with enough nasty things to call myself right now. Mr. and Mrs. Di Marco must hate me. Angelo too. It really was my fault he was late." He looked up at his father, his feelings clear on his face. "If... if you wanted to... I mean, if you wanted to beat the living daylights out of me I wouldn't blame you." he said with more bravery than he actually felt. "I deserve it." he finished, turning his eyes once more to the hard wood floor of the study.

Johnny Rossi tilted his head down to catch his son's gaze and quirked an eyebrow. "That answers the question I had for you, but now I have another one for you. Have I ever *beaten* any of you kids? In any way? For any reason?"

"No sir, but if you did now I wouldn't complain. I really messed up," he said dejectedly.

"As mature as you are, Dae, you're still a child. You still have a lot to learn and you'll learn from experience. I know that if you'd known you'd have been more careful, more attentive, more responsible, for yourself *and* for Angelo."

Angelo. The boy had come to mean a lot to his youngest in a very short period of time. The two boys had seemed to become closer more quickly than even 'Deo and Milo had all those years ago. Even their relationship seemed different than the one between Dae and Milo. The whole situation was unusual. Good, but unusual. Johnny couldn't quite put his finger on why it seemed so different, but the two were good boys and he was sure he had nothing to worry about. It wasn't as though they were part of a gang. He nearly laughed as he thought about Amadeo and his entourage these past few weeks. If the town didn't know better... ah well.

"I'm sorry dad, really. Are... are you... I mean, I'm just saying, I deserve it if you are."

"Do you *want* me to?"

"Want?" Deo asked, slightly taken aback. "No sir. I don't want it. If you want to know if I think I deserve it, then yes, sir, I do."

"Have you learned a lesson here today, 'Deo?"

"Yes sir."
"Are you going to make that same mistake again?"

"No sir!" 'Deo responded, surprised that his father would ask.

"Then I think you've been punished enough, don't you?"

"Sir?"

"‘Nothing is more wretched than the mind of a man conscious of his guilt.’ “ Johnny quoted.

"Who said that?" Amadeo asked, smiling wryly. His father was a wellspring of quotations and seemed to have one for every occasion.

"Plautus, Titus Maccius Plautus, he was a Roman playwright of the Old Latin period."

"I guess it fits." Amadeo sighed.

"Well, Dae. I could give you a good spanking if you think it would make you feel better. Or, if you don't want that but still feel badly you can always go talk to Father Frank."

Father Frank Ryan was the second of two priests who ran the Catholic Church in their town. 'Deo had been an altar boy for years and had even considered becoming a priest when he became old enough, but Father Frank had convinced Amadeo that he had other, equally important things to do with his life that didn't involve the church. At first Amadeo had been a little hurt, feeling as though he were being rejected before he even tried, but then something odd had happened.

That day had been grey, cold for this time of year, and drizzly. Father Frank and 'Deo had been sitting in the rectory drinking cocoa. Father Frank had been sitting in his chair with his back to the window when he'd told the boy that he felt that 'Deo was meant for bigger things than the priesthood. It was then that the sun came out from behind the clouds and the light had touched Father Frank's hair, turning it golden like a halo. Moments later the sun had gone back in and the rain started fresh.

'Deo had never considered himself a particularly superstitious person but the timing and effect of
that sunlight, combined with the fact that the priest had been completely unaware of the whole thing, had been enough to convince the boy that the other man might have a point, and he looked to the man as a mentor.

"Amadeo," Johnny said, clicking his fingers with a little smile on his face. "Still with me?"

"Yes sir, I'm sorry dad. Guess my mind wandered. What did you say?"

"I said that if it's still weighing on you you could always go to Mr. Di Marco and do chores for him to make up for your part in what happened. While we were sitting there waiting to see if you boys were going to come back any time soon he was talking about hiring some summer help if the crops keep ripening as quickly as they have been."

"I could do that." Deo said, happy with that option. "But how do I get him to keep the money, since I don't think I should get paid for causing them so much worry," he continued with a frown. "How can I convince him to let me work without pay? I don't think he'd do that."

"Your other option there is to accept the money... hold on!" Johnny said, holding up a hand. "Accept the money and donate it to a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter, an orphanage, an animal shelter. There are a lot of people out there who would benefit from the donation."

"Would it count, dad? I mean, it would be for a good cause but if I'm only donating because I want to feel less guilty about what I did... it's like doing a good deed with the idea of getting a reward afterward." the boy said uncertainly.

"Your atonement would be in working for Mr. Di Marco, doing anything and everything he tells you to do without complaint. I'm simply saying that if he insisted on paying you and you still felt you hadn't worked off your debt, donating the money is an alternative, and you can do it anonymously so there would be no expectation of reward. Understood?"

"Yes sir. Thanks Dad. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me, and giving me all these ideas as to how I can make things right again," he said, feeling considerably lighter. "Do... do you think that if I call Mr. Di Marco now he'd talk to me? Do you think he's super mad at me?"

"I think you're safe calling him, and I think he'll appreciate the offer. Feel free to use the phone in here, just this once. All right?"
"Thanks Dad," Amadeo said, giving his father a huge Rossi Bear Hug.

"All right then. Oh, one last thing," Johnny said, turning Amadeo by the arm and giving his son an all mighty whack on the backside.

"OW!" he shouted, giving his father a disgruntled look. "Dad! You said..."

"That wasn't for you, son that was for me and I must say, I do feel better. Now get on with that phone call, we have things to do to get ready for tomorrow," Johnny said, throwing his youngest a sharp salute before leaving the room.

Amadeo spent a minute or two rubbing the sting out before sitting gingerly to make his phone call.
Angelo and Amadeo

Chapter 26

The following day was everything Amadeo hoped it would be. All of his brothers and sisters were there. His oldest sister Giovana and her husband Daniel were there with their twin four year old boys, Keith and Kevin. Santa and her husband Alejandro drove the two hours in with their three year old Michael and announced that they were expecting again to shouts, cheers, hugs and claps on the back. Dante and his very pregnant wife, Beth Ann held court in the living room, surrounded by the Di Marco's, his parents, his sisters Teresa and Carmela and their boyfriends as well as Gabe and Con with their girlfriends.

Con's girlfriend Maritza had brought her little sisters, Jo Lynn, who was six and had conveniently brought along her copy of Amelia Bedelia, and her four year old sister, Katie who immediately got along like the proverbial house afire with the twins.

Angelo's brothers, John and Paul, were there as well with their girlfriends. Paul's girlfriend had brought along her youngest siblings, her eight year old brother, whose name was Trey but whom everyone called Turkey, her six year old brother Jeremiah, and her five year old sister Miranda who automatically gravitated toward Jo Lynn and began an animated discussion about books they had in common. The two girls were best friends by the end of the day.

At first Trey and Jeremiah stayed close together and didn't really mix with the other children, but Keith had run up to them, inviting them to play. Soon he was joined by his brother Kevin, then Katie who rattled off a list of games they could all play culminating in her poking Trey and yelling, 'You're it! Ruuuuuuun!' Before anyone knew what had happened Jo Lynn and Miranda had joined the fray and the house was filled with shrieking, laughing children who ran upstairs, and downstairs, calling from room to room and floor to floor.

Amadeo had warned him that his family was 'a little loud' but that had been a gross understatement. The Rossi's were, exuberant, to say the least. They spoke loudly, they laughed even louder. Mr. Rossi was a riot and had a joke ready for every contingency, and his son's Dante and Gabriele were just like him. Eventually it became a contest between the three of them to see who could crack the best, or worst, joke. Angelo's ribs hurt from all of the laughing he'd done in just the past hour alone.

At first it was all very nice but soon Angelo's head began to hurt. The shrieks of the children were becoming ear splitting and he was sure that the glass in his hand would shatter given enough time. He swore he could feel it vibrate in his hand every time one of the children came near.

Seeing his discomfort, Amadeo tugged his friend's sleeve and lead him out into the kitchen, which was blessedly child free at the moment. "Come on, Ange, let's get you some aspirin, huh? Find a
quiet place for a little while."

Angelo grimaced. "I can't, not really. I mean, I can have aspirin, gladly. Gratefully. But dad said I'm not allowed to go off anywhere without Paulie or John to keep an eye on me." he admitted with a deep blush. "I'd rather just stay on the couch in plain sight than have to ask either of them to baby sit me."

Amadeo shook out two aspirin and gave them and a glass of juice to his friend. "Come with me." he said, leading Angelo back toward the living room.

"Now, stand here and look pathetic," he whispered to his boy before leaving to stand behind Mr. Di Marco. He leaned down and whispered in the man's ear, pointing toward Angelo and then toward the backyard. At first Angelo was afraid that his father was going to say no, but there was apparently something in Angelo's face that gave truth to whatever it was that 'Deo had said and his father nodded, giving a pointed look to his friend and saying something with a no nonsense expression. 'Deo crossed his heart and gave the man his best boy scout salute, even though he'd never been one.

Amadeo came back to his friend and whispered with that glint in his wicked sunlit coffee eyes "We have his majesty's blessing. Let's away before he changes his mind and puts us both in the dungeon."

Angelo smiled and waved at his father and followed his friend into the back yard. Some of the canopy tents were still up, as were several of the picnic tables, since the Rossi's planned to spend the bulk of the day outdoors as soon as they began to cook lunch. Johnny, Amadeo and Con had erected an above ground swimming pool and spent the previous day and night checking it to see if it were filling properly and making sure it didn't overflow. They'd put the ladder nearby but not in just yet for fear that one of the little ones would get outside before the adults were there and try to climb in.

"C'mon Ange. This way." 'Deo said with a grin, leading him toward a quiet, shady part of the back yard. He lead his friend to a tree in the corner and pulled a rope that was hanging, then stepped back to avoid being hit by the ladder that fell down.

"You OK with rope ladders, Ange?" 'Deo asked. But it was an unnecessary question as Angelo was already half way up. Amadeo grinned and followed, climbing in and pulling the ladder back up. Angelo was already on his back, arms pillowing his head, looking with great interest at the tree house they were in.
The tree house was big enough for the two of them and perhaps Milo if he sat in the corner with his legs crossed, and was only tall enough for 'Deo to kneel without hitting his head on the roof. He reached into a corner and pulled the lid off of a cooler, pulling out two Cokes and using an opener that was hanging by a string on the wall next to it. He offered the Coke to Angelo with a grin. Then he pulled the rope ladder back up. He was very much aware of Mr. Di Marco watching them as they'd climbed the ladder and that was his way of assuring the man that they weren't going to disappear anywhere any time soon.

"Two questions." Angelo said.

"Shoot." replied Amadeo, closing the hatch that covered the entrance in the floor.

"One, how'd you know we were gonna get permission to come out here, and two, how'd you get the ladder back up here in order to pull it down?" he grinned.

"I didn't know your dad had ordered a babysitter for us," 'Deo said, including himself in The Sentence, "But I knew once he saw how miserable and in pain you were he wouldn't say no or press the issue. And to answer your second question, I knew it was going to be super noisy and I figured you'd need some place quiet to get away to, so I stashed the Cokes up here and then used the pulleys to get the ladder back up to keep the babies out. Can't risk them getting hurt now, can I?" he replied, turning on the transistor radio to the local pop station.

"Devious." Angelo said, taking a swig from his cold soda. He sighed in relief at the feeling of the cool drink and the cooler air as Amadeo lifted the flaps that covered the windows, tying them to hooks in the ceiling.

"So," 'Deo said with a glint in his eye and a suggestive smile, "I have a few ideas about what we can do to make the time go by." he said, leaning toward Angelo.

Angelo's breath caught but before he could say anything, Amadeo reached past him and snatched up a deck of cards. "Setback!"

"A**hole!" Angelo protested.

Amadeo put on a mock frown. "Language young man. Language! Gentlemen do not resort to crude language to make their point."
"Oh shit in a hat, man, you sound like my father! Way to kill the mood!" Angelo said, flopping melodramatically, but carefully, backward onto the floor, which he couldn't help but notice was wide enough in either direction to accommodate them lying down if 'Deo didn't mind bending his knees just a little.

"Angelo!" Amadeo said in a warning tone.

Angelo sat back up, stuck his tongue out, then licked his lips suggestively, his eyes glued to Amadeo's as he leaned in closer and closer, only to blow a raspberry once he was close enough to shower his friend.

"Angelo...! Hey, what *is* your middle name, anyway?"

Angelo tilted his head back slightly and gave his friend a little crooked grin. "Benedetto, what's it to ya?"

"Angelo Benedetto, watch your mouth young man. And you blow one more raspberry at me you'll regret it."

Angelo responded with a few choice words that would have astounded his parents, who were still convinced that their youngest didn't know things like that.

"Watch your mouth little boy." Amadeo fairly purred, the glint back in his eyes.

"Or what, Sister Mary Demonica, you'll get the ruler?" Angelo quipped, unsure where this was leading but finding it intriguing.

"Last warning, little boy."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry, Sister. I won't say bad words anymore." Angelo said coyly from beneath lowered eyelids, replacing words with gestures which would also have shocked his parents no end if they'd known he knew them.

"That's it, brat, you're in for it." Amadeo growled, grabbing his boy by the sleeves and pulling him
Angelo's eyes widened, wondering if Amadeo hadn't been kidding around as he'd thought. "Hey! Hold on..." was all he managed to say before Amadeo had his boy over his lap.

He wriggled to free himself, his mind raced to find the words with which to protest this treatment, until the first spank fell. Just a little sting, but by no means painful, quickly followed by another, and another, and another. Amadeo was targeting spots that had Angelo gasping in a way that a spanking had never made him gasp before, and eliciting physiological responses that a spanking had never gotten from him in his life.

"Now, little boy, are you going to behave yourself?" Amadeo scolded.

"No!"

Amadeo grinned and continued to spank his boy, who at some point stopped trying to wriggle away but instead lay there with his eyes closed, taking deep breaths.

"Are you going to behave now?" Amadeo asked, amused and a little aroused as he felt his boy's appreciation digging into his leg.

"Unnnnhhh." Angelo responded articulately, his eyes still closed.

Amadeo stopped the impromptu spanking and pulled his boy up to sit on his lap, holding him close and kissing him, loving the boneless way Angelo lay in his arms, allowing himself to be positioned and kissed in any way that 'Deo wanted.

Neither of them had any idea of how long they'd been kissing, nor what would have happened next if a voice hadn't begun to serenade them from the grass beneath.

"Let me in, whee-ooo. Whee-ooo, whee-ooo Hoo-whee-oo. Whee-ooo, whee-ooo, hoo-ooo-ooo, whee-ooo, Whee-ooo. I can see the dancin', (let me in)." Milo sang, flawlessly providing the lead and chorus,
accompanying himself effortlessly.

"The silhouettes on the shade (silhouettes).
I hear the music (music),
All the lovers on parade (oh).
Open up (let me in), I wanna come in again,
I thought you were my friend."

"Crud, I love Milo but his timing stinks." Amadeo griped.

"Uhhhhnn." Angelo agreed.

"Pitter patter of those fee-ee-ee-ee-eet.
Movin' and a-groovin' with that be-eat.
Jumpin' and stompin' on the flo-o-o-o-o-o-or.
(Lemme in) Let me in! (Open up.) Open up!
Why won't you open up that door? (Let me in.)"

"Come on lazy bones, get up. Here, take a handful of ice cubes."

"An' do what, put em in my pants?" Angelo asked tactlessly.

"You're gonna need em for your backside if you don't do what I tell you. Wash your face, go sit there by the cooler. Shoo!" he whispered back.

Angelo growled but did as he was told, taking and opening another Coke and surreptitiously holding it between his thighs.

"I hear (open up) music let me in (music).
I wanna come in again.
Let me in (let me in), a-well I heard it just then.
I thought you were my friend." Milo sang, then shouted without a break "What the heck are you guys doing up there? Throw the ladder down!" before he began to sing again.

"Whee-ooo, whee-ooo
Hoo-whee-oo.
Whee-ooo, whee-ooo, hoo-ooo-ooo, whee-ooo,
Whee-ooo."
Milo hummed the instrumental portion, then continued singing:

"Pitter patter of those fee-ee-ee-ee-eet.
Movin' and a-groovin' with that be-eat.
Jumpin' and stompin' on the flo-o-o-o-o-oor.
(Lemme in.) Let me in!. (Open up.) Open up!
Why don't you open up that door? (Let me in.) D'ya get the hint yet guys!?"

"I-ah-I (open up) hear music, let me in (music).
Oh, I heard it just then. Let me in. (Let me in.)
I wanna come in again.
I thought you were my friends!" he sang even though the ladder had been lowered moments before.

"Whee-ooo, whee-ooo, hoo-whee-oo.
Whee-ooo, whee-ooo, hoo-ooo-ooo, whee-ooo.
Hoo-ooo-ooo, whee-ooo."

He began the fade out, clicking his fingers and swaying his hips, his voice going softer and softer as though he were walking off into the distance.

"Mi! Stop that howling before you get every dog in the neighborhood here to see what died, and get up here!"

"Took ya long enough!" Milo griped back as he climbed the ladder, although he hadn't minded the wait since he loved the song and he liked to sing it.

"Ange, grab a Coke for Mi, would you? Mi, pull the ladder back up, k?"

"Bossy bossy bossy." Milo grumbled, hauling the ladder back up and shutting the hatch once again. He turned to thank Angelo for the soda and stopped to take a closer look. "I think you guys've been up here too long. Looks like Ange is gettin heat stroke." Milo observed.

"Nah, he's fine. He's just mad that he lost at setback." Amadeo reassured him casually, gesturing toward the abandoned cards on the floor. He ignored the raspberry that Angelo blew at him in response but noticed the little smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.
"So to what do we owe the honor? I thought you said you couldn't make it today?" 'Deo asked with a grin.

Milo laughed, "Yeah, dad was gonna make me and Mikey stay home today but we were making so much noise he caved and let us come over. Mikey is with the other kids in the front yard making a hellacious racket, and mom and dad are in with the other 'growed ups'. Oh yeah, your dad told me to tell you that they're gonna start the cook out in a little while so they're gonna need all hands on deck."

"So tell me, what the heck happened the other day?" Milo asked.

At the other boy's blank looks, Milo expanded. "Both of your dads called. Twice! Looking for both of you! What's the deal?"

The two other boys had the good grace to look embarrassed. "We went to Ketterly's and sorta got lost." Amadeo admitted.

"Both of you? Sheesh! And hey! Whyn't you call me? I'da gone!" Milo protested.

"Sorry, man, it really was a spur of the moment thing, and we only meant to be there a little while." 'Deo replied.

"Ange, you're a bad influence on our Mad Man here." Milo laughed.

"Milo!" said Amadeo warningly.

"Mad Man?" Angelo asked with a grin and a sly look.

"Ange!"

"Yeah, this is the kid who put himself on a schedule when he was six years old. This guy just doesn't lose track of the time like that."
"Mi!"

"Mad Man? Really? How'd you come up with..."

"Angelo!"

"You gotta see him wrestle, Angelo! One look at his face makes his opponents wanna go running for the hills."

"Milo!"

"Mad Man." Angelo repeated, grinning.

"Hush you!" Amadeo threatened.

"All right, all right." Milo laughed, "So tell me, what went on yesterday? It was the most exciting thing that happened all day." Milo continued, "I'm betting that if you'd gone missing a little while longer it'd'a been in the papers today. Spill." Angelo and Amadeo took turns relaying their edited version of events from the day before, including the story about Nicky, which was frankly driving the two of them crazy, not knowing the entire story.

"Wow, creepy. I wonder if there's some way to look up old newspaper stories to find out what really happened?" Milo conjectured. "But it happened in Pennsylvania right? Or was it Philadelphia, I forget. What year did it happen, again?"

Before Amadeo could respond, another voice drifted up to them.

"Little Pigs, Little Pigs, let me in!" came a familiar voice.

Without missing a beat the three boys chimed, "Not by the hair of our chinny chin chins."
"Then I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down!" Johnny Di Marco said with a grin. He took several deep breaths and cracked everyone up by sneezing violently.

Milo scooted over and opened the hatch to throw the ladder down again. The tree swayed slightly as it took Johnny's weight. He poked his head in and looked around. "Wow, this is cool!" he said.

"Guys, squeeze into the corners, I think we can fit him." 'Deo said.

"I don't think so..." Johnny said uncertainly.

"C'mon, where's your sense of adventure?" Angelo asked with a grin.

"I left it safely on the ground with my common sense." Johnny replied even as he tried to compress himself to fit through the hatch. There was a tense moment when everyone was sure that Angelo's older brother was going to get his shoulders jammed but he managed to wriggle in with a sigh of relief. The other boys squeezed themselves into the corners in order to give Johnny enough room to get in and close the hatch so he didn't run the risk of going through butt first.

"This is really cool!" He said again, then paused to thank his little brother as he handed him a Coke.

"Johnny," Angelo said tentatively, "Can I ask you a question? I mean, and get an answer? A real answer?"

Johnny Di Marco frowned and shrugged, "I guess. I guess it depends on what the question is." he replied, taking a swig of his soda.

"Look, Johnny, Dad told me about his friend Nicky from way back, but... he didn't tell me the whole story. I know there was more to it and it's been driving me and Dae crazy not knowing. Would you tell us what happened, if you know?"

Johnny frowned again. "I dunno, squirt. If Dad didn't tell you the whole story he mighta not wanted you to know it, ya know? He might think you can't handle it yet."
"Giani! You guys gotta stop thinking about me like I'm a little kid still. I'm sixteen, and honestly I know more about stuff than mom and dad like to give me credit for, but they look at me and see a little kid in diapers, no matter how big I get!"

"Please, John," added Amadeo, reasonably, "We aren't little kids anymore, and we'd really like to know. We understand that whatever happened was pretty bad, and we learned a lot just being told the bare bones. If you told us the whole story it would help cement the lesson. Please?"

"I'm not a baby, Giani! Come on! Please?"

His older brother sighed in frustration, "I know you're not a baby, brat, but I gotta tell ya, when I finally heard the whole story it kinda freaked me out, and I was older than you are now."

"Giani, please?"

Johnny glanced at the other two boys and saw the same hopeful expression on their faces. He huffed out a sigh and said "OK, I'll tell ya, but I swear to God you guys have nightmares afterward I don't know nothin' bout nothin', got me?"

Obtaining solemn promises from the three younger boys, Johnny began his narration.

"OK, so it was like 1915 in a nice little town in Pennsylvania. Everyone knew everyone else and nearly everyone was related somehow, got me?" Johnny began, waiting until his brother and his friends nodded. "So anyway, Nick got into a big fight with his dad and ran out of the house. When he didn't come back that night everyone in town started looking for him. Days went by and there was no sign of him. The police just said he'd run away and he'd come back when he got tired and hungry enough, but he didn't go home."

"Nick's mother was sick and getting sicker as the days went by. She was the one who finally suggested the morgue. No one wanted to believe it, no one wanted to be the one to go check. His father finally went and there he was." Johnny paused to take a breath and swallow. The story still bothered him.

"Don't stop now, John!" Angelo protested.

"Sorry kid, it's just a really... horrible story, even now." he took another deep breath and leaned
toward the three boys, lowering his voice. "Nicky'd been... well he'd been... you guys know what rape is?"

The three boys nodded, they'd heard stories, but none of them had a clue as to how one would rape a boy.

"Well whoever killed him raped him first, there was... well never mind that, but that's what happened. And then according to the story, whoever did that, killed him afterward. Cut him up pretty bad. There were knife wounds all over his body, his chest, his back, his arms. The police said it looked like he'd put up a real fight but whoever did him musta been bigger and the kid never had a chance." Johnny said, reluctantly. "Look guys I honestly can't bear to talk about it. I think I told you enough." he said looking at their slightly green faces, "Too much actually. You guys gonna be ok?"

The three boys nodded, taking careful swigs from their bottles of soda to ease their stomachs.

"Ah, God, I shoulda never told you... what was I thinking?" he berated himself. "If dad finds out I'm a dead man."

"No, Johnny, we really appreciate what you did. It shows that you don't think of us as little kids, and we're obliged that you'd tell us when no one else would." Deo said quietly. "Yeah, it's a vicious story, but by you telling us, well it just makes us understand better than we did." he continued, mentally kicking himself for worrying the Di Marco's like that. He vowed to himself that he was going to be the best unpaid hired hand the Di Marco's ever had.

"All right, well," Johnny sighed, "I only came up to tell you guys that we're starting the cookout and we need everyone to help." He looked closely at the three boys, "You guys sure you're gonna be ok?"

"Yeah, Johnny, honest." replied Angelo. "And thanks again. Thanks for telling us and treating us like we're adults and not kids."

"Ok brat, come on down then." Johnny said, finishing off his Coke and carefully squeezing himself in reverse through the hatch.

The three teenagers sat quietly for a few moments. Angelo vowed to add Nicky to his thoughts, and wondered if perhaps Nicky and Peter knew each other where they were. They stashed their empties
in the corner by the cooler and climbed back down. Deo secured the ladder and rope once again, and the three of them dove into the blessed distraction of chores and running errands in preparation for lunch.

It had been a beautiful day, everyone had eaten themselves into a coma, the children had swum until they were worn out and there had been nearly as much water on the ground as there had been in the pool. It was about ten o'clock at night, Gia and Daniel, who were staying the night, had tucked the twins in hours before. Alejandro and Santa had bundled Michael into the car and headed back to the base an hour before, little brothers and sisters had been picked up and were safely home, leaving everyone else sprawled across couches, chairs, rockers and cushions on the floor, sipping coffee, tea or Cokes and engaging in quiet conversation.

Johnny Rossi, who had at one point during the day insisted that the other adults call him Pazzo, since there were too many Johnnys around now, was in the process of telling yet another one of his jokes. He reached the punch line, delivering it with perfect timing. Everyone burst into appreciative laughter. Beth Ann especially seemed to like it since she continued to make a delighted sound even after everyone else had stopped laughing.

"It wasn't that funny, Bethie," Dante said with an apologetic grin toward his father. He reached over to give his wife a hug.

Beth Ann, for her part, began to laugh again. "It's not funny!" she cried.

Everyone was confused until Mrs. Di Marco took in the whole picture before jumping to her feet with a delighted smile on her face and clapping like a school teacher trying to get her student's attention.

"Mr. Dante Rossi! I suggest you go start up the car now. Pazzo! Go get her overnight bag! Paulie, you call ahead to the hospital. Teresa?" she called toward the fourth oldest Rossi child, "Do you have her doctor's number here? Yes? Give him a call would you bella ragazza? The rest of you start setting up the cribs, we'll need them in a few days. Datti una mossa! Abbiamo bambini sulla strada!" she crowed.

(Bella ragazza - beautiful girl) (Get a move on! We have babies on the way!)

She and Natie arranged Beth Ann on the couch with her legs elevated and a throw blanket covering her from the waist down. Beth Ann alternated between laughing and crying while everyone bustled around her. She clutched her mother in law's hand on one side and Mrs. Di Marco's on the other. "It's too early! It's too early." she cried.
"Shhhh sweetheart," said Natie reassuringly, smiling gently and brushing her daughter in law's hair away from her face. "They're not that early. They'll be fine, bambina. You'll be fine."

(little girl/baby girl)

Julia turned toward her son Johnny and quietly reminded him to make sure they laid down towels and blankets in the back seat so that Beth Ann could recline and be as comfortable as possible for her trip to the hospital. The young woman gasped as another contraction hit her.

Angelo quietly approached his mother from behind and handed her a cool, wet cloth. Julia smiled at her youngest and ran a thumb down his cheek briefly before turning back to the young woman beside her, gently running the cloth over her sweaty face. Softly she began to sing to the worried mother to be:

"Farfallina
Bella e bianca
vola vola
mai si stanca
gira qua
e gira la
poi si resta sopra un fiore
e poi si resta spora un fiore."

"Ecco ecco
a trovata
bianca e rosa
colorata
gira qua
e gira la
poi si resta sopra un fiore
e poi si resta spora un fiore."

"We're ready." Dante said breathlessly, kneeling beside his wife. "How are you, mia bella? How are you holding up? Can I do anything for you to make you more comfortable?"

"Can you carry her to the car?" Natie asked.

"Anything for my baby." he said, crouching down and lifting his wife carefully.

"Mamma Rossi! Stay with me? Please? Mrs. Di Marco? Please?" the young woman cried, unwilling to let go of the two women, her previous aplomb gone in the face of the actual impending births.
"Julia, la mia piccola colomba. You call me Julia." She looked over toward her friend, "Natie? You sit at her head and I'll sit at her feet?"

(my little dove.)

"Sounds good. We're with you, Bambina. Hold our hands. We're with you." Julia, Natie and Beth Ann were quickly situated in the back seat while Dante and his father took the front seats.

"Call us, Daddy! As soon as you can, please?" Teresa asked as she shut the doors behind them. Pazzo gave her the thumbs up as his oldest son backed the car out of the driveway and made their way quickly and carefully to the hospital, Julia and Natie taking turns singing comforting songs to the soon to be new mother.

In the upstairs guest bedroom, Angelo, Amadeo, Milo and Johnny struggled with the cribs while Paul tried to read the directions. "This is crazy! I hate to say it but Dan's bundles of joy are probably going to end up sleeping in a drawer! This is insane! You need a degree in engineering to make heads or tails out of it!"

"It can't be that hard." Amadeo said reasonably, "Maybe we're all just frazzled and need to calm down a little. Come on. Bethie isn't going to be home tonight, that's for sure. Let's go to the kitchen and make a sundae or something. Once we're calmer we can try this again, OK?"

"I could go for a root beer float." Johnnie said.

"Hot fudge sundae." Milo said dreamily.

"Banana split!" added Angelo. "Um, do you have bananas?"

"Yeah, I think so. Let's go."

They arrived in the kitchen to see that 'Deo's sisters, Carmie and Teresa, had had the same idea and were in a makeshift assembly line with Gabe's girlfriend Teddi, and Con's girlfriend Maritza. Johnny's girlfriend Heather was gathering ingredients while Paul's girlfriend Theresa took out extra bowls and spoons.
"Hey Paulie! Did you know that Dae's sister Teresa and I have similar names?"

Paul looked back and forth between the two women. "Yeah, I just realized it now. You're both Theresa, right?"

"Teresa Maria, without an H," she said gesturing toward 'Deo's older sister, "And Theresa Marie with an H!" she continued, pointing to herself. "How cool is that?" she said with a wide grin.

"Uh oh, I just realized! Does that mean that we're going have to start calling one of you Pazzo too?" Carmie quipped, grinning, scooping out ice cream.

"Nope, we came up with great nicknames." Theresa replied.

"I've always like the name Terri, so I'll stick with that," said Teresa.

"And since that's my nickname too, I've decided to go with Misa." said Theresa. "What do you think?"

"Misa?" Paul asked, confused.

"Well," Theresa said with a little blush, "You know what my mother calls me."

"The-re-sa Mi-sa Mun-chie-kins." he sing saged. Her mother had seen the movie Wizard of Oz and had called her Munchkin from the day she'd been born.

"Shhhhhh! Big mouth!" she mock scolded, as the others laughed, "But yeah, so I figured I'd stick with Misa."

"Awwww, I'd so much rather call you Mun-chie-kins! It's sooo cute!" Paul said, leaning forward to pinch her cheeks.

"Move em or lose em, buddy." she threatened with a smile.
"Oh, come on, you know I'm kidding... Misa," he said, trying out the new nickname as he reached out to gather her into a hug.

"Oh Lord," said Terri, wide eyed.

"What's wrong?" Carmie and the others asked.

"What names are they going to give these poor unsuspecting babies? Did they ever mention names?!

The kitchen became oddly quiet as everyone ate their sundaes and pondered the little injustices called names that parents inflicted on their kids.

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NOTES:

Let Me In by The Sensations (1962)
Label Argo
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjS-_09839E&feature=share&list=PL2F58E0DA1A400F5C
Pazzo - crazy

Maritza's little sisters: Jo Lynn (6), and Katie (4)

Milo's brother: Michael/Mikey (8)
Chapter 27

Angelo and Amadeo

By morning the boys had one crib assembled and they decided that that was enough.

"After all," Amadeo said, reasonably as they sat around the kitchen table having breakfast, waiting for an update from the hospital, "There are only two of them and they're going to be tiny. What does it matter if they share a crib for a bit while they're here, right? By the time they're old enough and big enough to need their own cribs they'll be in toddler beds." he'd joked.

"Brave words little brother," Carmie had said with a smile.

"Oh come on, Carm, you know I'm right."

"I know the lot of you are just being lazy." she replied pointedly. "Now come on guys, you have hours, maybe days to put the second one up. You're smart boys, you can do it!" she cheered, shaking imaginary pom poms.

Gabe huffed a laugh. "I have a better idea, you smart *girls* put the crib together and us smart *men* will do everything else. I like that idea better. The cribs still have to be put up at Dan's house." he groaned. "We were gonna do it today anyway, so you ladies feel free to go right ahead and..."

"OK," Terri agreed happily, "You guys go right out and buy the diapers and the rubber pants and pins. You'll have to make sure you buy enough to accommodate twins now so you can't just buy one package, then remember to set up the diaper delivery service, very important. Oh, and don't forget the liners so that Bethie and Dan can remove the poop more easily. And don't forget the spit up cloths! Oh and don't forget to check and make sure they have enough clothes and undershirts..."

"OK! You made your point!"

"Oh, no no no," Carmie said, "You guys had a valid argument, we don't want it said that we didn't do our share. So you guys just go on over to Dan and Bethie's house and get to cleaning. If there are any dishes to be done I know you can handle it, then there's the laundry and dusting and vacuuming and making sure the babies room is clean and safe and..."
"Nooooo, that's OK, you've made your point!" Con cut in. "Smart asses," he muttered.

"Mouth," Carmella scolded.

"Sorry, *mamma*." Con replied sarcastically.

"Constantin Patrizio," Terri said warningly, "That's enough now. If you think I won't take you over my knee you'd better think again. Got me?"

Con took a breath and was about to make a retort when Amadeo spoke up. "Guys! We can all work on the crib, we can all pitch in with the cleaning and buying what needs to be bought. We're all worried about Dan and Bethie and the babies, let's not start sniping at each other. Mom and dad and Dante and Bethie are all counting on us, so let's not fall apart now, OK?" he said calmly.

Constantin had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry Carmie. Sorry Ter. Guys."

Carmella sighed, "Sorry honey, we're all a little on edge." she said, looking toward the phone which had remained silent since their father had called the night before to let the kids know they'd gotten to the hospital in one piece. She glanced at the kitchen clock again. "All right, I think it's late enough now, I'll give Gia and Danny a call to let them know what's going on. Terri, you use dad's phone in the study and call Rene and Alex." she said, using her sister Santa's middle name since it's what she preferred. "I called Bethie's folks last night."

"Sounds good." Terri said, getting up to head into the study. She stopped long enough to give Con a quick squeeze. "It'll be all right, hon. Why don't you guys get started on the dishes and when we're done we'll figure out what to do next, OK?"

"'K," Con replied, subdued, as he began to gather the dishes.

Gabe got up and began to pick up the silver and napkins. He gently bumped shoulders with Deo, who'd begun to stack the glasses, as he walked past.

'Deo looked up enquiringly at his older brother.
"For a rotten little kid, you're not so bad," he said quietly, "And if you tell anyone I said anything nice I'll just tell 'em you were hallucinating from the stress." he finished with a half smile.

"Don't worry, I won't say a word. No one'd believe it anyway." Amadeo replied, equally quietly, shouldering his brother back before bringing the glasses to the sink where Con was already washing.

When the girls got back to the kitchen, Con and Gabe were finishing the dishes and Amadeo had just finished sweeping the floor. They were all surprised when the door bell rang. With a shrug, Carmie went to answer the door and came back moments later with the Jablonski's, bearing two large watermelons, Mr. Di Marco and his sons, hauling bushels of fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs which still dripped water from being washed thoroughly minutes before, and Mrs. Witt, carrying what was unmistakably a large plate of her prize winning fried chicken.

"We figured you'd need a hand getting things ready for the new mamma and babies," said Mrs. Witt, "So we're here to offer our services." the older woman said with a smile as Carmie took the plate of chicken to put into the refrigerator.

"Thank you, all, so much." Terri said, relieved. Before she was able to say more, the doorbell rang again. This time Gabe answered and was once again accompanied back to the kitchen by a crowd of neighbors, each bringing bowls or bushels of one thing or another, and offering to help get things ready for the babies.

Carmie smiled, stunned and pleased. "How did you all know?"

Mrs. Witt leaned forward, and in a stage whisper said, "Sometimes it's a good thing to have nosy neighbors." Then she winked and put a finger to smiling lips in a shushing gesture.

Terri and Carmie both hugged the woman and again thanked everyone who had just arrived.

"How about if I put on a pot of coffee," Terri suggested, "Then we can sit and make lists of what needs to be done?"

"Sounds wonderful, my dear," replied Mrs. Witt, who, being a frequent guest at the Rossi's house, went directly to the correct cabinet and began taking out the coffee cups.
At that, the Rossi's immediately invited their guests to sit, running around to get leaves to expand the table, extra chairs, sugar, creamer, and spoons, and putting most of the contents of a tin of cookies that had been brought by one of the neighbors onto a large plate. What had been a tense atmosphere became one of celebration and ease, as lists were made, volunteers organized and jobs assigned.

By two o'clock that afternoon, everything had been done that could be done. The rest was up to Beth Ann and her doctor. The neighbors had gone home but not without first demanding that the Rossi's call them at any time, for any reason, for anything.

Mr. Di Marco threatened to take Angelo by the ear and escort him out that way if he didn't come along voluntarily. "They have a lot to deal with today and I need you at home. Understand?"

Angelo had gone reluctantly, with a sheepish grin and a wave to his friends.

Someone had, in all the hustle and bustle, cleaned and aired the couch, which now looked almost brand new, and a bouquet of fresh flowers sat in a vase on the coffee table.

Mr. Rossi called again at three to tell his children that there hadn't been much progress but that Bethie was doing fine. With a chuckle that put them all at ease he informed them that Beth was actually doing better than Dante, who had just about worn a rut in the linoleum of the hospital room, where he would be allowed to stay with his wife until the actual delivery.

"Dad said that Doctor Franz says that if she doesn't go into natural labor in the next few hours he'll induce, and the babies will be here sometime tomorrow." Carmie told the others, relaying the message.

"Did he say why... ah, why it happened like that?" Con asked, trying, uncharacteristically, to be discreet.

"He said that there's a small percentage of mothers whose water will break without any advance warning such as contractions or any sort of discomfort. Beth Ann just fell into that percentage."

"She was so scared." Gabe said quietly.
"Yeah, but you know, it could have been worse." Amadeo said. "I mean, she could have been alone when it happened. As it is, she had mom and Mrs. Di Marco right there, the whole family around, Dan was right beside her the whole time. There's no way anything was going to happen to her, not with Dan treating her like spun glass for the past nine months." he'd smiled.

The others smiled and without realizing it, all glanced first at the clock and then at the phone before concentrating on their drinks as they sat around the kitchen table once again.

Terri laughed quietly, "I almost wish now that everyone hadn't come. We have nothing left to do but sit around and wait. I don't know about you but it's killing me." she laughed again.

Carmie joined in, "Oh I'm so glad you said that. I was afraid I was the only one thinking it and I felt so ungrateful for even letting the thought cross my mind." she said with a smile.

"Well," said Gabe, drawing out the word, "I can think of something we can do."

"Don't keep us in suspense, Gabie!" Terri scolded.

"We went out and bought all sorts of things that the babies and Bethie are going to *need*, how about if we hit the stores and just buy fun stuff? Little toys for the babies, something nice for Beth Ann. If we're really feeling generous we can get Dante something even though it's all his fault poor Bethie got in this condition in the first place." he joked.

The others enjoyed a good laugh at that before agreeing that it was an excellent idea.

"If you don't mind, I'll stay home in case they call with an update." 'Deo said, "But, I do have some birthday money left over that I'll pitch in toward whatever you guys want to buy, OK?"

"Sounds good little brother," Gabe agreed. "We can check in with you now and again while we're out."

"I know dad doesn't want us to use the study phone except in emergencies but how about if when you call you use that number so that we can keep the kitchen line open for them to get through?" 'Deo asked.
"I don't think dad would mind if we did that just this once. Good thinking, Dae." said Carmie.

"All right then, let me go get the money. Be right back." he said happily.

When he got back to the kitchen, the others were shouting out ideas for gifts while Terri wrote them down in the columns she'd made for Beth Ann, Dante and the babies. He grinned when he saw the three extra columns, one each for their parents, and one for Mrs. Di Marco.

"Keep that up and we're gonna end up buying presents for everyone who helped out." Amadeo laughed.

"Actually," said Terri, drawing out the word much as her brother had done, "We thought that once Bethie and the kids are settled in we could throw a little Welcome To The World party and invite the neighbors. We thought perhaps in a month's time. What do you think, Dae?"

Deo smiled broadly. This was so typical of his family. If there was an opportunity to throw a party they'd find it. They'd even been known to go so far as to make things up just to have a reason, such as the great 'Its Somebody's Birthday Somewhere' party of 1963. "Great," he said, laughing as he handed his cash over to his sister.

"Well, have a good time, Dae." Con called back over his shoulder as they prepared to leave.

"Um, do you think it's all right to ask Ange and Mi over to keep me company?" he asked, looking back and forth between Terri and Carmie.

Terri looked uncertain, "I don't know sweetie. Mr. Di Marco seemed pretty adamant that Angelo was going to be home tonight. You can ask..."

"But if he says no that means no, understand?" Carmie added sternly.

"And no wild parties, young man." Gabe said with mock severity.

"Yes sir," Amadeo replied solemnly, "We'll keep it to a dull roar, OK?"
"That's my boy!" Carmie laughed.

"All right, Dae, call Mr. Di Marco and ask. The worst he can do is say no, right?" Terri said with a smile, "Oh, and make sure that if Milo comes he leaves us some chicken! Boy's a darned Hoover if you don't keep an eye on him!"

"Yes'm." 'Deo replied with a grin.

"Make it quick then, don't hold up the line." she ordered before planting a quick kiss on his forehead and leading the others out.

Amadeo watched as his brothers and sisters got into the car and drove off, then turned back toward the kitchen to use the phone there.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jablonski? Can Mi come and keep me company for a while? My brothers and sisters went out and I'm minding the phone."

"Do you have permission to have company, Amadeo?"

Dae smiled, "Yes sir, if you like I can have Terri call you when they get back."

"No," Mr. Jablonski said with a sigh, "I believe you. Hold on, son."

'Deo could hear it as Milo's father covered the mouthpiece of the phone to call to his son. Even with the mouthpiece covered Amadeo could hear his best friend's war whoop and very positive response. Mr. Jablonski came back on, a smile clear in his voice as he relayed the message.

"Thank you sir. Is there any particular time you want Mi back home tonight?"

"No, Amadeo," Mr. Jablonski replied. He knew that if he gave Amadeo a specific time for Milo to be home, his son would be on the front porch at precisely that time. "As long as he's not underfoot and not eating you out of house and home, he can stay as long as you like."
"Thank you sir!" Amadeo nearly shouted, "Bye!"

He hung up and quickly called the Di Marco's. "Mr. Di Marco? I'm minding the phone while Terri and the others are out shopping. Terri gave me permission to have Ange and Mi over while they're out, if it's ok with you that Angelo can come over?" he asked, hopefully.

Mr. Di Marco's voice was a little strange at first, "Did Angelo just call you a few minutes ago?"

"No sir," Deo replied, confused. "I haven't seen or heard from him since you all left earlier this afternoon."

"I don't think so, Amadeo. He's been sulking ever since he got home. I don't think he deserves any special treatment tonight."

"Sir?" Amadeo said respectfully, "Carmie told me if you said no, it meant no, and I don't mean to argue, but... it's just a little while if you'll allow it and, well sir, if he's here he won't be sulking there." Deo said in what he hoped was a deferential tone. "Please, Mr. Di Marco?" he asked, then remembering that Angelo was supposed to be under restriction he added, "If it would make you more comfortable then Johnny and Paul could come too. We're just going to be sitting here playing cards and games or watching TV."

He could hear it as Mr. Di Marco sighed. "Let me call you back, all right Amadeo?"

"Yes sir. Thank you." He hung up the phone just as the doorbell rang.

"Dae!" Milo shouted as he let himself in, "Got any chicken left?"

Amadeo buried his face in his hands to hide his laughter. "You are one in a million, Milo Jablonski, ya know that don'tcha?" he said as his friend entered the kitchen.

Milo looked at his best friend with a puzzled expression, "I don't know where that came from but thanks, I think."
"What do you want to drink? We got Coke, Tang... oh, and mom bought cherry syrup so we can make cherry Cokes at home. Just take it from me and be careful how much syrup you put in, because it can get really nasty really fast."

"Great," Milo said around a mouthful of chicken as he rummaged around in the refrigerator to see what other treasures might be inside.

Amadeo held back a laugh and shook his head as amusement and affection for his best friend swelled inside him.

"Hey, where's..." Milo began just as the phone rang.

'Deo answered it quickly, hoping it was news of Beth Ann. "Hello?"

"Paul has agreed to bring Angelo over for a few hours. They'll be there soon." Mr. Di Marco said, somewhat abruptly.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." 'Deo replied, worried at Mr. Di Marco's unusual tone. Mr. Di Marco hung up before Amadeo could say anything else.

"Was that Ange?" Milo asked.

"No, it was Mr. Di Marco," Amadeo responded, frowning a little at the phone, "Ange is on his way over. Paul's gonna be here too, so behave yourself." he said playfully.

"Eh," was Milo's educated sounding reply. "So, what do you want to do first? Cards? Board game? What's on the boob tube tonight?" he asked, chewing and swallowing noisily as he sat at the table.

"Ugh, Mi, chew with your mouth closed, man!"

Milo responded by opening his mouth to reveal the half chewed chicken, bread and potatoes.

Amadeo closed his eyes and smiled. He knew that anything else he said would just encourage his
friend and it was best to ignore him at this point.

"I dunno, Mi, check the TV Guide. Oh heck, I don't even know what day it is today!"

"Sunday," came the garbled reply. "Oh, wait, Saturday. Oh, heck, I dunno, just turn the TV on and we'll find out."

The two boys sat quietly on the recliners, munching popcorn and washing it down with Coca Cola. It seemed as though it took a very long time for Angelo to get there but he finally arrived with Paul, matching scowls on their faces, Angelo absently rubbing his backside which had apparently just been swatted by his older brother.

"Hey, guys," Amadeo greeted them at the door, pretending not to have noticed any of it. "Come on in, we're watching TV. If you want a snack we have popcorn but if you're really hungry we have plenty of stuff in the fridge."

"Thanks, Dae." Angelo mumbled.

"Yeah, thanks Dae." Paul said, slightly more lively. "Is everything OK here? Is there anything else I can do to help get things ready for when Beth Ann gets out of the hospital?"

"Nah, we're good, Paul, thanks. Come on, sit and take a load off. Can I get you anything? Tang? Ni Hi? Coke? Beer?"

Amadeo laughed at the look Paul shot him at the last question. "Just joking about the beer, Paul, honest." he said with a grin.

"Better'a been, kiddo." Paul replied pointedly, "Yeah, though. I'd love a Coke. Thanks."

"Ange? Come on and help me get the drinks, all right?" he asked, looking to Paul for permission. Paul nodded his agreement and the two boys went into the kitchen.

He went to the cabinet and took out glasses, then to the refrigerator for the bottles of Coke and ice while Angelo sat at the table and scowled.
"Ange, what's up, man? Your dad sounded frazzled when I called and you just seem to be in this really foul mood. Did you not want to come tonight?" Amadeo asked, concerned.

"No. I mean, yeah, I did. I dunno." Angelo replied with a shrug.

"Come on, man, what's up? Somethings bothering you. Spill."

Angelo shrugged again, "I dunno, Dae. Dad was happy last night about Beth Ann and all, but all day today he's been getting... jeez, I really don't know, he's just not himself. He's constantly biting my head off for every little thing. I lost track of how many times he's whacked me today since we got home, and he even smacked Paulie one. I mean, yeah, Paul told dad no but it wasn't like he said it with an attitude or anything. Aw, hell, Dae, I dunno." Angelo said, frustrated at his seeming inability to make himself clear.

"Come on, Ange," 'Deo said gently, "Let's get the drinks in there and sit and relax. If you're still upset after awhile, we can come back in here and talk, all right?"

Angelo shrugged and nodded.

"All right then, you grab the glasses and I'll bring in the Cokes. Datti una mossa, bello," he whispered with a little grin. He was pleased to see Angelo at least attempt to smile back. (Get a move on, handsome)

"I was going to send out a search party." Paul quipped.

"We had to take a run to the North Pole for the ice, sorry it took so long." Amadeo smiled back.

Amadeo glanced toward Angelo now and again during the program to see if his mood were improving. Milo and Paul were having a spirited debate about the show and didn't seem to notice Angelo at all. Angelo slouched in the corner of the couch and watched the situation comedy as though it were news of a disaster. Everyone came to attention when the kitchen phone rang and Amadeo ran to answer it.
"Hello?" he greeted breathlessly.

"Dae, Bethie just went into full labor." said Johnny Rossi.

"Dad? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, son, just wanted to let you know she's gone into labor. I'll call you again soon with updates. Gotta go now, 'Deo." he said before hanging up.

Amadeo's stomach knotted. His father had been calm and cool while delivering the news. In anyone else that might not have been an indication that anything was wrong, but knowing his father the way he did, he knew that that calm control was the Drill Sergeant coming to the forefront, and not the expectant grandpa who would have been considerably more excited and vocal.

"Dae?" said Paul, seeing his friend's face.

"Bethie's in labor," Deo replied, attempting to remain calm. He glanced at his watch. Five thirty. The stores would be closed by now, his brothers and sisters would be on their way back with their purchases. He worried about what they would face the next day.

Paul didn't need to be a mind reader to see that something was wrong but there was no point in dwelling on it or making the situation worse, so he perked up and suggested that they get dinner ready, and perhaps play a card game while they waited for the others to get home.

Amadeo realized immediately what Paul was trying to do and smiled gratefully. Soon the four of them were organized, setting the table, which still had the extra leaves in it from that morning, for nine.

Terri, Carmie, Gabe and Con came in about a half hour later, happy and triumphant with bags upon bags of purchases.

"We finished a lot earlier than we expected," Carmie said happily, "I was getting worried because the clerks were getting antsy and I was sure they were going to tell us to put everything down and come back tomorrow..." she hesitated when she saw the forced smile on her little brother's face.
"What happened?" she asked, suddenly tense.

Terri looked between her little brother and her sister, then at Paul. She tosses aside the bags she'd been holding and grabbed Amadeo by the arm with a little more force than she'd intended, wincing in sympathy and rubbing the spot on his arm when he winced and flinched. "Sorry sweetie." she said. "Now tell us honey, what's wrong?"

'Deo took a breath. "The Drill Sergeant called. Bethie's in full labor."

The Rossi children took a moment for that information to sink in. Their little brother hadn't said 'Dad'. Johnny Rossi was only 'The Drill Sergeant' when someone was in trouble.

"Carm, let's you and I take a trip to the hospital." Terri said calmly, "Gabe, Con, put this stuff away, OK? We'll call you with any news when we get there."

The two women picked up their purses and kissed their brothers goodbye, promising to call soon.

"Don't forget to eat, guys. No sense starving yourselves, it's not going to help." Terri said, then the two of them left without another word or a look back.

Paul looked at Amadeo, "Dae, do you want me to call dad and ask if we can spend the night? Do you want the company?"

"Please?" Amadeo replied gratefully, "But use the study phone, OK? Just in case someone tries to call from the hospital in the meantime."

"Will do. Be right back."

He was back moments later. "It's all good, Dae. Dad says it's fine and for us to call him if we need anything."

"I'll call home too, Dae, I want to be here if you need me, OK?"
"Thanks Mi."

A little later the boys all sat around the table, picking at the warmed up chicken and potatoes. Even Milo, whom everyone called the original bottomless pit, seemed to have no appetite.

They tried half heartedly to play games and watch TV but no one was really interested. By ten, Con and Gabe had gone to bed. By eleven Milo began to yawn widely. "I'm sorry guys, I just really can't stay awake anymore. I'm gonna hit the hay, but you call me as soon as you hear something, 'K?"

"Sure, Mi, go ahead, there's no sense losing sleep either, it's not gonna help anyone. Your stuff is in Vani's old room. I'm gonna sleep on the couch just in case the phone rings during the night."

"'Night guys," Milo said as he headed up the stairs.

"Paul, you and Ange can bunk in Dan and Bethie's room if you want. The bed is big enough for the both of you. Beth painted it lavender but your eyes'll be closed and you won't even notice it if you decide to stay there."'Deo joked. "There's stuff in the lower left hand dresser drawer that might fit you if you want pajamas."

"Sounds good, thanks Dae. Ange, you ready to go to sleep?"

"Not yet, Paul, please? I'll be up in a little while, promise."

"All right. Like Dae said, there's no sense losing sleep, don't stay up too long."

"OK, Paulie, thanks." Angelo said, smiling a little for the first time that night.

Amadeo and Angelo sat on the couch, side by side, eyes glued to the show on the television but neither of them had a clue what they were watching.

Eventually Angelo turned toward his friend, reached out and took his hand.
Amadeo smiled and looked at his boy. "What's up, Ange? Did you figure out what's been bothering you today?"

"I think I figured out what was eating dad, and now I feel guilty for not figuring it out before and being a lot nicer today." Angelo said, sadly.

'Deo looked expectantly at his friend.

"Bethie is having twins. Mom and dad lost Petie. Now mom's been gone for about a day. I don't think they've ever been apart that long except for the times when mom's been in the hospital. Then we find out there might be something wrong with Bethie or the babies which has got to be bringing up all sorts of bad memories for dad. He's probably been all worried and stressed and all I did today was act like a brat and aggravate him when he needed me to be understanding..."

"Shhhh, Angelo, calm down." Deo said gently, "Your dad is going to be fine. It is stressful, and you're right, this has got to be setting off all sorts of memories, not only for your dad but for your mom too, and I'll bet he's been wanting to go and be with her and he's upset because there's really nothing he could do to help even if he went."

"I'm proud of you." Deo continued, seeing that Angelo was becoming more upset. "For putting aside your own concerns and thinking about your dad and how he feels. Tomorrow when you go home, ask how he feels, see if he wants to talk, tell him you're there for him, and apologize for being a brat." Amadeo said with a smile at his boy. "He loves you, il mio angelo, he'll understand. Mi capisci?" (Do you understand me?)

Angelo nodded and leaned into Amadeo, who wrapped his arms around his boy and rested his chin on top of his head. With a final warm hug he released his boy. "Help me clean this mess up and then get to bed."

They tossed the remains of the popcorn out of the kitchen door for the birds and washed the glasses. They cleaned the table and floor, working together comfortably and quietly.

"Well, good night then, Ange." Deo said, struggling to keep his eyes open.

"G'night, Dae." he replied, leaning toward Amadeo, hoping for a good night kiss.
Before they knew it they were standing in the middle of the kitchen, arms wrapped around each other, each unwilling to be the first to break the kiss, until they heard a sound behind them.

Amadeo and Angelo turned toward the noise, only to see Paul, who looked at them expressionlessly. Amadeo immediately shoved Angelo behind him to shield him from what he was sure was going to be the older boy's wrath.

"Paulie..." Angelo began, voice shaking with fear.

"Paul, it's not his fault..." Amadeo said, placing himself more firmly between the brothers.

"Guys," Paul interrupted, holding his hands up to stop them, "It's OK. I've known for a while now, and I'm cool with it. Relax."

"You... you knew? How? When?" Angelo asked breathlessly.

"I walked in on you two one day at the house. Don't worry, I didn't say anything. I figured when you were ready you'd tell everyone yourselves."

"I... I can't." Angelo said quietly.

"Ange, I can't speak for everyone, for myself, it's all good. Mom and dad? I think they'll understand, especially since she was always there for Uncle Pat. She knew and she loved him anyway..."

"But what if it's different now? What if she can't stand the fact that one of her own sons is... is... you know." Angelo asked, needing an answer and afraid of getting it at the same time.

"Angelo, there's a lot more to this than you know, lots more. Mom'll understand, but like I said, I'm not going to say anything to anyone, not til you're ready." his expression changed to one of concern, "I need to ask you guys something though. I don't want you to get upset, but I need to know, OK? Can you be as honest with me as I've been with you?"

Amadeo took a deep breath and nodded. He saw Angelo mirror the gesture from the corner of his
"Have you guys... have you guys had sex? Did you use protection?"

The two younger boys looked at each other, guilty, embarrassed, and Paul became worried. Then Amadeo spoke up softly.

"We... we've touched... and kissed." he stopped to take a breath, unable to look the older boy in the eye. "We both know what sex is supposed to be like between a man and a woman but... we don't know how it works between guys... we don't know if we did or not." he finished, blushing deeply.

Paul looked over his shoulder to make sure the coast was clear. "Think your dad'd mind if we used his study to just talk for a little while?" he asked.

"As long as we don't go into his desk or touch his stuff," 'Deo shrugged.

"OK, let's go talk then. I don't think this is gonna take long."

The three boys went into the study and closed the door, then they made themselves comfortable on the chairs, the two younger looking toward the elder for enlightenment.

Angelo's eyes became wider and wider as his brother quietly explained what he knew of sexual relations between men. Amadeo sat, hand poised beside his mouth as was his wont, occasionally swallowing a little harder than usual but otherwise silent.

Angelo was the first one to speak up. "No, Paulie," he said softly, "We never did anything like that. We didn't know..."

Paul took a deep breath and let it out slowly, relieved. "Look," he said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "I know you guys aren't babies, but I need to tell you this. It's human nature to want affection, to want to hug, kiss, touch... there's nothing wrong with that, don't ever let anyone tell you different. But while you're not babies, you're not adults either, and... going that extra step... being completely intimate like that... that's something you guys need to hold off on til you're older, til you're actually adults... understand? Can you do that?"
Amadeo nodded, then cleared his throat. "Yeah, Paul. We can do that." He said, standing up. He held his hand out toward the older boy. "Thank you, Paul, for explaining things to us, and for protecting our secret. Thank you."

Paul shook the younger boy's hand and then pulled him into a hug. "You're good to Angelo. You're good *for* Angelo. I think you're good for the whole family, Dae. Thank *you*.*" he said, releasing him so that he could look Amadeo full in the face. Then he looked past 'Deo toward his little brother, "It's way past your bedtime little boy," he said with a smile, "Come on. We'll see him again in the morning." he said, putting an arm around his little brother's shoulders, "'Night Dae."

"'Night Dae," Angelo echoed with a sincere smile and a little wave.

"'Night guys." Amadeo replied, feeling happier and more relaxed than he'd felt all day. He went back into the living room and laid down on the couch, hoping for the phone to ring soon, and yet dreading it at the same time. He said a long prayer for everyone at the hospital, asking special blessings on his sister in law and her babies. He fell asleep mid prayer.
At around nine o'clock Carmie called to let them know she was on her way and to remind them to have fresh clothes packed for their parents and brother.

"Do the babies need anything?" Deo asked.

"No sweetie, they're all set. The hospital has been keeping them in diapers and Bethie packed more than enough clothes for herself and them to come home in."

"Are they coming home today?" he asked hopefully.

"No hon, not today, but Doc Franz says within the next few days."

"Carm?" he inquired tentatively, "Nathan? Any word?"

"He's getting the best care possible, honey. He's the only baby there so he's getting lots of attention and care, and Zia Julia is there with him. They've actually let her in to be near him even though it's against hospital policy. She's really charmed everyone there." she said with a smile. (Zia - aunt)

"How'd she do that? Zia?!" he asked as the word sank in.

"She and mom told the doctors that Mrs. Di Marco... I mean, Zia Julia... is her sister, so while usually it's just immediate family; parents, and grandparents who are allowed to be with him, she's been allowed as well. Right now the nurses don't want her to ever leave. She's the only one so far who has been able to stop him from crying for any length of time.

"What about..."

"Hold on little brother, OK? Let me get home and changed and we'll get all of the stuff together. I'll
tell you all everything I know on the way back to the hospital."

"'K, Carmie. Thanks. I'll get right on it."

"Don't do it all yourself, Dae. Delegate!"

"Yes'm." he grinned. "See you soon?"

"Within a half hour. Give me a chance to shower and change and we'll head right out. Make sure you boys have all showered and eaten breakfast."

"Sounds good, Carm. Thanks." Dae said, hanging up the phone with a thoughtful look on his face. He was alerted to the presence of someone else by the sound of shuffling feet. He looked up to see Paul and Angelo.

"G'mornin guys. I won't ask how you slept," he smiled, "But I want to thank you for staying with me last night. Carmie said she's headed home soon to pick up me and Con and Gabe soon and I have a few things to get for them. Are you guys hungry? Thirsty? Can I get you something for breakfast?"

Angelo stepped up with a grin. "You go get the stuff, then sit back and relax. I'll take care of breakfast," he said, gathering up pans and utensils while directing his older brother as to what ingredients he'd need.

Amadeo grinned back and turned to take a quick shower before everyone else woke up, after which he'd gather the required clothes. He ran into Gabe and Con as they came out of their rooms, rubbing sleep from their eyes.

"Guys, Carmie called to say she's on her way soon, she needs us to get clean clothes for mom, dad, and Dan. Maybe something soft and comfy for Bethie. I need to use the bathroom real quick," he said, doing a familiar little dance, "And then I'll come and help, OK?"

"Gotcha little brother, go take care of business." Gabe said, doing an about face and heading for his parent's room which was strictly off limits except in times of an emergency or with permission. He figured he'd use their shower before gathering their clothes, sure that they wouldn't mind this one time.
Con turned toward Dante and Beth's room and began to rummage for their luggage and a smaller carry case.

Amadeo turned into the bathroom, took a quick hot shower and ran to his room with the towel wrapped around his hips.

"You better not'a done what I think you did, Dae, cuz if you did you're cleaning it!" Con said grumpily, standing in the doorway of Amadeo's room as his brother dressed.

Amadeo grimaced and laughed, "Nah, Con, that's your thing, not mine." he joked, laughing a little as Con walked into his bedroom and gave him a hard finger flick to the head.

'Deo playfully swatted his brother's hand away, "Hey! Delicate merchandise here, you break it you buy it." he said, pulling a polo on over his still damp hair, which was growing out quite nicely.

Con raised an eyebrow and looked at his little brother, "Uh, God no, why would I want to own something that ugly?" he said, smacking 'Deo on his jean clad rump instead.

"Hey! Hands off the goods!"

The two laughed and wrestled, each trying to get a clear shot at the other's backside until 'Deo got Con down in an awkward position at which point the little brother began to smack the daylights out of the elders rump.

"This is SO unfair! You're younger than I am! Where's the respect? Where's the big brother adoration I'm entitled to?" Con protested, red in the face and squirming unsuccessfully to free himself from the wrestling hold 'Deo had on him.

"You got it, Con." 'Deo reassured him, "I'm just making you work for it a little, that's all." he grinned.

"When you two are done shaking the house down around our heads, Angelo has breakfast ready for us. Let's go! Teeennnn'SHUN! Fo'ooooorrrd MARCH!" Johnny commanded, laughing as his two younger brothers immediately jumped to attention and began marching out of the room and
down the stairs. He comically wiped imaginary sweat from his forehead as he followed them down. If they'd decided to include him in the wrestling match, which had always been a possibility, he knew he could take Con down in minutes, but it would have been a close call between he and his youngest brother.

Carmie arrived promptly at nine o’ clock and was greeted at the door with hugs, kisses, pats to the back and more questions than she could possibly answer in one day. Amadeo had a stack of her clean clothes in his arms which he passed to her as soon as the others had backed off. He had considerately tucked her underthings in between the shirt and jeans, so that only the clean socks were on top.

"Guys! Calm down!" she laughed. "I know you want answers, but whatever's cooking smells amazing, and I'd be much obliged for a bit of it when I'm done washing up and dressing, if there's any left?" she asked.

"Plenty. Angelo was worried about food going bad so he's in the kitchen right now cooking up stuff to stock up the freezers here and at Bethie's house, so she won't have to do any cooking for a long time." he chuffed a laugh, "There's so much, he said, that there'll probably be enough left overs that we can keep even Milo fed for a day or two."

"I resent that!" Milo's voice came from the kitchen where he was washing dishes and utensils as soon as Angelo and Paul were done with them.

"Oh, I meant to warn you, Carm," Deo called over his shoulder while still speaking to his sister, "His ears are as big as his stomach!"

Carmella giggled and shook her head as Milo responded to her little brother's comment with a loud and juicy sounding raspberry.

"Did you get everything ready for mom, dad, Dan and Bethie?"

"Yes'm, and I know you said you'd get Terri's stuff but there was a good pile of her jeans and things in the laundry room so I just grabbed some from there, so she's got stuff packed up too. OK?"

"You're a sweetie, Dae, you really are." she replied, giving him a kiss to his forehead which she
realized was getting harder since he was nearly as tall as she was. She stood back and looked closely at her little brother.

Amadeo stood back a little more and looked back at his sister. "Did I grow a second head or something?" he asked with a smile, feeling around for said imaginary appendage.

"No," she replied thoughtfully, "I just realized what a handsome guy you are."

She turned on her heel and headed toward the bathroom next to the laundry room, leaving a bemused Amadeo behind.

Paul, Angelo and Milo, being considered family, had been asked to stay to hear the story. As the Rossi children and Paul sat around the table, sipping coffee, Carmella filled them in on the latest updates between mouthfuls. Angelo and Milo had been restless and upset and had decided to use their excess energy to quietly wash the dishes that had been piling up.

"And I don't know how to say this delicately so I'll just come right out and say it, but you guys have to give me your promise that you won't go off on a tear, especially around Bethie."

The boys all agreed although they were a little annoyed that they'd had to promise anything before she would tell them anything. Once she opened her mouth though, they understood why.

"When her parents came to visit... they told her that they'd know this was going to happen. They said that they'd objected to her marrying Dante in the first place since our family isn't white..."

"What?" asked Con, with a disbelieving, uncontrollable smile born of shock rather than amusement.

"Wait," she sighed, "It gets worse."

Gabe sat with his head bowed, shaking it slowly, as though the motion would make the thoughts running through his head settle into something resembling order.
Angelo and Paul glanced at each other, mentally comparing their duskier skin tones to the Rossi’s somewhat paler ones. Paul couldn’t help but to wonder if his Moroccan great great grandmother and his considerably darker toned oldest brother would be held against him if people found out.

Matthew, their oldest brother, had been born with dark skin, and had been classified as Black at first, despite his relatively pale skinned parents. Doctors and nurses had, according to the stories, given their mother ‘looks’ as they presented the black son to the white mother. She’d been in tears until Joshua went to the nurses station and explained his Moroccan heritage. That scene had played out again when it had come time to register him in school.

Martina said that she’d adored Matty from the minute she saw him, and that her parent’s had loved him on sight. Their two boys were mocha skinned and had had a few problems with new neighbors as they came in, but the old, established neighbors knew them, knew his history, and accepted them. Some folks didn't consider Moroccan’s to be Black, others said that Black was Black no matter where they came from. Matty and Martina simply didn't have anything to do with those folks.

Marco, his two boys, and the rest of the brothers had been born with dusky, though not outright dark skin, looking as though they had a permanent tan more than anything else, and had never had a problem.

Everyone seemed to accept the the family well enough, but Paul wondered how the families of their boyfriends and girlfriends would feel if they were aware that they could give birth to dark skinned babies. He decided to tell his Teresa more about his family as soon as he got the chance. He didn't believe it would make a difference to her but it would be better to make sure they were cool with things before things went any further. He was very much in love with the girl and hated the idea that she or her family might reject him if they knew that he wasn't technically 'white', whatever that meant, even though her family was Spanish.

"The Taylors were pleased enough with the girls, they looked like Bethie, with their light colored hair and skin, and they said they didn't mind the dark eyes. Then they’d gone to see little Nathan. They'd looked at him for about thirty seconds, turned around and left. They told their daughter that his condition was punishment from God, for marrying out of her race." Carmie continued, breaking into their thoughts.

"Is he dark skinned?" Angelo asked timidly, pausing as he and Milo washed and dried the dishes. He’d never worried before about having kids, since it just wasn't possible for him, at least if he stayed true to his own heart, but he'd never considered that someone would object to their daughter marrying one of his brothers. They were all good, honest, hard working men. Certainly Martina, quite fair skinned as a result of her mixed French and Scottish heritage, hadn't objected to Mattie courting her. He'd never considered how her parent's had felt. Then he wondered, did Rosalia know? What would she say if she knew that if she married Luke they might give birth to dark
skinned babies?

"No, not particularly," she replied thoughtfully, "No darker than Dae, I'd say. But he's tiny, and he's got a fine layer of dark hair on his face, shoulders, and arms. The doctors said that would fall off eventually, if he lives." she completed the sentence unwillingly.

"The Taylors said that if he lived they should put him in an orphanage and just pay their penance for their sins and devote their lives to their two normal children." she continued, as though the words hurt as they left her mouth. She looked as though she were about to cry and Amadeo went to her and enveloped her in a hug.

"Those... those... narrow minded... idiotic... *evil*..." Con sputtered.

"No, now Con, that's what I'm saying." Carmie said, recovering and hugging her little brother in return. "After they said that they packed up their stuff and went back home. Bethie has been distraught ever since, and we need to be upbeat and supportive. No matter what those people... I mean, no matter what her parents said or did, they are her parents and she loves them, just as we'd love mom and dad if they ever said something like that..."

"Our mother and father would *never* say anything that vile!" Con argued. "How could they say something like that to their own daughter?! She's already upset and crying and..."

Gabe went over to his brother and put an arm around him. "I know, Con. We all know that would never occur to mom or dad, or anyone in our family, but unfortunately, we might just be the minority who think that way."

"D'you think her folk'll come around?" Amadeo asked, giving his sister a final hug and reluctantly returning to his coffee.

"I have no idea, hon. I didn't even know about how they felt until they said it. They were always polite to me. I mean, they were always a little formal but I thought that was just the way they were with everyone. I had no idea they felt their daughter was marrying beneath her or 'out of their race'," she said, feeling slightly sick to her stomach.

"Well," said Paul, breaking into their thoughts, "Angie and I are going to head home and get washed and changed," he winced as his little brother kicked him under the table, apparently for calling him Angie, but continued as though nothing had happened, "And see if there's anything dad
needs us to do on the farm. Afterward, do you think it'll be all right if we come in to visit Beth Ann and Dante?"

"I'll give you a call from the hospital, OK? I don't think she'd mind but I can't really speak for them, especially after everything that's happened."

"Good idea." Paul replied, then he turned to his little brother, "OK, monello, lets head out. Dae'll call us with news when he can. Mi, I know you just live down the street but would you like a ride since we're headed that way anyway?"

"Sure," Milo replied, drying the last fork and putting it away.

Milo unselfconsciously gave his best friend a 'Patented Rossi Bear Hug', having been on the receiving end of it more than once, and then gave Carmella a gentler one accompanied by a little kiss to her cheek, which made her smile. "See you guys later." he said as he followed the Di Marco's out of the door.
At around nine o' clock Carmie called to let them know she was on her way and to remind them to have fresh clothes packed for their parents and brother.

"Do the babies need anything?" Deo asked.

"No sweetie, they're all set. The hospital has been keeping them in diapers and Bethie packed more than enough clothes for herself and them to come home in."

"Are they coming home today?" he asked hopefully.

"No hon, not today, but Doc Franz says within the next few days."

"Carm?" he inquired tentatively, "Nathan? Any word?"

"He's getting the best care possible, honey. He's the only baby there so he's getting lots of attention and care, and Zia Julia is there with him. They've actually let her in to be near him even though it's against hospital policy. She's really charmed everyone there." she said with a smile.

"How'd she do that? Zia?!" he asked as the word sank in.

"She and mom told the doctors that Mrs. Di Marco... I mean, Zia Julia... is her sister, so while usually it's just immediate family; parents, and grandparents who are allowed to be with him, she's been allowed as well. Right now the nurses don't want her to ever leave. She's the only one so far who has been able to stop him from crying for any length of time.

"What about..."

"Hold on little brother, OK? Let me get home and changed and we'll get all of the stuff together. I'll
tell you all everything I know on the way back to the hospital."

"'K, Carmie. Thanks. I'll get right on it."

"Don't do it all yourself, Dae. Delegate!"

"Yes'm." he grinned. "See you soon?"

"Within a half hour. Give me a chance to shower and change and we'll head right out. Make sure you boys have all showered and eaten breakfast."

"Sounds good, Carm. Thanks." Dae said, hanging up the phone with a thoughtful look on his face. He was alerted to the presence of someone else by the sound of shuffling feet. He looked up to see Paul and Angelo.

"G'mornin guys. I won't ask how you slept," he smiled, "But I want to thank you for staying with me last night. Carmie said she's headed home soon to pick up me and Con and Gabe soon and I have a few things to get for them. Are you guys hungry? Thirsty? Can I get you something for breakfast?"

Angelo stepped up with a grin. "You go get the stuff, then sit back and relax. I'll take care of breakfast," he said, gathering up pans and utensils while directing his older brother as to what ingredients he'd need.

Amadeo grinned back and turned to take a quick shower before everyone else woke up, after which he'd gather the required clothes. He ran into Gabe and Con as they came out of their rooms, rubbing sleep from their eyes.

"Guys, Carmie called to say she's on her way soon, she needs us to get clean clothes for mom, dad, and Dan. Maybe something soft and comfy for Bethie. I need to use the bathroom real quick," he said, doing a familiar little dance, "And then I'll come and help, OK?"

"Gotcha little brother, go take care of business." Gabe said, doing an about face and heading for his parent's room which was strictly off limits except in times of an emergency or with permission. He figured he'd use their shower before gathering their clothes, sure that they wouldn't mind this one time.
Con turned toward Dante and Beth's room and began to rummage for their luggage and a smaller carry case.

Amadeo turned into the bathroom, took a quick hot shower and ran to his room with the towel wrapped around his hips.

"You better not'a done what I think you did, Dae, cuz if you did you're cleaning it!" Con said grumpily, standing in the doorway of Amadeo's room as his brother dressed.

Amadeo grimaced and laughed, "Nah, Con, that's your thing, not mine." he joked, laughing a little as Con walked into his bedroom and gave him a hard finger flick to the head.

'Deo playfully swatted his brother's hand away, "Hey! Delicate merchandise here, you break it you buy it." he said, pulling a polo on over his still damp hair, which was growing out quite nicely.

Con raised an eyebrow and looked at his little brother, "Uh, God no, why would I want to own something that ugly?" he said, smacking 'Deo on his jean clad rump instead.

"Hey! Hands off the goods!"

The two laughed and wrestled, each trying to get a clear shot at the other's backside until 'Deo got Con down in an awkward position at which point the little brother began to smack the daylights out of the elders rump.

"This is SO unfair! You're younger than I am! Where's the respect? Where's the big brother adoration I'm entitled to?" Con protested, red in the face and squirming unsuccessfully to free himself from the wrestling hold 'Deo had on him.

"You got it, Con." 'Deo reassured him, "I'm just making you work for it a little, that's all." he grinned.

"When you two are done shaking the house down around our heads, Angelo has breakfast ready for us. Let's go! Teeenmmm'SHUN! Fo'ooooorrrrd MARCH!" Johnny commanded, laughing as his two younger brothers immediately jumped to attention and began marching out of the room and
down the stairs. He comically wiped imaginary sweat from his forehead as he followed them down. If they'd decided to include him in the wrestling match, which had always been a possibility, he knew he could take Con down in minutes, but it would have been a close call between he and his youngest brother.

Carmie arrived promptly at nine o’ clock and was greeted at the door with hugs, kisses, pats to the back and more questions than she could possibly answer in one day. Amadeo had a stack of her clean clothes in his arms which he passed to her as soon as the others had backed off. He had considerately tucked her underthings in between the shirt and jeans, so that only the clean socks were on top.

"Guys! Calm down!" she laughed. "I know you want answers, but whatever's cooking smells amazing, and I'd be much obliged for a bit of it when I'm done washing up and dressing, if there's any left?" she asked.

"Plenty. Angelo was worried about food going bad so he's in the kitchen right now cooking up stuff to stock up the freezers here and at Bethie's house, so she won't have to do any cooking for a long time." he chuffed a laugh, "There's so much, he said, that there'll probably be enough left overs that we can keep even Milo fed for a day or two."

"I resent that!" Milo's voice came from the kitchen where he was washing dishes and utensils as soon as Angelo and Paul were done with them.

"Oh, I meant to warn you, Carm," Deo called over his shoulder while still speaking to his sister, "His ears are as big as his stomach!"

Carmella giggled and shook her head as Milo responded to her little brother's comment with a loud and juicy sounding raspberry.

"Did you get everything ready for mom, dad, Dan and Bethie?"

"Yes'm, and I know you said you'd get Terri's stuff but there was a good pile of her jeans and things in the laundry room so I just grabbed some from there, so she's got stuff packed up too. OK?"

"You're a sweetie, Dae, you really are." she replied, giving him a kiss to his forehead which she
realized was getting harder since he was nearly as tall as she was. She stood back and looked closely at her little brother.

Amadeo stood back a little more and looked back at his sister. "Did I grow a second head or something?" he asked with a smile, feeling around for said imaginary appendage.

"No," she replied thoughtfully, "I just realized what a handsome guy you are."

She turned on her heel and headed toward the bathroom next to the laundry room, leaving a bemused Amadeo behind.

Paul, Angelo and Milo, being considered family, had been asked to stay to hear the story. As the Rossi children and Paul sat around the table, sipping coffee, Carmella filled them in on the latest updates between mouthfuls. Angelo and Milo had been restless and upset and had decided to use their excess energy to quietly wash the dishes that had been piling up.

"And I don't know how to say this delicately so I'll just come right out and say it, but you guys have to give me your promise that you won't go off on a tear, especially around Bethie."

The boys all agreed although they were a little annoyed that they'd had to promise anything before she would tell them anything. Once she opened her mouth though, they understood why.

"When her parents came to visit... they told her that they'd know this was going to happen. They said that they'd objected to her marrying Dante in the first place since our family isn't white..."

"What?" asked Con, with a disbelieving, uncontrollable smile born of shock rather than amusement.

"Wait," she sighed, "It gets worse."

Gabe sat with his head bowed, shaking it slowly, as though the motion would make the thoughts running through his head settle into something resembling order.
Angelo and Paul glanced at each other, mentally comparing their duskier skin tones to the Rossi's somewhat paler ones. Paul couldn't help but to wonder if his Moroccan great great grandmother and his considerably darker toned oldest brother would be held against him if people found out.

Matthew, their oldest brother, had been born with dark skin, and had been classified as Black at first, despite his relatively pale skinned parents. Doctors and nurses had, according to the stories, given their mother 'looks' as they presented the black son to the white mother. She'd been in tears until Joshua went to the nurses station and explained his Moroccan heritage. That scene had played out again when it had come time to register him in school.

Martina said that she'd adored Matty from the minute she saw him, and that her parent's had loved him on sight. Their two boys were mocha skinned and had had a few problems with new neighbors as they came in, but the old, established neighbors knew them, knew his history, and accepted them. Some folks didn't consider Moroccan's to be Black, others said that Black was Black no matter where they came from. Matty and Martina simply didn't have anything to do with those folks.

Marco, his two boys, and the rest of the brothers had been born with dusky, though not outright dark skin, looking as though they had a permanent tan more than anything else, and had never had a problem.

Everyone seemed to accept the the family well enough, but Paul wondered how the families of their boyfriends and girlfriends would feel if they were aware that they could give birth to dark skinned babies. He decided to tell his Teresa more about his family as soon as he got the chance. He didn't believe it would make a difference to her but it would be better to make sure they were cool with things before things went any further. He was very much in love with the girl and hated the idea that she or her family might reject him if they knew that he wasn't technically 'white', whatever that meant, even though her family was Spanish.

"The Taylors were pleased enough with the girls, they looked like Bethie, with their light colored hair and skin, and they said they didn't mind the dark eyes. Then they'd gone to see little Nathan. They'd looked at him for about thirty seconds, turned around and left. They told their daughter that his condition was punishment from God, for marrying out of her race." Carmie continued, breaking into their thoughts.

"Is he dark skinned?" Angelo asked timidly, pausing as he and Milo washed and dried the dishes. He'd never worried before about having kids, since it just wasn't possible for him, at least if he stayed true to his own heart, but he'd never considered that someone would object to their daughter marrying one of his brothers. They were all good, honest, hard working men. Certainly Martina, quite fair skinned as a result of her mixed French and Scottish heritage, hadn't objected to Mattie courting her. He'd never considered how her parent's had felt. Then he wondered, did Rosalia know? What would she say if she knew that if she married Luke they might give birth to dark
skinned babies?

"No, not particularly," she replied thoughtfully, "No darker than Dae, I'd say. But he's tiny, and he's got a fine layer of dark hair on his face, shoulders, and arms. The doctors said that would fall off eventually, if he lives." she completed the sentence unwillingly.

"The Taylors said that if he lived they should put him in an orphanage and just pay their penance for their sins and devote their lives to their two normal children." she continued, as though the words hurt as they left her mouth. She looked as though she were about to cry and Amadeo went to her and enveloped her in a hug.

"Those... those... narrow minded... idiotic... *evil*..." Con sputtered.

"No, now Con, that's what I'm saying." Carmie said, recovering and hugging her little brother in return. "After they said that they packed up their stuff and went back home. Bethie has been distraught ever since, and we need to be upbeat and supportive. No matter what those people... I mean, no matter what her parents said or did, they are her parents and she loves them, just as we'd love mom and dad if they ever said something like that..."

"Our mother and father would *never* say anything that vile!" Con argued. "How could they say something like that to their own daughter?! She's already upset and crying and..."

Gabe went over to his brother and put an arm around him. "I know, Con. We all know that would never occur to mom or dad, or anyone in our family, but unfortunately, we might just be the minority who think that way."

"D'you think her folk'll come around?" Amadeo asked, giving his sister a final hug and reluctantly returning to his coffee.

"I have no idea, hon. I didn't even know about how they felt until they said it. They were always polite to me. I mean, they were always a little formal but I thought that was just the way they were with everyone. I had no idea they felt their daughter was marrying beneath her or 'out of their race'," she said, feeling slightly sick to her stomach.

"Well," said Paul, breaking into their thoughts, "Angie and I are going to head home and get washed and changed," he winced as his little brother kicked him under the table, apparently for calling him Angie, but continued as though nothing had happened, "And see if there's anything dad
needs us to do on the farm. Afterward, do you think it'll be all right if we come in to visit Beth Ann and Dante?"

"I'll give you a call from the hospital, OK? I don't think she'd mind but I can't really speak for them, especially after everything that's happened."

"Good idea." Paul replied, then he turned to his little brother, "OK, monello, lets head out. Dae'll call us with news when he can. Mi, I know you just live down the street but would you like a ride since we're headed that way anyway?"

"Sure," Milo replied, drying the last fork and putting it away.

Milo unselfconsciously gave his best friend a 'Patented Rossi Bear Hug', having been on the receiving end of it more than once, and then gave Carmella a gentler one accompanied by a little kiss to her cheek, which made her smile. "See you guys later." he said as he followed the Di Marco's out of the door.

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When they arrived at the hospital they stopped in to see Beth and Dante first, bearing half of the gifts, wrapped in bright paper, labeled, to everyone's amusement, with Christmas stickers.

"Because someone forgot to buy the right tags!" Terri complained with a smile.

"Yes, you did, and aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Carmie replied.

That even got a little smile from Beth Ann who up 'til then had laid in her bed, looking wan and sad.

"Here sweetie," Terri said with a smile, handing Beth the first present, "We bought you some nice things for when the babies come home."

Tears welled in Beth's eyes and she covered her face, "But what if they don't..." she stopped that thought, sobbing.

Dante immediately and gently pulled his wife forward, sat behind her on the bed and held her in his arms. "Shhhh, Bethie Bean," he said quietly, "remember what Zia Julia said? Just because the doctor said it doesn't mean it'll happen, and if it does then he'll be fine because Petey will find him and take care of him." he said, hugging his crying wife to his chest.

"It's all my fault." she cried, the words painful to everyone's ears, "It's all my fault. I did something wrong. I did something wrong."

"Bethie, sweetheart, do you love Dante?" Natie asked gently, taking the younger woman's cold hand in hers and holding it gently in her warmer ones.

"Yes!" the distraught young woman reassured her.
"Then you did nothing wrong." There's only one race to worry about, she thought angrily. The human race and some people are just more human than others. "Your babies are blessings, not punishments. I truly believe that God doesn't give you more than you can handle, honey. This little baby, our Nathan, is a blessing every bit as much as Mara and Olivia. Do you understand me? He has wonderful things to teach us, sweetheart."

"But..." Beth began.

"No buts honey. No matter how long we have him for, he's ours, and he's our blessing, and we've had him now hours longer than the doctors said we would.

Just then Julia came in with an armload of what looked like linens, to see 'her little dove' crying. She walked over to the other side of the bed and smoothed back the younger woman's hair with a fond glance toward Natie and Dante, who was still on the bed with her, holding her as though to keep her from floating away.

She put the items down on the bed and announced, "The nurses are going to bring Nathan in to visit, il mia colomba. Everyone has to put on these gowns and masks and then they'll bring him for a visit.

"Will I get to hold him?" Bethie asked anxiously. She hadn't been allowed to touch him yet and it broke her heart that she couldn't hold her own son.

"Yes, and whomever else you wish to hold him may as well, but just for a little while. Alright?"

Bethie would have agreed to give up her legs for a chance to hold her son and quickly agreed. The Rossi's suited up quickly, putting on the masks and mob caps they'd been given after they had scrubbed their hands til they glowed.

"We don't need gloves?" Deo asked, hoping the answer would be no.

"No," replied Mrs. Di Marco quietly. "I was finally allowed in to see him. He'd been crying non-stop. His cry was high and monotone and was painful to hear. It reminded me of Petey," her eyes suddenly misted up, and just as suddenly she got hold of herself, cleared her throat and smiled and smiled encouragingly, "I asked to be allowed to touch his hand only. They wrapped me up in one of these getups and made me scrub til I thought the skin would come off," she joked, "but they let me in, and as soon as I touched his hand, he calmed down. That's how I convinced them that he
needed his mamma and his sisters. So they're bringing in the babies. Nathan first, and then the girls. OK?"

Bethie sat up in bed with help from her husband. Mrs. Rossi cranked up the head of the bed, and Beth got up to use the restroom and wash up before putting the gown on, hands shaking at the prospect of holding her son.

The nurses bustled in first to make sure that everyone's gowns were secure, the masks and mob caps in place and hands and nails clean. Another nurse, as wrapped up in gowns and other accouterments as the family, rolled the little bassinet which held Nathan into the room. She took off the lid and gently handed the crying baby to his mother.

At first, Beth looked as though she were going to cry with the baby who seemed to be inconsolable until Mrs. Di Marco gently took the baby's hand and brought the young woman's pointer finger where it latched on with unexpected strength.

Mrs. Di Marco began singing softly, and as she sang, the baby's wails became less and less until he was silent and appeared content.

'Fa la ninna, fa la nanna,
Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della mamma.
Fa la ninna bel bambin,
Fa la nanna bambin bel,
Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della mamma.'

Beth looked down at his little face. It was perfect other than the fine hairs on the sides of his face. He was wrapped up in a blanket and smelled as though he'd just been changed, smelling faintly of baby powder. She lifted him higher in her arms and took a deep breath, inhaling his scent. The baby made a little sound like a mouse. Bethie put him back down quickly for fear she'd hurt him, but instead, the baby seemed to be looking at her expectantly, little mouth open and working.

"He's hungry, Mrs. Rossi. We brought a bottle along unless you'd prefer to feed him yourself?" the nurse asked, smiling.

"May I?" she asked.
"Of course. Your auntie here convinced us that a baby who has been in close quarters with his
sisters for nine months must be missing not only them but the first heartbeat he ever heard, and the
first voice he ever loved. We can only leave him with you for about an hour, then we're going to
put him in a larger bassinet with his sisters and see if his health improves, provided that that's
alright with you?" she said, looking back and forth between Dante and Bethie.

"Of course! Anything for him! And if... if... if this is all the time they have together... at least they
get that." she said, trying once again to control her tears.

"We can't tell you that everything is going to be all right, Mrs. Rossi, we wish we could," the head
nurse said to Bethie, 'But we can make what time he has here as comfortable as possible." She
hoped beyond hope that their 'Zia' Julia, who was as much the grandmother's sister as she was, was
right, and being with his mother and sisters would strengthen him.

"Will the... is anything... wrong... with Nathan?" he asked, embarrassment turning his cheeks
burning red, "That would hurt the girls in any way?" Dante fussed.

The nurse smiled and said, "He's better and better every day. His time out of the incubator gets
longer and longer, as you can see. We just need to hold them here for a few more days. Maybe a
week, but I can't see the doctor holding the girls at least here. They're fine and healthy. Little
Nathan here was hiding behind his sisters that while time, he was just a little premature, and not
ready to pop out, but his sisters demanded it," she joked, "and he had to choice but to follow since
Mara had a tight grip on his ankle.

After feeding him, Beth Ann reluctantly handed the baby over to his father, who held him much as
he'd done his wife, treating the tiny figure as though he were made of finest crystal, gently
touching the little face, finding a little hand, tiny fingers wrapping once again with amazing
strength around as much of his father's much larger finger as he could.

Johnny and Natie shared the little bundle between them, arms creating an impenetrable cradle
through which the baby could not fall nor be harmed in any way by the monsters that lurked under
the beds or in the closets.

Mrs. Rossi began to softly sing:

Vento sottile, vento del mattino,
Vento che scuoti la cima del mio pino.
At which point Mr. Rossi began to sing from the beginning, the family recognized the round from when they were little.

Vento che danzi che balli,
La gioia tu mi porti vento sottile.
Oh, oh, oh, oh!
Oh, oh, oh, oh!
La, la, la, la, la, la, la,
la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, vento sottile.

Mrs. Di Marco, who loved to sing, jumped in on the third round patting Bethie's hands as they all sang, quietly, enjoying the delighted smile on the younger woman's face, and the looks of remembering on the faces of the adults and children alike as they remembered having those songs sung to them as young children.

They all finished singing, everyone in the room was smiling, when the baby made little noises that sounded like lalalalalalala. He stopped, then repeated the noise. "Lalalalalalala."

Surprised, the grandparent's sang the song again, accompanied by a coordinated swaying of their bodies. The baby immediately settled down again and seemed to listen closely to the words, even though there was no way he could understand either. When they finished the baby made another squeaking sound and began to fuss.

The elder Rossi's handed him to his mother, who allowed the baby to wrap his hand around her finger again. His eyes began to flutter closed, and his little mouth opened in a wide, toothless yawn.

Mrs. Di Marco sat beside the bed and began to sing once more;

"Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della mamma
Fa la ninna bel bambin,
Fa la nanna bambah bel,
Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della mamma."

The infant was asleep before she'd finished singing. "Zia Julia, you have to teach that song to me, please?" Bethie asked with a watery smile.

"Of course mia colomba." She smiled, "And look, just in time for his sisters." she said happily.
Everyone ooh'ed and aaah'ed at the babies, trying to be as quiet as possible in deference to the sleeping baby boy. The girls, who were both healthy, were passed from Dan to Bethie, to grandparent to grandparent to aunt to uncle to parents again. It was their feeding time now, and there was no shortage of people willing to help feed them. The aunts and uncles groaned when the parent's decided that they wanted the job for themselves, but everyone understood and were happy with the promise that they could be next.

Then the girls were fed and burped, the nurses came in and changed the babies, leaving the tubes that had been attached to Nathan while in the incubator, off for the time being, and ready to reattach them if something happened.

Bethie began to cry again as they put the babies into the same bassinet. "Do you have to take them so soon? What are those tubes? What happens if something happens to Nathan? Will they be safe all in one incubator?"

She would have asked more questions but the nurse, Ms. Esmae, shushed her gently and gave her a shot of a mild sedative. The young lady was doing much better now but was still allowing stress and worry to keep her awake at night.

"Yes, Mrs. Rossi, it's time for the babies to get back to the nursery now." she smiled as two other nurses came in and wheeled the bassinet out of the room, back toward the nursery.

"What if... what if... what if..." Bethie asked, unable to make the words come out of her mouth voluntarily.

Ms. Esmae had no problem understanding what the young mother meant, "Mrs. Rossi, if that happens, then that'll be just a little extra time he had with his sisters before God took him home. It'll be alright. We'll keep a close eye on all of them. All right?" she asked kindly. "Now when all you all are ready to leave just take those togs off and put them in that hamper in the hallway, OK?"

"Thank you," Bethie said, yawning despite her desire to stay awake and visit with her family.

"I think it's time we got going," Natie said, bending down to give her daughter in law a sound kiss and a hug. She turned to her son and gave him a much harder hug and kiss. "You did good, honey. Those babies are beautiful little angels. You and Bethie did good work." she smiled.

Dan suddenly felt the need to be close to his mother and hugged her especially hard if only quickly.
"Thanks, mamma," he whispered before releasing her.

Johnny wasn’t half as reserved, shaking his son’s hand, clapping him on the back hard enough to cause the younger man to cough and then pulled him into a bear hug. "Proud of you son. SO proud," he said, his voice catching.

The others began to leave the room with hugs and kisses all around.

Amadeo hung back a little until the others were further away and went back to his sleepy sister in law who had begun to cry again, saying softly 'It's my fault. It's my fault.'

"Bethie," he asked tentatively, "Were you ever paddled in school when you were a student?"

"What? What kind of question is that, Mister Amadeo?" she responded, waking despite the sedative, and slightly offended that her sixteen-year-old brother in law would ask a question like that.

"Well, I only ask because we have this Vice Principal at our school who has a real problem with people blaming themselves for stuff they couldn't possibly have any control over."

"Why are you telling me this?" Beth Ann asked, curiosity overcoming her fatigue.

"'Cause, Mrs. Dante Rossi, if you don't stop blaming yourself I'm gonna find out where he lives and ask him if he'd please come visit you here and bring his paddle along. Believe me, after a few whacks and a talking to from him, you won't be blaming yourself for stuff anymore." he replied with a little half smile. He leaned down and gave his sister in law a kiss, then followed the rest of his family.

Bethie leaned back against her pillows and began to drift off, her little brother in law's final words whirling in her head.

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NOTES:
All Italian Lyrics and Lulabyes found on Mama Lisa's World
http://www.mamalisa.com/index.html
Song 1
Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della mamma
Fa la ninna bel bambin,
Fa la nanna bambin bel,
Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della mamma.

Go to Sleep, Go to Sleepy

Go to sleep, go to sleepy
In the arms of your mother,
Go to sleep, lovely child,
Go to sleepy, child so lovely,
Go to sleep, go to sleepy
In the arms of your mother.

Italian/English Lyrics and Music can be found on Mama Lisa's World
http://www.mamalisa.com/?lang=Italian&t=es&p=1447

Song 2
Vento sottile
(Italian) Round

Vento sottile, vento del mattino,
Vento che scuoti la cima del mio pino.
Vento che danzi che balli,
La gioia tu mi porti vento sottile.
Oh, oh, oh, oh!
Oh, oh, oh, oh!
La, la, la, la, la, la, la,
la, la, la, la, la, la, la, vento sottile.

Gentle Wind
(English lyrics) Round

Gentle wind, morning wind,
Wind that shakes the top of my pine tree.
Wind that prances that dances,
The joy you bring us gentle wind!
Oh, oh, oh, oh!
Oh, oh, oh, oh!
La, la, la, la, la, la, la,
la, la, la, la, la, la, la, gentle wind.

http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=es&p=3746&c=120

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The doctors kept the babies in the hospital for another two weeks. Even though the two girls were in perfect health, their little brother was still small, but with them beside him, and constant physical contact from nurses, parents and the rest of the relatives, including Zia Julia and Zio Joshua, the little boy began to gain weight and inches. He also, as the doctors had predicted, shed the excess hair and no longer looked like a little monkey, a comment that got Con smacked by more than his parents for saying it out loud. He didn't dare argue that they'd all been thinking it, this time.

With grandma and grandpa Rossi in the back seat with the girls and a proud Beth Ann in the front holding her only son, they waved and smiled at the doctors and nurses who had turned out to say goodbye to the remarkable Rossi's, their six pound two ounce girls and their five-pound baby boy whom everyone had been sure wouldn't live more than a couple of hours, and who was now healthier, heavier, and taller than he'd been when he'd been born. His hastily bought and washed clothes were still a little too large on him, but they knew he'd grow into them, then out of them, in no time.

Beth and Dante had originally intended to go home and begin settling in with their triplets, but mamma and papa Rossi wouldn't hear of it, and finally convinced them that the extra hands would be needed, especially at first.

When they arrived at the Rossi house, it was decorated with streamers and balloons, two signs in the yard proclaiming "It's a Girl!" and one that said, "It's a boy!"

They brought the babies into the dimly lit house and settled them into a playpen. A brightly colored mobile attached to two sides, ready to be wound and entertain the babies.

Two brightly wrapped packages were on the coffee table. One, which turned out to contain candy, was for Beth. The other was addressed to Dante and contained fine cigars, half bearing a blue band, the other half pink.

"Guess I'm going to have to take up smoking cigars!" he said in a delighted voice.

"Not as long as you want to live." his father replied.

"You mean, here?" Dante asked, a little put out.

"I mean, anywhere." Johnny Rossi said, holding out his hand for the box.

"Awww, come on pop, you really think I'm going to start smoking?" Dan protested.

"Absolutely not!" Mr. Rossi assured him, "I'm merely removing them since none of us will be needing them. Capire?" he said as he tucked the box under his arm.

"Coffee is ready for anyone who wants it!" Carmie said, coming out of the kitchen, wearing tennis shoes, capris and a pretty pink blouse that complimented her dark hair. "And how are my beautiful little nephew and nieces?" she asked softly, leaning over the playpen to coo at the babies and chuck the one girl and the little boy who were awake under the chin.

"Bethie, Dan? Can I hold one? Which one is she?" She asked permission, before touching the baby.

"Sure," Beth said with a smile. "If you look, the nurses at the hospital put little bracelets on the
girls that have their names on them. We can keep them on until they start to develop their own personalities, or we can enlarge them by adding beads... they gave us extra. This one is... Mara." she said proudly, picking up the baby, and inspecting the bracelet before handing her over to her auntie.

Carmie's eyes misted over immediately as she smiled and spoke softly to the child in her arms, who looked back, puzzled and unfocused, before reaching out a little hand to grasp one of Carmie's fingers, which the woman thought was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen. She exclaimed over what a smart little girl her niece was.

"Bethie? Dan?" asked Amadeo anxiously.

"Go ahead, Dae, just be careful, OK?"

"Like he was glass, I swear," Amadeo said with a large grin as he carefully lifted the little boy out of the playpen.

Little Olivia slept peacefully while the others went into the kitchen for coffee and pastries, Carmie and Amadeo's attention were so firmly on the babies that their parents had to guide them to the table and seat them or they both would have been standing in the middle of the living room, lost in the adorable befuddled expressions on their niece and nephew's faces.

"What'll you all have to drink?" Asked Terri, only a little jealous that Carmie had gotten a baby first.

"I'd better have milk or iced tea," replied Amadeo, as though speaking to the baby in his arms rather than his big sister. "Better safe than sorry."

"Same here, please sis?" Carmie said, only slightly more aware of the people around her as she gazed at the light shining off of the fine hairs covering her niece's head, turning them gold and red.

Amadeo coo-d and chirped at his nephew, then began to finger walk up the baby's lower legs, "Here comes the mousie," he said, continuing up the baby's legs to his belly "Creepin' up the housie, gonna build a nestie," he said, fingers climbing up over the baby's chest, finally tickling the baby gently under the chin, "In your little neckie!"

"Ewwww, mouse nest on my baby? I don't think so." Beth Ann joked.

"No mouse nest?" Amadeo asked his nephew in a silly voice, as though astounded that his mother wouldn't want something as pretty as a mouse’s nest on her son's neck. "Then let's try this instead, OK?" he asked the baby as he proceeded to sing a song. He gently took the little boy's hand in his and waved it, in time to the music, as though directing an orchestra.

'I was working in the lab late one night
When my eyes beheld an eerie sight
For my monster from his slab began to rise
And suddenly to my surprise
He did the mash
He did the monster mash
The monster mash
It was a graveyard smash...'

"Great song for a baby!"

"I thought you'd like it since you used to sing it to me everytime I was upset," 'Deo said, with a
little attitude combined with more humor.

"I did n..."

"So," Gabe finished for her. "You sang it to me too, and Con."

"Yeah, the ghouls went great with the frogs and snails and puppy dog tails. Remember how I used to freak out when I saw sheepdogs? I thought their tails had been cut off to make me! Thanks, sis! Why don't you tell that to little Nathan here and traumatize him too while you're at it?" he joked.

"You guys are terrible," Terri said, laughing as she poured everyone's drinks. "OK little sister, big sister wants a turn."

"I'm not done yet," Terri said, giving a mock pout.

"Mamma, tell Terri to let me have the baby. It's my turn." Carmie said, grinning, knowing full well she sounded about five years old.

"Sorry babinas, that's Bethie's baby and you'll have to ask her or Dante." Natie replied with a grin.

"Bethie? Dante, aren't I your favorite sister in the whole world? Can I hold Mara next? Pleeeeeeaaaaaaasssssse?"

"Ugh, you guys want a little cheese to go with all that ham?" Dante complained.

"I thought it was 'whine' to go with the cheese?" Deo asked, confused.

Johnny came up with a solution. "Troops! Present babies!" he said, loudly enough to get his family's attention but not so loud as to scare the babies, which his wife would have killed him for. "Pass left!" he ordered.

Terri grinned as Mara was handed to her by a grumpy looking Carmie, and a delighted Con took his nephew.

After about twenty minutes of the babies being passed around, little Olivia began to wake and cry. Dante put a hand on Beth's arm when she began to jump up. "I'll get her, Bethie Bean," he said quietly, "I'll bring her right to you so that you can feed her. All right? You relax." he said, smiling.

No one except Natie noticed the look on her daughter in law's face. She got up and took three bottles out of the refrigerator, setting them to warm quickly. "Dante, take Beth Ann upstairs, I'll warm the bottles, then we'll bring the babies up, and you can all have some alone time with them.

All you need to do is call us if you need anything. All right?" she asked casually, winking in response to Beth Ann's look of relief.

"But mom..." Dante began, not understanding.

"You just need some family time, sweetheart, and we're all right here if you need us for anything."

"Thank you, mamma," Beth Ann interjected. "I could use a little quiet time with the babies if that's alright with everyone?" she asked deferentially, but once they saw her face they realized she was getting worn out and wanted quiet.

"Of course, Bethie," Dante said, taking his wife gently by the arm and leading her upstairs. Gabe
and Con each had one of the girls and Mr. Rossi trailed behind with Nathan. As soon as the bottles were warmed adequately, Mrs. Rossi brought them upstairs with clean spit up cloths and a diaper bag full of the necessities.

"She won't agree to stay here forever, you know. Any more than Gia and Rene would after they had theirs," he reminded her gently afterward.

"Oh, I know." she replied a little sadly, "And of course I'm not going to keep them prisoner. Bethie and Dante are both perfectly capable of taking care of their children, but I will miss them when they leave."

Johnny grinned down at his wife. "They only live across town, bella mia, not in the next state."

"Oh shush, you. You know what I mean," she said, swatting playfully at her husband.

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NOTES:

Rhymes from Mama Lisa's World (USA)

Creep Mouse (Here Comes the Mousie)
Nursery Rhyme Game
No Copyright infringement intended.
"So tell me something." Amadeo said as he and Angelo laid on their backs under the shade of a tree in his backyard, watching clouds roll past on the breeze, "I finally got it about your brother's names, the books of the bible and all that, but how did you and Paul end up with your names?"

Angelo grinned, "You caught on, eh?" he laughed. "Well, it started as a joke really. Matthew and Mark were just Matthew and Mark, no theme in mind at the time when they named them, but then mom read Tom Sawyer, and she remembered the rhyme, 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you saddle a rat and I'll hop on.' So when they were expecting their third baby, mom said if it was a boy he had to be named Luke."

"And if he'd been a girl?"

"Lucianna. Actually, I'd have liked to have a sister. I think Lucianna is a pretty name. You don't suppose he'd change it do you?"

Amadeo let out a snort to the negative.

"Yeah, you're right, he has no sense of humor. Then of course John came along and I think they thought they were done. Then of course there was Peter, and the completely unexpected Paul. Did you know he was almost named Philippians?" he laughed. "Apparently mom said 'Paolo, his name is Paolo.' and fell asleep. Dad picked out Paul's middle name, Felice, it being so close to Christmas."

"Yeah, dad told me about Paul's name after your dad told him, that last time... you know... anyway, so that explains Paul... what about you? Shouldn't you be named Titus, or Timothy, or James... Corinthians?" he laughed.

"Because mom got the news she was pregnant with me on Petey and Paul's birthday, and because I was born a year to the day Petey died, they thought it was a sign of some kind. Not that they'd gotten Petey back, they said they'd never treat me like that, but because the doctors said after Peter and Paul were born that mom would never have another baby. Then they told her that I wouldn't survive, or there'd be something wrong with me."

Amadeo leaned up on one elbow and looked down at his friend. "Well, I can say from personal experience that there's nothing wrong with you." he smiled. Then he became serious. "I feel badly for what your mother went through, and while I know it had to be hard for her to be with Bethie and hear the same things she heard all those years ago, it still had to hurt, but your mom hung tough. She's an amazing lady."

"Yeah, I have to agree." Angelo said, chewing on a blade of grass.

"Ange, can I ask you a personal question? If it's too personal just tell me and it's all good, OK?"

Angelo sat up and tossed the blade of grass aside, then he looked at his friend. "Sure, I guess?"

"I never see you guys in church, and neither do the other guys. Do you go to one of the Baptist churches? Or are you Methodist? Presbyterian?"
Angelo looked away, “We don't go to any church. It's probably best not to get into a discussion about it, I don't want to offend anyone, OK?"

"It's all good, Ange. I was just curious. So, wanna find Mi and go to the pond? Looks like it's going to be a hot one today?" he said, listening to the buzz of the insects in the early morning heat of late July.

"Yeah, wanna call around and stop by Aiden and Felix's? We can make a party of it, bring snacks and bottles of cola and stuff."

"Good idea, I still have my Radio Flyer from when I was a kid so we don't have to carry everything."

"Yeah, I have a wooden wagon my dad built for me when I was about three years old. I'm pretty sure it still works. I'll get that. You call Mi, I'll call Jim and he can pass the word on. We'll make a circle and pass by everyone's house so they can put their stuff in the wagons. Maybe the other guys have them too."

Amadeo laughed. "How much stuff do you think we're gonna need? Oh shoot!" he said, suddenly crestfallen.

"What's wrong?"

"We didn't even ask permission to go anywhere yet, let alone make a party of it. Dang!' Deo said, which was the closest he ever came to swearing. Jim's parents were more strict on that front, and they considered any word that sounded like the forbidden one to be just as bad as saying it in the first place. Jim had regaled them more than once about the horror that occurred in his house if he let slip even a 'Dang!'."

"Oh, c'mon, Dae, it's not like we're gonna be gone a long time, just a couple of hours."

"Angelo Benedetto, do I need to remind you what happened the last time we were gone for 'just a couple of hours'?"

"But what if your folks say yes and mine say no? Or mine say yes and yours say no?!"

"Then we don't go. We still have the above ground set up here, we just need to clean it a little and we're ready to go."

"But we can't swing into the above ground, and we can't jump off each other's shoulders, or jump in off the ladder." Angelo protested, remembering the long list of rules they'd had to obey in order to swim in the pool two weeks before.

"Ange, slow down." Amadeo laughed. "First let's call my folks, then yours, etc, etc and see what everyone has to say before we start predicting the end of the world. And at least Bethie and Dan and the babies are at their house now so we don't have to keep the noise down if we have to stay here."

"And,“ said Angelo perking up, "then we won't have to cart everything to the pond and your mom can cook for us!"

Amadeo laughed again. "Dad's at work and mom is at her Ladies Aid meeting, so we'd be on our own, and I can guarantee you that if we eat everything in the fridge now, neither of us is going to be able to sit down for dinner later."
"Where're Carm and Terri?"

"What's with getting someone else to cook? You're a great cook. You come up with stuff I never dreamed of and it always tastes great. C'mon, let’s start calling and see if it's ok before we start worrying."

"Come home and get some money so that you can buy some snacks instead of counting on the Rossi's to fill your belly." Mrs. Di Marco said.

"OK, then you promise I can come right back?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Di Marco, confused, "Why wouldn't I after I said yes?"

"I'm just afraid I'm going to get home and you're gonna find a million things for me to do and I'll never get back here," he muttered.

"Keep that up and I'll find a million and one." she warned.

"Yes, mamma. I'm on my way." Angelo replied.

"What happened?" 'Deo asked.

"She said come home and get money so I can pitch in to buy snacks but I know as soon as I get there she's gonna find stuff I didn't do before I came here." he groused.

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Leave stuff undone before you came here?"

Angelo didn't answer immediately.

"Ange!" Amadeo began to scold.

"I know! But it was just little things and it could wait for later!"

"Like what?"

"Picking the ripe blueberries, strawberries and raspberries." Angelo replied, avoiding Amadeo's eyes.

"Anything else?" 'Deo asked sternly.

"I was supposed to make sure the wire guards around the trunks of the apple trees are in good condition, those keep the rabbits out, and I have to pull back the mulch so that the mice can’t hide next to the trunks."

"How did you get out of the house without doing those things?"

"Mom was out shopping and dad was at work." Angelo admitted, ashamed. "Paulie and Johnny were in the lower garden and they didn't see me leave."

"But I see you now, little brother, clear as day. I think you should come home with me now before
you do anything else," came John's voice from the corner of the house.

Angelo turned with such suddenness that 'Deo was surprised the boy's head didn't snap right off.

"Now," was all John said.

With an apologetic look at his friend, Angelo got up and slowly walked toward his brother. Johnny took him by the arm and landed a resounding smack to his little brother's backside, before leading him back toward the front of the house to the car. "Catch you later, Dae," Little John said over his shoulder.

Amadeo waved and shook his head. His boy would never cease to amaze him. Hearing the phone ring he ran into the house and picked up the communal phone. It could be anyone, for any of them, but he liked to answer it whenever he could.

"Hello?" he asked as Carmie, Terri, Con, and Gabe all came rushing into the kitchen.

"We SO need another phone." Con griped, "Maybe five."

"Shhhh," 'Deo said, covering the mouthpiece. "Yeah, it's me, Dennis, what's up?"

The others groaned and turned to leave. "Don't forget the time limit!" Carmie reminded him.

Amadeo scowled but nodded and looked at his watch. "Hang on, let me tell someone where I'm going and I'll meet you at your place, ok? Just you guys stay calm. I'll be there as soon as possible."

he said, hanging up.

"Terri? Carm?" he called down the hallway to his sister's rooms.

"What's up now Dae?" Carmie asked, poking her head out of her room. "Everything all right?"

Terri asked at the same time.

"Kinda. Dennis, Charlie and Jim are at Dennis' house, they're getting worried because Freddie and Brice's trial is coming up fast. It's in two weeks. Anyway, they're worried and want to talk. The problem is that the more they talk the more upset they get. They want me to come over and bring Felix and Aiden, and they're gonna call Eddie. I don't know what they think I'm going to do but they asked me to come over. Is that OK?"

"Where does Dennis live?" Carmie asked.

"Central Avenue, 218 Central. Is it OK? I'll write down his number next to the phone if you need to get a hold of me," he offered.

"Did you finish all your chores?" Terri asked.

Amadeo smiled. "Yes'm, piccola madre." he answered, jokingly calling her 'little mother'.

"Smart alec," she grinned at him. "All right, hon, go ahead. Just don't get lost."

"Me? Get lost? You must have me mixed up with some other kid."

"Hmmm, I don't know. Aren't you the Amadeo who disappeared for six hours with a friend of yours and the best excuse you could come up with was that you lost track of the time?" she asked, arching a fine eyebrow at him. "Just so you know, dad bought it to a point, but he still thinks you guys were up to something nefarious. He just doesn't have proof... *yet*."
"Tell me when he gets Dick Tracy on the case, then I'll worry." "Deo laughed.

"Tracy wasn't available, he got The Phantom."

"Good to know. I'm on my way to Dennis' now, OK?"

"Later, brat." the two women said simultaneously, grinning at each other as they said "Jinx!" before bursting into laughter and heading back to their rooms.

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The other boys were pacing nervously on Dennis' front porch. Someone had already gone to Felix's and Aiden's houses to get them and they sat quietly on the rocking chairs, wringing their hands.

"Dae! Thank God you're here!" Dennis exclaimed.

"Guys, I really don't know what you think I'm going to be able to do. I mean, they haven't escaped, have they?"

Charlie went a little paler than he'd already been. "NO! Where did you hear that? They escaped? When?! We have to get out of here!" he said, jumping down the front steps and preparing to run.

Amadeo grabbed him by the arm before he could rabbit off. "No! I didn't say they escaped." he said calmly. "I said I'm not sure what I can do. What do you guys need me for?"

"The trial is coming up soon." Jim said unnecessarily.

Amadeo nodded and remained silent, looking at the guys to continue.

"What if I can't remember what I said back in May?" Felix asked, panicked.

"What if I can't remember what I saw and I mess something up? What if it's crucial evidence and I mess up?!" Eddie ranted.

"Dad always says I don't think before I talk, what if I think too much and they think I'm thinking of ways to lie to them, cuz I'm not lying I just don't remember everything I said two months ago and it wasn't a lie back then but what if they think it's a lie now?!" Jim ranted.

"Guys, calm down." 'Deo said firmly. "Take some deep breaths."

"You sound like the Cobra." Jim said with a sickly smile on his pale face.

"He's got a lot of common sense, and that breathing is useful for a lot of things, not just calming down. So breathe in slowly for six, and breathe out slowly for six. Come on guys, what can it hurt?"

"Besides that Jim has dragon breath? Nothing." Eddie quipped, causing everyone but Jim, who stuck out his tongue, to laugh.

"All right, laughing is good too." 'Deo smiled. "Look, I have an appointment with Mistres Selby and Holt on Wednesday. I'm sure that they're going to be calling you guys soon too. If it makes you feel any better, let's go inside and call them."
"What if they don't take us seriously? What if they hang up? What if..."

"Hush now!" 'Deo commanded forcefully. The controlled tone his father used when they were in trouble.

The boys hushed.

"Dennis, are your folks home?"

"No, not right now."

"Anyone, are your folks home?"

Eddie nodded. "Mine are."

"OK, can you call and ask if it's ok if we go to your house? Tell them what's going on and ask if they'd be willing to call the lawyers. Tell them what's going on and what you're worried about and we'll go from there."

Eddie called his parents who told the boys to come directly. Once there, Mr. Parker pulled the lawyers card out of his wallet and made the call.

He explained the situation and after a few minutes of saying nothing more than "Ummm hmmm. Ummm hmmm," he wrote something down quickly, thanked the person on the other end and hung up.

"The receptionist, Ms. McKiddie, at Selby and Holt's office told me that she is in the process of calling the families to let us know the time and date of the hearing," he said, showing the information he'd written down. "She couldn't give me specifics about you guys but someone will be calling either on the phone or in person to set up an appointment to go over your stories. She said she was in the process of doing it now so you boys have nothing to worry about." he smiled.

"The actual hearing isn't until August 24th, and it's only July 20th, so you have a little over a month to relax, nothing is going to happen to you, you're all safe,

The boys sat, weak kneed on the chairs and couch in the small living room, considerably calmer than they'd been. Jim sat doubled over holding his stomach as though he were about to lose his breakfast.

"Thanks 'Dae." Eddie said with a sigh, his color better than it had been only a half hour earlier.
"Yeah, thanks, Dae," the others said.

"'Dae?" sputtered Mr. Parker theatrically, "'Dae? And who may I ask dialed the number? Hmmm? 'Dae! That's gratitude for you!"

The boys laughed, feeling much better now that they had answers. "Thanks dad." "Thanks Mr. Parker!" they chorused.

"Mr. Parker, sir. I was thinking that with all the worry the guys have been going through all morning, that a trip to the pond would be nice, if everyone's folks are OK with it. Can we get your permission to start sir?" Amadeo asked.

Mr. Parker looked at the boy, looking for signs that he was being 'had', but there was only an open, honest expression on inquiry on the boy's face. The other boys looked surprised at the question so it was obviously not something that had been discussed or planned ahead. "And if the other parents don't agree?" he asked, arching his eyebrows.
"We can hang out at my house. I have a little pool and if we take turns we can horse around in that once we've cleaned it a bit. If that's ok? Sort of like a little impromptu picnic." he suggested.

Mr. Del Parker had no idea what impromptu meant but wasn't about to ask a bunch of kids. Buncha smart alecs, he thought wryly as he saw the hopeful looks on the other boy's faces.

"Eddie's got my permission either way. BUT!" he said, cutting into the boy's cheers, "I don't want any boy being left out, so if one can't go he can't either. Understand me?"

"Yes sir. We wouldn't have left anyone out anyway, sir, honest." said Charlie with an earnest expression.

Del nodded his permission, “Here,” he said, digging into this pocket for some change, "You buy what snacks you can and share 'em round, got it?"

"Yessir! Thanks dad!" Eddie said happily pocketing the change. "May we use the phone to call around? We'll stop off at Felix's and Aiden's houses and ask there too. "I promise; no one gets ditched." he promised, seeing his father's face. Eddie had spent too much time being excluded from games and other groups of boys because of his slight stature, so his father was thrilled when he'd begun to make friends and wouldn't let his son hang out with people who excluded others.

"I'll call Milo and we'll get this thing rollin!'" Eddie said excitedly, happy to be part of a group that was no longer considered oddballs.

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AN:

The Monster Mash
Written by Bobbie Picket
Performed by the Krypt Kickers
Written By
Bobby “Boris” Pickett & Leonard L. Capizzi
Piano Leon Russell
Release Date August 25, 1962
Sampled In WorkinInTheLab by Charles Hamilton

No copyright infringement intended (These are all just such great songs!)
Chapter 33

Angelo and Amadeo

The boys all received permission and went house to house, gathering the necessities, hands full of change either from parents or from the pockets of the jeans they'd worn the day before, or in Felix's case, an actual piggy bank, white with large black eyes and blue flowers painted on it, which made the other boys grin, though none of them said anything or outright laugh at it.

Amadeo fended off questions about Angelo, saying only that he had chores to do before he could go anywhere. The other boys groaned in sympathy as some of them were sent last minute to take out the trash or run the push mower over their lawns before they were given permission to go to the pond. With all of them working together to get the chores done it wasn't long before they were all walking toward the pond, tugging several little wagons behind them which were loaded with supplies and snacks.

They walked leisurely, enjoying the sunshine and each picking and leading the others in their favorite songs. They laughed and danced along to Yakkity Yak as they walked along, once they were out of sight of the houses on the street, with Jim providing the bass 'Don't talk back.'

The boys spent the day swinging from the rope on the tree, ducking each other, swimming laps or racing. Dennis had brought a ball and they spent some time batting it back and forth over an invisible net which seemed to change it's position depending on who hit the ball and where it landed.

Amadeo kept thinking about Angelo, wishing he could be there with them but understanding that he'd once again gone off without telling anyone where he was headed. He sighed, wondering how someone as intelligent as Angelo could keep making the same mistake repeatedly. Sure he could be a little absent minded and forgetful at times, scatterbrained was how 'Deo's father had affectionately described it, but taking off without telling anyone where he was going was a bad habit of his. He wondered how his boy was doing. The third time he got bopped on the head with the ball for not paying attention to the game he excused himself from it and went on the blanket they'd spread to lie in the sun.

"That is so not fair." Jim complained, coming to sit down beside him.

"What's that?" Amadeo asked, shading his eyes to look at his friend.

"You're out in the sun for like thirty seconds and you get tan. You come back to school every year looking like you've been to Hawaii for the summer and the rest of us either burn and get a little tan or we come back peeling like bananas." he griped.

Deo laughed and dug into his bag. He found the suntan lotion and passed it to Jim. "I don't know if it's going to keep you from burning but it might help with the tanning a little. Or, for all I know you'll fry like Mrs. Witt's chicken, in which case we'll share you round for dinner."

"Oh man, that's bad." Jim laughed, pouring lotion into his hand and smearing it everywhere he could reach.

"Want me to get your back?" Amadeo asked.
"Nah, I got it," Jim said, contorting his body and arms in what looked like seriously uncomfortable positions in order to reach the spots on his back. Deo could see where Jim missed but didn't pursue the matter. Odds were that the other boy would be lying on his back anyway so it hardly mattered.

"So what's the story with Angelo?"

Amadeo's stomach tensed a little, "In what way?" he asked casually.

"What's with him and those other guys? I heard they're a bad bunch and it just seems weird that Ange would hang with guys like that when he's got us."

Amadeo leaned up on one elbow to look down at his friend. "What guys?"

"They're from the next town over, from what I heard, go to school at Wilson High, couple of 'em dropped out even, if I heard right."

"When did you see them hanging out?"

"I was out with my folks coming home from my cousin's house around eleven one night last week and I saw him with that bunch. It was only for a minute but I know it was him."

"Did you tell anyone?" Deo asked casually.

"Nah! Like I was gonna rat on a friend? No way, man."

"Did you see him any other times?"

"Yeah, about the time you guys were all working at Beth Ann's, I was riding bikes with Eddie and Felix, and we saw him with those guys out by the water service station. At first I worried that they were Brice and Freddie's friends, and we started to go after him, but then he saw us and he went around the corner out of sight. Then all these guys came out from behind the building and stood there looking at us. We didn't see him anymore, and decided not to go any further, and we turned around and left right quick."

"You said they go to Wilson?" Amadeo said, brow furrowed in thought. "What on earth would they be doing all the way out here?"

"From what I heard, yeah. They might actually be real good guys, but you know what they say about those kids from Wilson, and me, I don't wanna take that chance, y'know? And why they're here? Dunno. Maybe they're looking for new territory?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Yeah, I know." Amadeo said thoughtfully. "And if they're looking to expand 'territory', this might be a bigger problem than we think."

"So... what's going on, should we call someone?"

"Not yet. Let me talk to Ange first. I know he made friends with them before he started hanging out with us, he might have just run into them and been catching up." he said, not really convincing either of them. "Um, Jimmy? Why'n't you say something about this sooner? I'm just curious."

"Well, he came back and he was fine." Jim said a little defensively. "I mean, he was the one that went and hid when he saw us. If he'd'a been hurt I'da called someone right then, and if he didn't show up later just fine I'd've said something, you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know. No worries. I just wondered." Amadeo said, trying to brush it off. He couldn't help
but to wonder if he'd met up the guys at other times, times when Angelo had perhaps told his
parents he was going to be with him or the other guys. He knew that Angelo had promised his
father that he wouldn't hang out with those kids again, Angelo had told him himself. What was
going on?

"Hey!" shouted Milo, running up onto the grass and shaking water all over the two other boys.
"What's with the serious faces? Something wrong?"

"No," 'Deo said quickly, "Jim is just complaining that he's fried chicken and I'm a sun kissed
Adonis." he finished, flexing his muscles and posing.

"That reminds me," Milo said, turning toward the wagon with the basket from Amadeo's house, "Is
there any chicken left?"

*******************************************

Yakkity Yak
Performed by The Coasters
Release 1958
Label Atlantic Records

No copyright infringement intended
"Jooohhhhhnnnnnnyyyyyyyyyyy! You can't do this to me! Come oooooonnnnn! I'm sixteeeeeen! Jooooooohhhhhhhnnnnnnyyy!" Angelo whined, stomping his foot in the corner of the kitchen where his older brother had put him.

Johnny had stood behind Angelo while he did the chores he'd been supposed to do before he left the house that morning and then dragged him back into the house, put the baskets of fruit in the entryway, fed his little brother lunch, and then lead him into the corner between the refrigerator and the hallway door, swatting him every step until they reached their destination.

"You're gonna stand there til mom and dad get home, little brother. I was in this kitchen getting a drink when you said you left. I have no idea how you snuck out with me right here but I can guarantee you're not going to do it again. Now I'm gonna go wash off the fruit. You move one muscle and you'll regret it. Mi hai capito?" he said, just before he turned and opened the screen door.
(Do you understand me?)

"Capisco." Angelo muttered crossing his arms and scowling at the wall as he heard the screen door slam. It was so unfair! Where did his brothers get off smacking him anyway? He didn't remember his parents ever giving them permission to do it. And Johnny was only four years older than him, well five if you counted that he'd just turned twenty-one on his last birthday but that was beside the point. So who'd died and left him in charge?
(I understand.)

After all, if Johnny had only been four, would their parents have left him in charge of an infant Angelo? No! If Johnny were eight, or nine, would they have left him solely in charge of a four-year-old Angelo? Well, actually they had, for very short periods of time when they'd gone to borrow a little milk or sugar from a neighbor. Maybe. NO! So where did Johnny get off putting him in a corner and treating him like a little kid?

Angelo made up his mind and turned to leave the corner.

There stood Johnny in the doorway. Arms crossed. "I wondered how long it was going to take you to decide to do whatever you wanted."

Angelo turned back toward the corner with another stomp and recrossed his arms only to throw them back moments later when Johnny treated his backside to several thundering smacks. Angelo gasped. It wasn't nearly as bad as when their father did it, but it still stung like crazy. He was wise enough not to say it aloud, but he hoped that Johnny's hand hurt worse than Angelo's rear.

"Ora, hai intenzione di stare lì e comportati bene?"
(Now, are you going to stand there and behave yourself?)

"Yes!" Angelo said quickly in a tone that he hoped his brother believed before landing any more of those smacks.
"Are you sure this time?"

"Yes!" he repeated, covering his backside just in case.

"Not a muscle." Johnny warned.

"Got it." Angelo agreed.

The screen door slammed again, but this time Angelo stayed in place, not even daring to look over his shoulder to be sure his brother had actually left this time.

Approximately a half hour later Johnny walked back in the house, kicking off damp sneakers, to see his little brother standing dejectedly in the corner, head bowed, right hand clasping left wrist, toe of one sneaker digging into the floor as he fidgeted. He looked at the clock. His mother wouldn't be back for another five minutes or so and their father about a little after that. He began to look in the refrigerator for something to make for dinner when the phone rang.

Angelo listened to John's half of the conversation and his stomach dropped.

"Hello? No, Dae, he can't right now. That's up to mom and dad... maybe tomorrow. I can't say for sure. OK then, see you soon." he said before hanging up.

"You can't ground me from the phone! You had no right to tell Dae I couldn't talk to him! You're not mom or dad!" he protested, turning from the corner toward his brother, hands clenched into fists.

"No, I'm mom, and if you tell me what's going on I can tell you whether he had the right to do so or not." said Julia from the doorway.

Johnny quickly took the bags she'd been carrying. He put them on the table and then stepped back to let Angelo have the floor, tilting his head to the side and crossing his arms once again to see what his little brother would say.

Angelo, put on the spot, turned red and stammered. "I... I... I mean he... I..."

"That tells me nothing. How about if I hear Johnny's version first and you can tell me if you agree with it or not?" she said, coming further into the kitchen.

"Mamma, anything out there that'll spoil?" Johnny asked.

"How long is this going to take?"

"Maybe a while. It depends." he said, looking pointedly at Angelo who blushed even more darkly.

"Let's bring in the groceries and go from there. Get a move on." she said, letting the boys out ahead of her and not taking comfort in the fact that her youngest covered his backside when he passed her.

The groceries were in and the perishables put away before Julia allowed her sons to sit at the table and tell their stories while she started dinner.

Johnny was concise and to the point, and included his decisions about the corner and screening the phone call meant for Angelo.

Angelo sat quietly. He had no defense and he knew it. If he had actually been on trial he'd have been headed to the gallows.
Julia opened the door to the hallway and tried the odd door that lead to her son's bedroom closet. It was locked tightly and to the best of her knowledge there was no key. She returned to the kitchen and asked, "Did you find a key to that door and sneak out the back, Angelo?" she asked.

Using Amadeo's knack for prevarication, Angelo answered the question truthfully. "No, mamma, I didn't sneak out the back. I'm not sure when he came in for his drink but him and Paulie were in the lower garden when I left."

"So you knew you had chores and that you weren't supposed to leave until they were done. Yes?" his mother asked.

"Yes mamma?" Angelo replied softly as he felt the noose slip over his head.

"And you've been told more than once about going out without telling anyone where you're going, yes?"

"Johnny knew where to find me, he came right to 'Deo's house."

"Because no one answered the phone and I figured he might be out back doing chores and might know where you were," Johnny said, unhelpfully.

"So you went out again, without telling anyone where you were going. Yes?" his mother asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yes mamma," Angelo replied again, feeling the noose tighten around his neck.

"Then that's a discussion you're going to have to have with daddy when he gets home." she said with finality. "Now if you'd please set the table. Set a place for Paulie too, just in case he comes home. He said he might be staying at Teresa's for dinner but wasn't sure. I hope the two of them aren't having an argument." she said to herself.

Shortly before their father arrived, Julia sat down to take a look at the mail. She smiled when she saw a letter from Luke. She wasn't the least happy with his girlfriend or the conditions under which he'd left the month before but he was her son, and she was always happy to hear from him.

She slid her finger under the flap and pulled the letter out. She read the letter, then read it again with a smile on her face, then read it again only to laugh happily upon reaching the end.

Little John and Angelo, who had been sitting in their places quietly sipping water or iced tea while they waited for their father to walk through the door, looked at their mother inquiringly.

"He got rid of her!" she announced. Then at her son's uncomprehending looks she explained, "Lukie! He got rid of that... woman! He said he's going out with a really sweet girl now. He met her after he and... that woman had a big argument and she walked out the door. He said the new girl, Tara, is originally from Texas and actually lives across the hall from him in his apartment building."

She laughed as she read, "When she heard them having their final brawl she stood in the hallway watching the whole thing, and when... that woman... was gone, Tara looked at him and said, 'It's about time, that child was poison!' before turning to go back into her own apartment. He says it took him three weeks to get her to agree to go out with him but she finally said yes!"

Angelo and Johnny looked at each other, each unwilling to point out that Luke's taste in girls hadn't been stellar so far, but they didn't want to break their mother's bubble.
"Who said yes? Don't tell me Luke proposed to that... woman," said Joshua, unknowingly imitating his wife as he walked in the door, "If she said yes I swear I'll disown the boy!"

"No, no. He has a new girlfriend named Tara. I don't know if she's going to be any better than that hell spawn," Julia said, causing her sons to choke on their drinks since their mother never, ever, swore, "But she can't be any worse!"

"Well, I suppose we'll find out eventually. Does he say anything about visiting any time soon?"

"No, nothing about a visit, just apologizing to me for letting that... woman... talk to me the way she did, assuring me it's over and telling me about Tara, his new girlfriend."

"Well that's wonderful." Joshua said with a smile. "Now, before we eat, you all can tell me what's wrong. And since Angelo is sitting at the table, drinking Alka Seltzer which he only does when he has an upset stomach due to a guilty conscience, I'll have to come to the conclusion that he's the one in trouble, am I right? So, what happened?" he asked, focusing his gaze on his youngest.

Angelo related the story with only a few prompts from Little John, who got death glares from his younger brother for his troubles, and finished with an apology delivered in a small voice. He was pretty sure an apology wouldn't help his case, but it wouldn't hurt either.

"So, shall we take care of this before or after dinner, Angelo?" his father asked.

"Instead of?" Angelo asked, "You can send me to bed without dinner? I won't... I mean, I'd understand, and I'd hate to miss such a wonderful dinner but I really don't deserve it and should go without." he tried.

"Now or afterward, ragazzino."

If he took his punishment before it would ruin everyone's dinner because he'd trying to eat with a stuffy nose and a sore butt. If they did it afterward the tension might mess up everyone's digestion and he might sick up the dinner, and he told his father as much.

"Before it is, then." Joshua said, getting up from his place and gesturing for his youngest son to accompany him.

"What if everyone gets a sick stomach from the tension." Angelo tried.

"That's what Alka Seltzer is for. Get going."

"But dad..."

"No buts, little boy." his father said sternly, "I've never sent a child of mine to bed hungry and I'm not about to start." he said, remembering some of his parent's crueler punishments. "Let's go." he said, pointing once again toward the boy's bedroom.

"Come on, Johnny, let's see if we missed any raspberries," Julia said, handing a little basket to her son and leading him out of the house.

Angelo shot his brother another death glare which went unnoticed since his brother and mother were headed out the door before he was herded into his bedroom by his father.
"Ohhhh! How wonderful!" cried Natie, reaching out to hold her daughter's hands.

"That's great!" said Johnny Rossi. "What made you decide on a double?"

"Well, both of us want to get married next year, and neither of us is willing to give up early September, so we decided it would be a good idea, and save money, if we both get married on the same day, and have our reception in the same place. The only differences would be some of our friends, and Eddie and Connor's families. I mean, it would all be the same relatives on our side, so that's saving half right there..."

"What are you worried about saving money for? It's mom's and my responsibility and pleasure to pay for your weddings." Johnny countered.

"Well, you already had Gia and Rene's, and they were lovely, truly." Said Terri.

"And ours will be just as lovely, except we'll be having ours on the same day." Carmie added.

"And Carm and I are going to pay for our own wedding dresses and bridesmaids dresses."

"Whoa, what's going on here. Did someone say we were having financial problems or something? Because we're not." Little John protested.

"Well, noooo," Terri said uncertainly.

"What's going on?" Natie asked in a no nonsense tone.

"It's just that the only place that can hold our entire bridal party and all our guests on the day and year we want is the Elk's Hall." Carmie said, a look of trepidation on her face as she stood in expectation of her parent's reactions.

"Why didn't you say something sooner!?" their father asked, suddenly delighted. "I belong to the Elks, remember? I can get a discount. Did you already get the day and date in writing?"

"Yes?" Carmie asked, suddenly hopeful, since she and Terri and their fiancés had already made plans to pay for at least half the cost. The girls knew that their parents wouldn't have said no, no matter what, but they didn't want them to bear the entire brunt of the cost, since both Eddie and Connor's families and friends would also be in the mix.

"Excellent, let me call Mule and..."

"Mule?" the women asked at once.

"Samuel Barkis, he's in charge of scheduling at the club. I'm surprised he saw the name Rossi and didn't call me." he said, frowning in confusion.

"We had to put the reservations in Eddie and Connor's names." Terri said.

"Why?" her parents asked in tandem.
"Because they're the grooms. At least that's how I understood it." Carmie said.

"Hmmm, so does that mean that the grooms are going to pay for the whole shebang?" asked Big John archly.

"Well, the guys had offered to pay half and they put the deposit down, so that could be why." Terri said, worried at her parent's reactions.

Natie and Johnny looked at each other with matching arched eyebrows. They had no idea why they should be surprised. It had been worse when they'd been planning their wedding and no one would so much as put down a tentative reservation when Natie called somewhere without her fiance's or her father's OK. They'd only hoped that by the time they had children old enough to be married that things would have changed. Maybe it was only because they put down the deposit. Johnny Rossi decided to give good ol' Mule a call and find out what the story was.

"I'm just curious, Terri," Johnny said, looking at his oldest daughter still living with him, "Why didn't you tell us this at dinner when everyone would be here?"

Carmie laughed, "Can you imagine everyone spitting out food or their drinks when we told them? Or choking?" she tried not to laugh.

"That, young lady... or should I say, young ladies... is why you tell people, 'Before we eat we'd like to make an announcement...’ hmmm?" Johnny asked, smelling deception in the air.

Terri grinned and said, "You caught us dad. We told you and mom first for two reasons. One, what if you'd said no to one or both of us. Doing it this way saved a lot of drama at the table, right?"

The elder Rossis' nodded, and gestured for them to continue.

"And two, we didn't want to get into a discussion about the finances in front of the guys. It would take about two minutes for Con to call the neighborhood and tell them how much everything is going to cost. I know how much you dislike people gossiping about money."

"Yep," their father agreed, "We got enough of that when we had a second phone line put in. A double wedding is going to set tongues wagging as it is," he grinned. "For all I know people will be coming up and offering donations, thinking we're hard up," he laughed.

"Did you already start to look for dresses? I know a beautiful place just across town, Delilah's, that does beautiful work and the people are so nice. I've been there for my dresses for Gia and Rene's weddings.

"Oh mamma, that would be perfect. Didn't Gia get hers there too?"

"Yes, and Rene wore mine since we're more of a size. Carmie, you're more my size also, do you want to use my dress too, or have your own?"

"Mamma, I think your dress is beautiful, but I'd like my own," Carmella said, afraid she'd hurt her mother's feelings.

"Nonsense, my little sweetie, don't you worry. Every bride should have the dress she wants," she reassured her daughter with a hug. "You will let me at least watch while you try them on?" Natie asked.

The girls both knew that if their mother 'watched' then she would have something to say, but how could they say no to her. "Of course mamma." they said together.
It wasn't until the end of July that Angelo was allowed to hang out with his friends again, and he was pacing like a caged tiger, waiting for 'Deo and Milo to come pick him up at his house. His mother had been keeping him busy doing chores but the idea of finally being released from his 'fifty years hard labor' was too distracting.

"Sit," his mother ordered.

Angelo gave his mother a wry look and said "I can't. It's all dad's fault."

"I sincerely doubt that the spanking you got last week is preventing you from sitting today, but if you need a refresher in order to feel the difference I'll be happy to help," she said, striding over to the oven and picking the longest, thinnest wooden spoon from her collection from the jar on the stove and wagging it warningly.

"No, mamma, thanks. I don't need a reminder." Angelo sighed.

"That's what I thought." she said, putting the spoon back just as a knock sounded at the door.

Angelo ran to the door, waving to his friends through the window. "'Bout time you got here guys! Let's go!"

"Wait, Angelo!" his mother said.

"Yes, mamma," Angelo replied with a hint of asperity.

"Watch your tone with me," she warned.

"Yes, mamma," he said again, more politely.

"Go down the cellar before you leave and bring me up ten good sized potatoes, a bunch each of oregano and basil and two jars of tomatoes, please."

"Why didn't you ask..." was all he said before his mother picked a spoon at random.

"I'm going! I'm going! Sorry! I'm going!" he said, trying to cover his rear and the backs of his thighs as he sidled past her with his back to the table. "Guys, help me, huh? Won't take long if we all carry something," he said, keeping his eyes on his mother and opening the hallway door by feel.

She kept her eyes on her son, who kept his eyes on her, still managing to open the cellar door and find the light switch on the inside wall before slinking down the stairs with his friends close behind. Even with the light on, the cellar was dimly lit and to Milo's mind, wonderfully spooky.

"Whoa, what's that smell!!?" Milo asked tactlessly.

Amadeo, who had finally gone down into the Di Marco cellar a month ago, and had had the same reaction, albeit not quite so loudly, grinned while Angelo took a breath and began his narration.

"Uncle Pat and his buddies used to make their own wine," he said, gesturing to the room to the
right at the bottom of the stairs which was filled with racks from floor to ceiling, brimming with wine bottles, before turning left. Milo noticed that the floors were dirt and slightly moist. "Dad figures the smell is caused by years and years of fermenting grapes and exploding casks seeping into the dirt floor. He said we could probably finish the floor in concrete at some point but he's not sure we'd ever get rid of the smell."

Just inside the door to the left at the bottom of the stairs, were three large, obviously homemade, wooden casks, each taller than 'Deo, who at a little over 5' 10", was dwarfed by them, and round enough that both Amadeo and Milo reaching around one would only be able to touch fingertips. To the left of the casks stood a positively medieval looking machine which also looked homemade and from the same wood as the casks. Milo immediately took hold of the iron handle on top and began to turn the mechanism which spun lower and lower into the vat.

"This is so cool!" he exclaimed. Angelo and Amadeo exchanged smiles.

"Those huge barrels there were homemade," Angelo said, pointing to the casks, "And there were bunches of other ones stacked along the walls. Some had been filled, and some were waiting to be filled but, the ones that were filled were leaking, so dad dumped the contents, built a bonfire and chucked them in because they were beginning to rot. Dad says these big ones are going too, but he just can't bear to break them up just yet. No idea why Uncle Pat kept them, unless he was going to use them in the oven."

"Oh! speaking of the oven! We're getting our new one next week! No more kindling and paper and stoking it at four o'clock in the morning to make sure it's hot enough to cook on for six!"

"Hey, that's great!" Milo said, following his friends. "What's this door?" he asked, pointing to an ancient door in the stone wall to the left of the wine press.

"That," Angelo said, opening it, letting in more light and fresh air. "leads into the lower garden where Uncle Pat and his friends grew the grapes for their wine. There aren't grapes there now, just some nut trees and stuff. It was like the grapes knew Uncle Pat died and didn't figure there was any reason to come back."

"Ange, I'm curious about something. How on earth did your uncle and his friends get so many different things to grow here? I mean, don't some of them need different soil and light and stuff?" Milo asked.

"Believe it or not, they made their own by mixing soil with rotted vegetables and horse manure."

Milo wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, I don't need to know that."

"You asked," Angelo said, grinning. "As far as light goes, that's why the garden tiers. Anyway, here is where we keep the vegetables, so if you'd... take... a bunch... of these potatoes," he said, handing the potatoes to Milo, "And Dae, if you'd take a few... jars... of tomatoes," he said, handing Amadeo mason jars containing home canned tomatoes, "And I'll get the oregano and basil." he said, taking two of the little bouquets that hung from hooks from the rafters for himself.

"Why do we get to carry the heavy stuff?!" Milo demanded, shifting the potatoes into the hammock formed by the hem of his tee shirt.

"Well," replied Angelo, "Someone has to close the door, and there's a knack to it, and I can't do that
with an armload of potatoes or hands full of jars of tomatoes. Also, consider it my fee for showing you around the cellar."

Before Milo could complain, Amadeo chimed in, "It's worth it, Mi, believe me. He only showed you half of what's down here and you want to be in his good graces for him to show you the other side."

Milo grumbled but otherwise quietly carried the potatoes upstairs. After all, he thought to himself, he was doing it for Mrs. Di Marco, not Angelo, and he'd do anything for Mrs. Di Marco.

"Thank you, boys." Said Mrs. Di Marco with a smile. "Now, Angelo, if you would just peel the potatoes and cut them up, then put them in a pot of water for me, you can go out." she continued, turning toward the refrigerator to take out a jug of iced tea.

Angelo opened his mouth to protest but Milo kicked him on the shin from one side and Amadeo kicked him from the other.

"Ouch! What the heck!?"

Mrs. Di Marco turned to her son, recognizing the tone of pain and looking concerned, "What's wrong?"

"Sorry, mamma, bit my tongue." he replied with a smile at his mother who smiled back before going to the alcove for a large bowl to put the peels in for the pigs, and a paring knife. He gave his friends an evil look and sat down to the table in front of the pile of potatoes.

"Mrs. Di Marco, if you have other knives we can help Ange get these done in no time," Amadeo offered, ignoring Milo's kick to his shin.

Mrs. Di Marco looked undecided at first and then nodded. "All right. I have plenty of knives. My mother in law was a gem and she believed in always having cook books, the proper knife for any occasion, and plenty of wooden spoons handy in case of emergency." she said with a smile at her son, who wrinkled his nose at her. She handed Milo and Amadeo paring knives. She then got to work peeling carrots and putting them in a bowl of water.

"Is this for lunch?" Milo asked.

"Nope, getting ready for dinner." Mrs. Di Marco said.

The boys all looked at the clock on the wall. It wasn't even ten o'clock in the morning yet.

"It's how I keep ahead of everything. Oh I can't wait for our new oven. Did Angelo tell you?"

"Yes'm," Amadeo and Milo answered, "Congratulations, Mrs. Di Marco."

"Thank you, boys. I'm going to miss this old clunker but it'll be so nice to be able to turn a knob and make a cup of tea or coffee that doesn't take an hour before the stove top is hot enough to cook on."

"Oh, Mrs. Di Marco!" Amadeo said, suddenly remembering and taking a note out of his pocket. "This is from Bethie, and mom wanted me to tell you she was going to call you later with some news unless you're going to be out, in which case do you think you can call her?"

Mrs. Di Marco smiled. "Of course. I'll call her right now. And thank you boys, for helping Angelo peel those potatoes." she said, giving her youngest a pointed look.
"Yeah, guys, thanks." Angelo said, blushing slightly as he tossed another piece of potato into the pan.

The woman picked up the phone from in front of the window where it usually sat and brought it into the living room, pulling it as far as the cord would go so that she could sit in an arm chair and make her call. The boys could hear the dial whirring and the faint chime as it went back to zero each time she dialed.

"So hurry up and let's get out of here before she finds something else for me to do!" Angelo whispered.

"Come on, what's a few little chores when we have the rest of the day to hang out?" Amadeo asked.

"I spent the last two weeks at hard labor, and she kept me busy morning to night. No TV! No phone! I want out! Now!" Angelo said, fairly hissing.

Their conversation was interrupted by Mrs. Di Marco's delighted cheer, which just as quickly died down.

"Ange! Chill." Milo replied, surprised at his innocent looking friend's vehemence. "Like Dae said, we have all the rest of the day. Cool it."

"You spend two weeks doing every dirty, nasty, smelly job it's possible to have on a farm from sun up till bedtime and then tell me to cool it!" Angelo growled. "You wouldn't last five minutes with Hilda while you were trying to clean out the fu..."

"Angelo!" Amadeo chided before his friend could finish that sentence.

"That fucoid hen house." he finished with a grin.

"What was that?" Mrs. Di Marco demanded from the doorway.

"Seaweed, mamma. It means shaped like seaweed." he explained quickly.

"Angelo... one minute, please Natie? Thanks." she said, covering the mouthpiece. "Angelo, I had a very interesting discussion with Mrs. Barkis at the grocery store last week. Would you like to hear what it was about?"

He did not, in fact, want to know what they'd talked about. "No mamma." he said, then quickly said "I mean, yes mamma, please tell me what you talked about?" when he saw the thunder clouds forming in her normally merry blue eyes.

Mrs. Di Marco leveled a dangerous look at her little boy. "She gave me a wonderful recipe, and if you keep up with the mouth I'll be more than happy to try it out. Would you like to know what the recipe is?"

"Yes, mamma." he forced himself to say. He, Deo and Milo had heard about Mrs. Barkis' 'recipe' for dirty mouths, but Angelo was afraid that if he told her he already knew it she might decide he was being fresh and be tempted to try it out on him.

"Dial soap. A nice mouthful of Dial soap that leaves a pretty coating on all of the teeth. And do you know what her children are allowed to rinse with?"

Angelo swallowed. He'd heard this story. He prayed that his mother wouldn't actually follow up on the threat. He shook his head, more to ward off the vision in his head rather than an indication that
"Listerine. Now, according to her, even words that you get away with, such as dang and darn are considered too close to the forbidden word, and those will result in a thorough mouth soaping. If that's what I have to do to you to keep your mouth clean then that's what I'll start doing. Understand?"

"Yes mamma." Angelo said, abashedly, digging with a little more force than necessary into the eye of a potato.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes mamma." he repeated quietly.

"Ricorda che. Non mi tentare." she warned before turning back to the living room and continuing her conversation with her friend. (Remember that. Don't try me.)

"Si mamma." he said in a near whisper. "F****** Jimmy and his f****** mother and her bull s*** bright ideas." he muttered derisively when she was out of earshot.

"Angelo!" Amadeo hissed, looking back over his shoulder to see if Mrs. Di Marco had heard.

"What're ya gonna do, Amadeo? Tell on me? Go ahead." he challenged with a snarl.

"Ange..." Milo said, disbelievingly, potato and knife forgotten.

"No, Angelo, I'm not going to tell, but I'm not staying here with you in this foul mood with your fouler mouth." he whispered, setting aside the paring knife he'd been using. He went to the sink and washed his hands. "I'm done here, Ange. In the meantime, I'm headed home. When you're in a better mood, of if you just need to talk, you can call me. Today, tomorrow, whatever, but I'm not staying here for this... whatever you call it. Later." he said, walking calmly out the kitchen door.

"Yeah," Milo said sadly, "I guess me neither. I don't know what's wrong, Ange but... call me if you need to talk, all right?"

"To you? Yeah, right." Angelo spat. "Whenever I need misinformation and wrong answers you'll be the first one I call."

Milo wiped his hands on the legs of his jeans and followed shortly after Amadeo, head down, footsteps dejected, sad that he apparently couldn't help his friend through whatever it was he was going through.

All but one of the potatoes were cleaned and cubed. Angelo threw away the last potato, took the pan to the sink and ran the water to wash them off, rinsing as much dirt and starch off as he could before the water ran clear. He left the pan in the sink, the peelings and knives on the table, and ran out of the house.

Angelo rambled around for a while, not having any specific destination in mind. The buildings became shabbier and shabbier, the remaining windows dirtier, boarded up doors with graffiti sprayed on them, cracked pavement. Some brave child had drawn a hopscotch grid upon which he jumped from one to 'home', where he found a can and kicked it as far as he could, watching as it sailed several feet before fetching up against the sagging wooden wall of a decrepit store.

"Yeah, it is! Benny! Hey! Where've you been hiding, man? Thought you got sick of us or
something!" Carlos said, coming up behind Angelo and wrapping a burly arm around the slighter boy's shoulders. "Haven't heard from you since that night when you had to hang up right quick. Good to see you alive and kickin'."

"Beeeeeeennnnnyyyyyyyyyy! Decided to come and slum wit'cher friends? Welcome! Have a cig!" Steve smiled.

"Guys, I don't want a smoke, ok? Really. It makes me sick, you know that." he complained, pushing away the hand holding the smokes.

"Wha's up wi'chu Bennie? You're a real wet blanket today."

"I'm just tired." Angelo said softly.

"Well come on. Me, Parker, Ralph, Carlos, Bruce and Ethel have our scooters, we can ride around and see what's what. You get bitch seat behind Ethel!" he joked about the only female member of their little group. She was plain spoken, didn't take BS from anyone and had been known to deck people for messing with her. She was one 'seriously cool chick', and she'd been one of the guys for five years now. She also refused to let anyone ride behind her. Anyone who tried to sit on her red Vespa either got smacked down hard, or neutered, so no one tried.

Her brother Bruce rode a dark blue one. Seemingly the opposite of his very vocal sister, it was a major event anytime one of the guys could get him to say more than a couple of words. He seemed to prefer to ride along and look. He seemed to view talking as an annoyance. He did it infrequently and unlike his sister, very quietly. However, if anyone asked Ethel, which they tried not to, she was more than happy to tell them that he was certainly NOT silent at home.

Carlos had a sky blue Piaggio that he treated like a museum relic, waxing it almost constantly, looking for scratches or dings. The running joke was that he spent more time on maintenance than actually riding it.

Steve had a custom painted Lambretta that was his pride and joy. Some of the others joked that his scooter was a bicycle compared to theirs, but in a drag race his 'bicycle' blew the rest of theirs away. No one knew what he did when he tinkered with it but they all agreed he'd somehow stuffed an airliner engine into the little casing.

Parker and Ralph 'only had Honda's' but those Honda's were their babies and they wouldn't hear anything against them. "We can't all be rich, mamma's boys who just ask for an Italian bike and get it as a reward just for blowing our noses," Ralph joked.

"Hey! Learning to blow my own nose was a major accomplishment! Do you know how nasty that stuff is? And it leaks through the tissue..." Steve complained.

"OHHHHHH! More than I wanted to know! Thank you!" Parker complained.

"Come on, whadda ya say, Benny?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll go. I've been stuck..." he trailed off.

"Grounded by the rents, gotcha." Carlos said, and they all laughed at Angelo's blush at being seen through so quickly.

"You hadda hang up fast and we didn't see you for two weeks, we kinda figured it out." Ethel said in a matter of fact tone.
"Don't worry, bro, we all been through it." Steve said. "S'matter'a fact I'm supposed to be sitting in my room right now doing my summer reading. I just put the record player on with a stack under the arm. The next record automatically drops when the previous one is done so it's gonna be hours before the last one ends. If I'm lucky ma'll think I fell asleep reading and she'll leave me be til dinner," he boasted.

"So come on, Ben. Pick a place. It's your day today." Carlos said, grinning. "Your get outta jail celebration."

"I like the park." Angelo said shyly, afraid of his friends reactions. "I like to watch the ducks and the fish."

"The park is cool. I like to sit in the sun." Steve said. "It's a perfect day for it today."

"The water is really clean in the parks here, I noticed." Ethel said. "Anyone ever fish in these ponds? Or swim?"

"You guys got a playground." Ralph said with an embarrassed little grin, "I wouldn't mind goin' on the monkey bars."

"I'll go on the swings." said Parker, smiling.

"I like to lie on the grass and watch the ants." Bruce said softly.

"Bruce has spoken! That makes it official! The park it is." Steve said, hopping on his 'bike' and gesturing for Angelo to get on behind him. "Get on and let's go."

"Anyone have some change? We can get a day old loaf and feed the ducks. Get em fat enough and we can cook em for Sunday dinner," Ethel joked, throwing a leg over her Vespa and starting it up.

Angelo smiled. "Yeah, I have some change. Thanks, Eth," he said, gratefully. Jim, Dennis, Charlie and the other guys were pretty cool and easy going but they always got a good laugh at Angelo's fascination with the ducks and fish, and were rarely in the mood to sit and feed them.

They stopped at the bakery, picked up a couple of loaves of stale bread for a total of twenty cents and then headed for the park.

Everyone laughed when they got there, joking that the ducks recognized their meal ticket since the feathered creatures swarmed up onto the grass in front of the bench where Angelo, Parker, Steve and Carlos sat, and began to open one of the bags.

"Nah, it's Pavlovian Conditioning." Angelo countered, concentrating on taking out several slices at a time, crumbling them and attempting to portion the pieces out evenly to the ducks who nudged and nipped the others around them in an attempt to fill their beaks.

"Hey, I thought you said your name was Benny! Who's this Pavlovian?" Ralph asked.

Angelo winced. He'd introduced himself as Angelo, and when asked his middle name had given it freely. For some reason these guys had fixated on the name Benedetto and had called him Benny ever since. He'd stopped a long time ago trying to correct them.

"Idiot." Angelo said, affectionately, "Pavlov was this scientist who would ring a bell and then give his dogs a treat or food. It got to the point that any time the dogs heard a bell they'd start to salivate in anticipation of food."
"These are ducks, Benny. Duuuuuucks." Steve said, slowly, teasing his friend. "Not doooooooogssss. Hear the difference?"

"Yes, Steve, I can see that they're not dogs." he assured him patiently, going along with the joke.

"My point being that these are duuuuuuccccks, and there are no bellllllsssss here."

Angelo groaned, not sure if his friend was still teasing or really didn't understand.

"The ducks see people sitting on the bench. The ducks see the people with bags. The ducks hear the rustling of the bag as it's opened. The ducks know that people sitting on the bench with a bag usually means that the people have food for them, so they rush the people on the bench. Pavlov's dogs." he said, as though that explained everything.

"OK, so what we got here is Benny-lov's Ducks." Carlos laughed.

"An' it's like Eth said, fatten em up and we can go hunting come November and have ourselves a nice fat duck for Thanksgiving dinner." said Parker, "Hey, for that matter, where're the geese these days? I could go for goose this year." he said, looking around for the geese who were obviously hiding that day.

"Those fish keep poppin' up and stealing the bread and we can guarantee a juicy fish course before the duck, whadda ya say?" Ralph asked.

"I got a thing about catfish." Carlos said with a shudder. "Things just creep me out with those feelers or whiskers or whatever they are, and those big bug eyes. Just can't bring myself to eat something that looks like that."

"I think the only fish here are minnows and goldfish." Ethel disagreed. "But I don't want to eat those either," she shuddered.

"Eel," Angelo offered. "Mom makes it around Christmas. She chops the head off, uses wire cutters to slice it down the belly then takes a pair of pliers, grabs the skin and peels it off like a rubber glove. It looks like snake. I just can't eat it."

"Know what I can't stand the idea of eating?" Ethel asked, "Lobster. Tell me those things don't look like huge, mutated spiders, and I'm just not into spider, mutated or not." she said, tossing a hand full of crumbs out to the ducks and laughing as they quacked and squawked at each other, flapping their wings and nipping with their beaks to chase other ducks away from the morsels they were sure were meant for them.

"Liver." said Ralph, wrinkling his nose. "Just thinking about it makes me wanna..."

"Just liver? I can do you one better. Haggis." said Parker, grimacing.

"For pity's sake, what on earth is Haggis?" Ethel asked, wrinkling her nose and twisting her mouth in distaste and still managing to look pretty. "Just the name sounds nasty."

"A specialty my mom makes a few times a year. It's chopped up sheep liver, heart and tongue, mixed with oats, suet, onions, and herbs. All of that is mixed together, stuffed into the sheep's stomach, tied closed and then boiled for hours. She only makes it for special occasions, but man, I'll tell ya, I run to the A&W, fill up on Papa burgers, then go home and tell her I'm not hungry. She says I'm not really Scottish if I don't love it. I told her I was born in Georgia and that makes me Georgian, and I'm happy with a streak o' lean and potatoes."
Bruce, who had been quietly lying on the grass, using a couple of sticks to herd ants toward a grasshopper carcass said, "Pickled pig’s feet."

Amidst groans and sounds of fake vomiting, Steven announced Bruce the winner.

"Nuh uh," Parker protested, "I'll put my haggis up against your pig’s feet and we'll have a contest. Since Steve has made himself judge and jury he can eat them and decide afterward which one is worse."

"I hereby declare a draw." Steven said quickly, an exaggerated look of horror on his face.

"Yeah, I thought so," replied Parker with a triumphant grin.

"Well whadda ya say, Benny? Think the ducks are full yet? Where to next?" Ralph asked as he crumpled up one of the bread bags.

"Actually, Benny, you really need to get home," came a familiar, calm voice.

Angelo's head once again twisted so quickly that Amadeo feared it would pop off and roll down into the duck pond.

The other boys, except for Bruce who still lay on the ground but was now focused on his friends, and Ethel, who had been leaning against her scooter, stood up and formed a barrier between Angelo and Amadeo.

"Benny, you know this joker?" Steve said, noticing the pallor of Angelo's skin.

"Need us to convince him to keep walking?" Parker asked, keeping his eyes on the strangely serene boy before them.

Amadeo cocked his head to one side and casually slipped all but his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans. "Do you? Benny?"

Angelo didn't know which worried him more. Amadeo's very calm voice, or the fact that he'd called him Benny, like the others.

He knew Ethel wouldn't hesitate to punch out anyone she saw as a threat. Carlos and Steve weren't afraid of a scuffle if it came down to it. Ralph carried a switchblade in his boot and Parker carried around a cylinder of lead in his front right pocket in case of emergency. He wasn't much of a fighter but that little added weight to his fist gave his punches a little more 'oomph'. Bruce was slow to anger but as soon as he felt that he or one of his own were in danger he became a bear, attacking the enemy with arms and weight, wrestling and crushing his opponent. He reminded Angelo of Hoss Cartwright when Hoss had had enough of whichever imbecile was baiting him at the time.

"No, guys! No! This is Deo. Amadeo. My friend I told you about? Remember?" he said worriedly.

The expression on the other's faces changed immediately. Steven smiled broadly and advanced on Amadeo with his hand extended. "Amadeo, man! It's a real pleasure to meet you! Name's Steven. Steve." he said, offering his hand to shake. Amadeo politely responded, shaking the other boy's hand solemnly.

Ralph and Parker also advanced with smiles on their faces and hands extended as they introduced themselves.
"Finally we meet the Great and Powerful Amadeo!" Parker said, shaking 'Deo's hand and clapping him on the shoulder at the same time.

"Stop hogging him, Macalister! Amadeo... 'Deo, welcome to the club. Name's Ralph. That there was Parker. Ethel there," he said, gesturing to the one girl, "Her brother Bruce, and Carlos there. Any friend to Benny is a friend of ours. Especially you, man. He talks about you all the time but we never saw you. We were startin'a think he was either ashamed of us or you were an imaginary friend." he laughed.

Ethel walked up to him, expressionless, head to the side, eyes narrowed but in contemplation rather than challenge. "Oh Dio Mio." she said quietly, keeping her hands to her sides.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss Ethel." Amadeo responded just as quietly, with a polite nod in her direction.

The others looked at her in surprise, looking back and forth between her and her brother, whom they expected to get up and start chatting away to the new comer.

Bruce did get up but merely stood silently, watching the goings on placidly.

"It is very nice to finally meet you all," Amadeo said diplomatically, not mentioning the fact that Angelo had never spoken about them outside of the one conversation they'd had, nor that Angelo had been forbidden to hang around with them. "And I hate to break up the party, but An... Benny, is needed at home. We've been looking for him."

Steven said something next that greatly elevated Amadeo's opinion of the other boy.

"Ah, Benny! You didn't sneak out again did you?" he said, frustrated. "Jeez man, I keep tellin' ya your dad's gonna chain you up in the cellar and we'll never see you again. Not only that but if you keep doin' this people're gonna think we're corrupting you! You gotta stop it, man!"

Angelo bowed his head, embarrassed, and slid his hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

"Can we give you guys a lift back home? S'he been gone a long time?" Carlos asked.

"No, not very long, and he doesn't live very far away. We appreciate the offer though." 'Deo said with a smile. Angelo actually lived several miles away but 'Deo was sure that if a bunch of motor bikes came down their driveway the Di Marco's couldn't help but to notice and ask questions.

"Yeah well... Benny has my number. When he gets outta solitary this time you guys give me a call and we can hang out, 'K? He's a good guy but, man, I dunno..." Steve said with a slight shake of his head.

Amadeo extended his hand once again toward Steven and shook hands. "Thank you." was all he said before turning away from the group. He didn't say a word to Angelo who either would or wouldn't follow him as he pleased.

"Get goin, Benny. Hopefully we'll see you before the end of the summer." Carlos said as he and the others mounted their scooters, started them up and rode out, considerately keeping their speed down until they reached the road. With a final wave to the two boys they rode off.

Angelo finally caught up to Amadeo, head still bowed, trying to keep up with his friend's rapid pace.

"Dae! Slow down man! You're like ten feet taller than I am and I'm getting winded tryin'a keep up
with you!" he panted, trying to diffuse the situation with a little humor.

Amadeo stopped dead in his tracks and put a hand to his forehead to scratch. He took a breath to speak and then closed his mouth, turned and continued on his trek.

"Dae! Talk to me!"

Amadeo stopped again and looked at his friend. "What do you want me to say?"

"I dunno, but don't just walk and ignore me! How bad is it? Is dad on the rampage? Do you need to call home to tell them you found me again? Am I deep in the sh** again?"

"No... Benny... and watch your mouth. No one is out looking for you. I had no idea you'd left your house. I just happened to be walking in the park when I saw you."

"You f***** lied?!" Angelo accused. "You said I had to go home! I coulda stayed with them?! You made me look like a jerk in front of them and no one was even looking for me? You a**h***!" Angelo said, turning back toward the park.

Amadeo caught up to his boy in three long strides and caught him by the arm. "I lied?! I'm willing to bet you didn't tell anyone where you were going again today. I'm willing to bet you counted on your mother assuming that you were out with Mi and me, and if I hadn't seen you here you'd have spent the day and gone home and told your folks about what a great day you had with us, am I right?" Amadeo demanded.

"I also doubt that you were going to go home and admit to your folks that you'd been hanging out with those guys again, especially after your father laid into you and told you outright not to! And you have the nerve to get mad at me? Ange, you put me in a really rotten position and I resent it!"

"What're you talking about? What did I do to you?"

"I'm in on your lie now. I think the police call it guilt by association. If someone asks what you and I did today I either have to tell the truth, which ends up with you with your butt in a sling, or I lie and cover for you, in which case if I get caught, my butt ends up on the line! I can handle a little prevarication, I don't mind stretching the truth a little to keep the two of us out of hot water, but to tell a bold faced lie is a different matter entirely."

"You can do it, Dae! You've done it before! Like when you told dad about what we did in the woods, remember?"

"I lied, plain and simple. I lied by omission. I mean, if I'd told our dads what we'd really been doing in the woods or exactly why we weren't wearing our watches, things might have gone a lot worse for us than it did. You still got spanked and I got grounded, but without those omissions, well, the stuff might'a really hit the fan."

"But you can do it, I know you can," Angelo said, nearly crying with combined guilt, anger and frustration.

"Ange," Amadeo began angrily, then, seeing the state his boy was in, he calmed down and began again. "Angelo. The problem with a lie is that you have to remember it. You never know when someone is going to bring up an incident again, ask a more specific question. The longer it goes on the harder it is to remember exactly what you said, and there's no way of knowing what the person you lied to will remember. You might be able to get out of it by wrapping another layer of lies around the original one, but then the more 'facts' you add to your lie the more you have to remember. The lie gets bigger and bigger until it explodes in
your face. Then despite your best efforts, you're in deep for lying, and even deeper for all the lies you added to it."

"So now, Angelo, I'm faced with either telling your parents what you did and being labeled the world's biggest fink for ratting out my best friend; or remaining quiet, sustaining your lie, and letting you get away scott free with stuff you were told outright by your dad not to do and which your own friends told you was wrong! And what I don't understand, Ange, is why? Why do you sneak out? Why do you insist on continuing to see kids your folks have forbidden you to see? Are you still looking for that thrill you told me about the first time? What is going on in your head?"

Angelo looked around to see if there were anyone else in earshot and noticed the mostly obscured gazebo several yards away. He went over to the gazebo and peeked in. Seeing it empty he gestured to Amadeo to follow. They could tell that someone had been in it recently because it smelled of tobacco, and a fresh layer of butts was on the ground, but they stayed and sat on the ledge anyway.

It took several minutes for Angelo to gather his thoughts but Amadeo waited patiently.

"I'm tired of being thought of and treated like a little kid." Angelo said in Italian. "I'm sick of my brothers being allowed to smack me when they think I'm being bad but I can't smack them when they're bad and believe me they're not perfect either but they're older so that makes them in charge when mom and dad aren't home and then they automatically take their word."

"I'm sick of everyone dictating rules to me. Do this. Don't do that. You can see these people but not those and it doesn't matter if you say those people are good I say no and my word is law. Don't say this or I'll wash your mouth out and she f****** says it right in front of you guys and makes me feel like I'm a G** d***** five-year-old and she doesn't care that I'm embarrassed cuz she wants for me to be embarrassed and ashamed. I mean, why doesn't she just f****** pull my pants down and spank me right in front of you while she's at it!"

"It doesn't matter how old I ever get, I'm always going to be nothing more than a baby to them. I'm old enough to do chores til my hands fall off but I'm not old enough to see certain movies. I can tell them what I'm feeling but I can't just do it like an adult and just say it I have to be careful of how I say it and mind my tone and constantly worry that I'm gonna get spanked or have my mouth washed out or get grounded. I mean, dad just says what he wants and no one grounds him for saying something out of line, or threatens to wash his mouth out for saying it his way and not all polite and everything."

"And Johnny and Paulie are the same way! If they think it, they say it and no one spansk them! I mean, sometimes they'll get a whack but you know what I mean and mom doesn't threaten to wash their mouths out with soap in front of their friends and if Johnny and Paulie can smack me an' put me in the corner like I'm a f***** kid then I should be able to do the same thing to them and mom and dad should listen to why I did it and spank them for not listening to me! I'm not a little kid!" Angelo said, becoming more and more upset as he spoke.

"You're not a little kid." Amadeo repeated. Also in Italian, but in an oddly flat voice.

"No!" Angelo replied vehemently.

"No," Amadeo said, switching to English, "You're not a little kid, but there are things you do that your brothers don't. Hear me out." he said putting up a hand to forestall his boy.

"Your response to what you feel is being treated like a little kid is to run away without telling anyone where you're going, which you just got in trouble for two weeks ago, and again only a day or so before that."
"Your response to what you feel is being treated like a little kid is to run off with kids who your parents have forbidden you to hang out with because they encourage you to smoke, drink..."

"But I don't. I didn't! Not today!"

"Basta, Angelo." Amadeo said firmly, then continued when his boy quieted, "Yes, you may have said no and stuck to your guns today, but in the past you've allowed them to convince you to smoke, and you've stood by while they drank and threw rocks through windows, which you know is wrong, rather than walking away from it. I'm not saying you had to rat them out, but you stood by while they did it, and if the police had gotten there before you all left you'd have been arrested too, just for being there. I asked Gage. Don't worry, I didn't mention names. We just started talking about your dad's renovations on the old stone works and the damages caused by people over the years," he reassured at Angelo's panicked look.

"And finally, your response to what you feel is being treated like a little kid is to cuss up a blue streak. Even if it's just to me or your other friends, it's still not cool, Angelo. Cussing is low, and a smart boy like you knows better, but you still do it because it's a way to rebel, to defy your folks. Put all of that together Ange, and tell me that it adds up to rational, mature, adult behavior which in turn could most likely cause your folks to think of you as a mature adult and stop treating you like a kid."

"But..."

"No buts, Ange. Your brothers never go out without telling your folks where they're going and when they'll be home. Your brothers don't cuss, at least not where I've ever heard, and I certainly never heard your dad do it. Your mom used strong words that one time you told me about Rosalia, but not once did you say she cussed."

"I've heard your dad argue points with mine, and yeah, he says what's on his mind, but he does it in a diplomatic and respectful way. I never heard him force his opinion on anyone, or threaten or swear at anyone who disagreed."

"But I..."

"You're his sixteen-year-old son." Amadeo said, switching back to Italian, "And I love you, Angelo, very much, but sometimes you're tactless. You act impulsively and you don't think ahead about the consequences of your behaviour, and you will cuss if you think it'll help you make a point, as if the cussing will convince anyone of your point of view rather than make them just want to stop talking to you all together. The other guys don't say anything but none of them like it, and I try to make you stop before you start but you're so determined to be seen as an adult that you don't notice your own very childish behavior."

"If it makes you feel any better, when my folks are out of the house and Terri or Carmie, or even Gabe are home, I have to ask their permission to go out and tell them who I'm with and where I'll be. It doesn't happen often at all but me and Con both have been swatted by Carm or Terri, and even our older brothers when they're there, because they're older and they're in charge when my folks aren't home. It's just the way things are. I don't always like it, especially when Terri gets it into her head that I need a smack, but they're in charge because they're older and more mature."

"Your brothers and sisters can smack you?" Angelo asked disbelievingly, in English.

"Yeah. I'm not saying they always do, just now and again when I get a smart mouth." he replied. "Even Con does it once in a while, but when I think he's pushing the big brother thing too far I just wrestle him down and leave the final decision up to my folks when they get home."
"But I can't wrestle my brothers, they'd flatten me." Angelo protested.

"So you watch your mouth, tell em where you're going, who you're going with, and leave a number. Don't just disappear. See the difference?"

"What about Steve and Carlos and the others. You met them, they're not bad guys, but dad won't let me hang out with them! I like them, Dae! They're my friends. They were my first friends."

"All I can do is go with you when you talk to your folks. Hold on!" he said, holding up his hands again. "Ask your parents politely if they have time to talk. Explain to them that there are things that have been weighing on you and you'd like to sit down with them and discuss them in a calm, rational manner. You can do that right? I mean, they're not like Jimmy's folks who just say 'This is the way it is, end of discussion.' Right?"

Angelo shrugged. "I guess."

"If you need me to be there while you're talking about your other friends, kind of as a character witness, I'll do it. I liked them. Of course they weren't drinking or spray painting the park or anything like that, but from what I saw, they were good people, and Steve was very level headed."

"Would you?" Angelo asked hopefully.

"Yes. Now, I can't guarantee that your folks'll change their minds about them, but if they do, and you can promise that you'll walk away if Steve and the others start to do anything illegal, it's possible they might say it's OK for you to hang with them. It's also possible that if they're all willing to hang with Milo and the others, they won't be bored and they won't drink or smoke or do anything else that the rest of the group isn't doing."

"I can't speak for Steve and the others, but it's possible they'll be all right with that set up. If they don't they don't, but they might. And I'm not your folks and I can't speak for them, but you have to at least give them a chance. The thing is, Ange, whatever they decide, you have to do the mature thing and obey them because they only have your best interests in mind when they lay on the rules. When you begin to behave maturely, then they'll start seeing you as something more than a little kid. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," Angelo said faintly. "I get you."

"OK, then. Are you ready to go home?"

"Dae? Are you gonna tell on me?" Angelo asked, frightened. "I don't want to tell mom and dad I outright disobeyed them. Dad'll kill me. No exaggeration, I won't be able to sit for a week, and I'm pretty sure that except for the trial I won't see the light of day until school lets back in. I... I told mom and dad I'd go back in September." he added hesitantly, looking up at Amadeo for his reaction.

"I'm glad you decided to give the school another try, Ange. I'm proud of you. But as far as what you did today, you have to own up to what you did. You can't in good conscience just get off free as a bird for breaking pretty much every rule your folks gave you. I told you once before that actions have consequences, and if you get away with it today you'll just keep doing the same things over and over again."

Angelo was quiet for several minutes as he once again gathered his thoughts. Then, in a low voice, again in Italian, the younger boy said, "Dae? I admit that bad behaviour should have consequences, but please, please don't tell dad or make me tell him. Please? Would you... would you be willing..."
remember what happened when I batted Hilda, what you said? That you'd take care of me yourself if I did it again? Would you... would you...” he trailed off, unable to speak aloud what he was thinking.

"Angelo..." Amadeo began, stunned at what he was sure his friend was asking him.

"Dae please think about it? Please? I'm not kidding, Dae. Dad'll toast me but good. I know he'll use the belt again this time! And I know I'll be grounded, and that'll mean no phone, no friends over, no going to anyone's houses either and the idea of being stuck in the house all summer, and only allowed outside to work in the garden or the barn... Dae... please. Please?” he said, looking up at the boy he loved so strongly from beneath his long lashes. "Take time to think about it if you need to but please think about it? I'm really sorry for what I did, I really am. You're right, it was immature, and I wasn't thinking before I took off. All I can say is that honestly, I wasn't looking for Steve and the others when I ran out. Not consciously at least. And I'll try really hard to watch my mouth from now on. Please, Dae?"

Amadeo sat for several minutes, hand to mouth, giving his boy's request serious thought. It was true. If Mr. Di Marco heard what his youngest had been up to today it was a surety that Angelo wouldn't be allowed to see anyone for the rest of the summer, and there was no doubt that Angelo's backside would pay a heavy price. Angelo had reassured Amadeo that his father didn't use the belt often, but it made an indelible impression, in more ways than one for days afterward when he did. Amadeo's father had never used a belt on any of his kids as far as he knew, and he was grateful for that fact after Angelo had described what it felt like.

He didn't want Angelo to be grounded for the rest of the summer, but he wasn't sure if Angelo was only asking him to do it because he thought that a spanking from him wouldn't be as painful as a strapping from his father. If he did agree to do this thing, he knew he wasn't going to use a belt, but he did want to make sure his boy knew he'd been punished and why.

Angelo sat by, quietly, watching a variety of expressions pass over Amadeo's features as he debated the matter.

Amadeo seemed to come to a decision but then stood up and told Angelo to stay put. Angelo watched as 'Deo walked out of the park, and headed in the general direction of the Mom and Pop across the street where the kids bought Cokes and snacks to eat while they hung out at the park. Angelo doubted that Amadeo was going to buy snacks but did as he was told and stayed put.

About twenty minutes later Amadeo returned with two fountain drinks in paper cups, a hand full of napkins which he was in the process of stuffing into his pockets and a set expression. "Angelo. Before we go any further, tell me now. Are you sure about this? Because once I start... I don't want to do what you ask only to have you change your mind halfway and cry foul."

"I won't, Dae, I swear."

"You agree to do what I say, when I say, and no arguments. Yes or no. Tell me now."

"I agree, Dae. Whatever you say." Angelo agreed earnestly.

"Come on, then." he said quietly but abruptly, leading Angelo out of the gazebo and further into the surrounding woods.

The two boys walked quickly but quietly down some well beaten paths, and then veered off onto a less traveled route, then once again onto a path that was nearly nonexistent. They came out in a clearing with a circle of stones, and cold, charred wood in the center. Around the perimeter were
fallen logs which had been pulled over to serve as benches. Amadeo put the drinks on the ground next to one of the logs and asked Angelo to sit beside him.

"We need to talk." 'Deo said.

"Dae, we already talked, and honest, I meant what I said."

"You say so now, but this is... this is a serious situation. We have to make sure that we're on the same page, so to speak. You asked me to do something... very personal. We need to talk about what you expect from my handling this rather than your father."

Angelo took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I... I don't know, just..." he hesitated. "I don't want a whipping, I don't want to be grounded all summer. I know I deserve it, and I know that's what'll happen if my dad finds out, but... Please Dae? I've spent half of my summer vacation grounded already and..."

"Do you expect me to go easy on you because of what we mean to each other? Because I don't plan to." Amadeo said.

At Angelo's uncertain expression he clarified, "I'm not going to use my belt, but I'm not going to go easy on you. I don't approve of what you did, you know that. I'm disappointed in you, Ange. I'm not your father but I understand how he feels, especially after what we learned about his brother's friend."

"The idea of anything like that happening to you... not knowing where you are... finding you like that... or worse, never finding you again." Amadeo stopped, unable to continue speaking about the grim picture that came to his mind. "Angelo Benedetto Di Marco, you mean everything to me, do you understand me? The idea that something could happen to you, that you could disappear, that we might never hear from you again or know what became of you... what if it were your mother who disappeared, or your father? One of your brothers? Me?"

"Deo, don't!"

"It's the same thing, Angelo. The fear, the uncertainty, the... guilt. The not knowing. It would eat at us every bit as much as it would you if the situation were reversed and it was one of us missing. Put yourself in your parent's place. My place. Think about it." Amadeo said, allowing his boy the opportunity to do just that.

Angelo bowed his head and began to wring his hands in his lap.

"So now Angelo, I'm going to ask you again. Are you sure you want me to handle this, because like I said I'm not going to hold back. If you're sure about this, if you agree to it, once I start I'm not going to stop until I think I've gotten the point across. I hate the idea of being the one to do this. I don't want to hurt you, but I do want you to learn to think before you take off. I want you to think about the consequences of your actions, about how the people you leave behind will feel if something happens to you."

Angelo looked up at Amadeo from beneath his thick lashes. "Will you love me again afterward?"

Amadeo sighed heavily. "For a smart guy you can be a real numbskull." he said, taking his boy's hands in his and gently detangling them. "I do love you! It's because I love you that I'm willing to do this for you rather than letting it get back to your dad. I just want you to learn. I want you to think. Do you understand me?"

"I understand." Angelo said in a faint voice.
"So you're going to do as I tell you? No arguments? No backtalk? No cursing?" he asked pointedly.

"I'll do what you say. I won't curse." Angelo promised quietly, licking his lips nervously.

"Stand up, Angelo." Amadeo directed softly.

Angelo did as he was told.

Amadeo began to unbutton and unzip his boy's jeans.

Angelo opened his mouth to protest but Amadeo hushed him, pulled the jeans down and then pulled his boy across his lap.

The younger boy felt pressure across his back as Amadeo leaned down over him for a moment, then gasped seconds later as he felt the first sharp swat on his brief clad backside. He threw a hand back just in time to feel the size eleven sneaker come down a second time, rubber sole providing a sting that Angelo had never felt before.


"Dae!"

"No backtalk, no arguments. Hand away. Now."

Once Angelo's hand was clear, Amadeo resumed the punishment. The crisp sounds of the swats and the wails of the younger boy were the only sounds in the deep woods.

Afterward Amadeo rubbed his Angelo's back until he calmed and his breathing became more regular. He helped Angelo get up, carefully adjusted his jeans and then stood to wrap his arms around his boy.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"It's ok now, Ange. It's over, we're good. Just don't, please don't ever do this again. Please." Amadeo said quietly into his boy's ear. "I love you, Angelo Di Marco. I love you, and I can't bear the thought of losing you."

"I un-un-der-stand." Angelo replied, his breath hitching, "I-I'm sor-sor-ry Dae, and I-I-I love you t-too. Th-thank y-you, Dae." he said fervently.

Amadeo wrapped his arms more firmly around his boy and buried his face in the younger boy's hair, inhaling his scent. "You're welcome, il mio Angelo. Don't ever give me cause to do this again, ok?"

"'K." Angelo hiccupped, resting his head against Amadeo's chest, hearing the faint sound of his heartbeat, and getting lost in the comfort of his man's arms. "'K."

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NOTES:

Haggis is a kind of sausage made from sheep's heart, liver and lungs, minced with onion, oatmeal, suet (fat), and spices, which are then stuffed into the animal's stomach and simmered for approximately three hours.
Streak of lean/fatback - basically fatty bacon with just a little lean meat in it.

Oh Dio Mio by Annette (Terrible song, just convenient title).
"Are you gonna come home with me and talk to my parents?" Angelo asked about a half hour later as he sat on Amadeo's lap on the log, sipping at the soda his man had bought him as Amadeo gently pressed several layers of ice filled napkins to Angelo's face and neck.

"Not today. One of the reasons I took so long earlier was to call our folks and ask permission for you to sleep over tonight. You and I have some more talking to do, all right? Your mom is going to have Paul bring over your pajamas and a change of clothes."

"I thought we were all right," Angelo said with some trepidation.

"We're good, Angelo, don't worry about that," Amadeo reassured him. "We need to talk about what you're going to say when you do go back home. We're going to practice how you're going to approach your folks, the tone you're going to use, the words. Understand?"

"Yeah, I get it. Thanks, 'Deo."

Suddenly Amadeo realized that Angelo hadn't been talking in questions as frequently lately. Statements were statements. Questions were questions, but very rarely did he answer a question with a question or phrase a statement as a question. He pondered that for a while as he continued to comfort his boy.

"Now, I wanted to call Milo and ask him to come over too. First, for you to apologize to him, and I need to also, for just walking out without waiting for him. My only defense is that I was upset and not thinking straight myself. Second, to explain what's been bothering you. He's your friend and he cares about you. He deserves at least that. Lastly because he could be handy for this drill. He's got a talent for imitation and he does a great one of your father, so it'll be a good walk through for you to talk to him and use him as your practice dad." Deo said with a grin. "Afterward I'll ask him to do one of my father... he's got Pazzo Rossi down to an art. But I'm not going to call him unless you're comfortable with that idea. I do think you owe him an apology at the very least, even if you don't like the rest of the plan. What do you say?"

"Yeah, you're right. I did treat him badly... pretty shoddy actually. I hope he's willing to talk to me at all," Angelo said, sadly.
"Milo's good folks. He's put up with me for years, and he likes you. He'll forgive you. Just don't be surprised if he socks you one on the shoulder first," Amadeo said with a smile. "All right then, how do you feel?"

"How do I look?" Angelo asked uncertainly.

Amadeo grinned, that glint that Angelo loved so much back in his eyes. "If I answer that we won't be getting out of these woods for another hour at least, and we'll have to hose ourselves down when we get back to my house, so for propriety's sake I'll just say delicious and completely off limits for the time being... especially since we promised Paul we'd hold off on anything too intense."

Angelo's grinned shyly and happily. He knew he had to look like he... heck, and he loved that 'Deo loved him enough to consider him desirable even now. "All right, Dae. I'm ready."

Amadeo stuffed the soggy tissues into the empty drink cup and put his arm around his boy's shoulders.

"Really, Dae. Do I still look like I just got my backside roasted?" Angelo asked, thinking other words but determined to be more careful of his mouth from now on.

"No, your eyes and nose are still a little red, but you're not going to see your folks any time soon so they won't see. Johnny or Paul probably won't be there by the time we get back. I'm pretty sure that by the time we get to my house you'll be fine. We can call Mi from the Mom and Pop to meet us at my place, and you should be more or less back to normal. If anyone asks I'll just say you had a reaction to something in the woods, which is technically true. We just don't tell them what you had the reaction to, and we're not precisely lying. See?" Amadeo laughed, "Just be prepared to be babied by Carmie and Terri if they're there."

Angelo laughed as well. He had no idea how Amadeo did it but no matter how badly he felt, his man always managed to make him laugh.

They went back to the Mom and Pop and bought a few bottles of Ni-Hi, called Milo and asked him to meet them at 'Deo's house and headed there shortly afterward.

Milo was on the front porch when they arrived, looking uncertainly toward Angelo. Amadeo gestured everyone to remain quiet and lead the way into the house. Wordlessly they went up to
Amadeo's room, where he closed the door and turned on his stereo. He put the volume up to what his parent's deemed fit for human hearing and gestured for the other boys to sit. He nudged Angelo with his shoulder and nodded toward Milo.

"Mi... Milo. I-I'm sorry, man." Angelo said quietly, gaze on the floor, face very red, fingers tangling and untangling nervously. "I was a total jerk. I was mad. Mad a being grounded. Mad at mom finding more chores for me to do after she told me I could go out. Mad at everything," he said lamely. "I was embarrassed at the stuff she was saying and... I was afraid you were gonna tease me whenever we finally got out of the house. It's no excuse for being... for saying..." He took a breath and looked up at Milo, fearing that Milo would stay angry and that he'd lose a good friend.

Milo stood silently and looked at Angelo as he stammered through his apology. "You are a jerk!" he said angrily when Angelo paused, startling both Angelo and Amadeo. "When did I ever tease you? I mean, yeah, I tease you but when did I ever tease you about stuff like that?"

"Never." Angelo said, softly.

"You bet'cher rump never, so what on earth made you think I'd start now, Angelo Di Marco?! D'ja ever hear the saying 'Treat people the way you want to be treated.'?" he demanded.

Amadeo wanted to intervene but he decided to let Milo say what was on his mind. If things got out of hand he'd step in but right now it was only Milo speaking his mind, albeit a bit too loudly. Amadeo's brow furrowed as he listened to Milo rant. A memory of something nagged at him. He could feel it knocking on the front of his skull but his brain refused to let it in.

Angelos head bowed penitently, nodded and trained his gaze on the ground again.

"Well that's what I try to do. Yeah, I tease, and I expect people to tease back. But I'm not mean about it. I know those jackasses at school gave you a hard time and treated you like dirt..." he paused. He'd been one of those people. He'd laughed afterward with his friends, and he'd even bragged to Amadeo about it, going so far as to get angry with his best friend for standing up for the younger boy against him. His shoulders sagged. It was his turn to turn red.

"Jeez, Ange. I-I'm sorry. Man, I'm- I'm really sorry." Milo stammered, pressing his thumbs into the corners of his eyes by the bridge of his nose. "I'm a fraud. If anyone should be mad at anyone you should've been mad at me. Should be mad at me. I'm the jerk. Jeez man, I'm sorry!" he said, looking at Angelo with sad eyes.
At first, the two other boys were startled and confused. Then the memory broke through and hit Amadeo. He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the conversation between he and Milo on the street.

It took Angelo a little longer to remember what it was that Milo felt he had to apologize and be sorry about. Quietly he said, “Milo, have you ever heard the saying, 'Forgive and forget.'?”

Milo laughed ruefully.

"I haven't forgotten, not entirely." Angelo said quietly, “I never understood why people treated me the way they did, and for the longest time I was hurt and angry, but at some point I forgave them. None of them knew and the majority of them wouldn't've cared if they had. So, Milo? I formally forgive you. Can you forgive me back?” Angelo asked.

"Jerk," Milo said, holding out a hand to shake.

"Dipstick," Angelo replied, solemnly shaking the proffered hand.

"Idjits," Amadeo said, shaking his head.

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That evening was spent rehearsing. Milo did indeed do a very good impression of Joshua Di Marco, surprising Angelo several times not only with spot on expressions and replies, but with the occasional swat and the word, "Whining," when Angelo would begin to do it, knowing that Joshua hated whining nearly as much as he hated lies.

Angelo rehearsed his 'lines', practicing his delivery, avoiding whining and cussing at the risk of being smacked by either 'Joshua' or Amadeo if he relapsed. While Milo and Angelo went over their give and take, Amadeo considered his next moves. He still hadn't offered himself as free labor for the summer and was trying to figure out a way to get Mr. Di Marco to allow him to work for free, and had to think very hard about how to make his proposal without getting Angelo's father mad at him and saying no before he finished.

"I think he's got it." Milo said, tired but happy, worn out from his efforts.
"Excellent!" Amadeo replied, equally tired. "You guys hungry?"

"I could go for something." Milo answered.

"Oranges." Angelo suggested.

"Ice cream." countered Amadeo.

"Let's see what's there, whadda ya say?" Milo asked, remembering the bowl of Jello in the refrigerator and making his plans.

Everyone agreed and troupèd down the stairs as quietly as they could, as it appeared everyone else had gone to bed.

Milo picked up a spoon, opened the refrigerator door, and began to rummage around. "Hey!" he said, surprised.

"What's wrong? Bug in there or something?" Amadeo asked.

"Worse." came Milo's muffled reply.

"What's goin' on?" Angelo inquired.

"You have elephants in the refrigerator!"

"What?" Amadeo asked incredulously, wondering if his friend were a little giddy from sleep deprivation.

"Yeah, look," said 'Pazzo' Jablonski, "They left their foot prints in the Jello!" he deadpanned, showing his friends the bowl of orange Jello with three large 'elephant footprints' visible across the top.
"All right, smart guy," ‘Deo remarked, "How do you know there are two elephants in your refrigerator?"

"You can hear giggling when the light goes out!" Angelo nearly shouted, happy that he knew this one.

"Pft!" Milo said, “K guys, how do you know there are three elephants in your refrigerator?"

"Easy peasy!" Angelo crowed again, “You can't close the door!"

"Spoil sport." groused Milo jokingly.

Amadeo snorted a laugh. "Come on guys, what do you want to eat?"

"You guys want elephant, or peanut butter sandwiches?" Angelo asked.

"Elephant. It doesn't stick to the roof of your mouth." 'Pazzo' Jablonski replied.

"Guys, forget the snack. Let’s go back to the bedroom and listen to some music. I'm in the mood for some Elephants Gerald." Amadeo offered.

"I'd rather listen to Harry Elephante." countered Angelo before the three boys broke up into laughter.

"Hey, guys,” ‘Pazzo' Jablonski asked thoughtfully, “How do you shoot a blue elephant?"

The two other boys looked at each other, then at Milo and shrugged.

"With a blue elephant gun," he said as though the answer should have been perfectly obvious.
"Ok smart alec, how do you shoot a yellow elephant?" Amadeo asked.

Milo and Angelo gave up very quickly.

"You can't! There's no such thing!"

"Aww that's bad!" "No fair!" the other two boys protested.

"How do you shoot a red elephant?" Angelo asked, brow furrowed in thought, trying to remember all the elephant jokes he'd heard.

Amadeo and Milo got into a huddle, broke and 'Deo replied, "Put him next to the blue elephant and have a cross eyed guy do the shooting?"

"No, nimrods! You hold his trunk shut until he turns blue, and then shoot him with the blue elephant gun!"

"All right! All right!" 'Pazzo' Jablonski cut in, "I got one for you. How do you shoot a purple elephant?"

"Purple. Purple. Purple." Amadeo said, trying to figure it out. "Put a red elephant and a blue elephant next to each other and let a nearsighted hunter have a go at 'em?"

"Ugh, that's as bad as the other one, Dae! It's simple! You simply paint the red one blue and shoot him with the blue elephant gun! Sheesh! This is kindergarten stuff, guys!"

"What happened to the elephant when he painted his toenails red?" Milo asked next.

"What happened to the three boys who were up at three o’ clock in the morning and woke the rest of the family up?" Johnny Rossi asked from the doorway. His wife casually leaning against the door jamb, arms crossed, fighting off a grin and a yawn. Carmella and Teresa contented themselves with scowls aimed at the boys before turning back toward their bedrooms.
The three boys snickered, looking at each other with guilty smiles.

Pazzo the Elder rummaged through the snack cabinet and came up with a box of crackers which he then placed on the table.

Mrs. Rossi opened the refrigerator, raised her eyebrows at the gouges in the Jello, and then took out the half empty container of juice and a block of cheese. "Glasses." was all she said while her husband gently placed a knife and cutting board on the table.

Amadeo quickly took three glasses out of the cabinet where they were kept and put them on the table. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die?" he prophesied.

"Eat, drink and be quiet. Then go to bed or else." Pazzo said before turning back toward his bedroom.

"Thanks mom and dad." Amadeo smiled, pouring out the juice.

The next morning, Saturday, Angelo called his parents and asked if they had time to sit down and have a talk. The Di Marco's were a little concerned by their youngest son's serious tone until he reassured them that it wasn't a life or death situation, merely that he would appreciate them hearing him out and discussing what he had to say afterward.

Milo, having done all he could for the time being and still being worn out from the night before, chose to go home and sleep. Amadeo accompanied his boy to his parent's house and sheepishly explained that he too, would appreciate some of their time afterward if they were available, since he had a proposition he'd like to put to them.

"What are you going to do while Angelo tells us whatever he needs to discuss?" Mrs. Di Marco asked, perplexed, imagining Amadeo in the gardens flapping his arms around like some demented scare crow.

"I, Milady, will be out in yon garden gathering berries to be put into your next amazing mixed berry pie." Deo said with a roguish grin, taking Julia's hand gently and placing a gentlemanly kiss on the back of it, causing Mrs. Di Marco to giggle and blush.
"Get your own girl, knave!" Mr. Di Marco joked, keeping the theme of the joke.

"As you wish, good sir," replied a visibly heartbroken Amadeo, who ignored his friend's bewildered expression and bowed toward Mr. Di Marco. "I will be out in yon berry patch until I'm needed." he said, glancing at Angelo. As he left the kitchen, he paused to pick up one of the hand baskets that stood ready by the door, then continued on his way.

"All right. He's in a good mood." remarked Joshua with a somewhat addled expression before turning to his son. "So now, Angelo, what's on your mind?" he asked. "You sounded so serious. Are you okay?"

"Yes sir," Angelo reassured him. He took a deep breath and began his dissertation just as he'd practiced with Milo the night before, pausing and listening politely to allow his parents to ask questions or reply to something he said, repeating points they had made to let them know he'd actually been listening. Several times Angelo had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling or laughing because Milo had been dead on with his impersonation of Joshua, and it was funny to hear the exact same words and tone coming from his father that had come from Milo the night before.

Joshua and Julia, for their parts, were impressed with their son's demeanor. Joshua had expected some whining and foot stomping from his son whenever he argued a point, but Angelo remained calm and rational. Julia had expected frustrated tears and a few words that were close to but not quite swears, but her son didn't cry or resort to 'near' cussing to force his point. She wondered where her little monello had gotten to and where this changeling had come from.

"You're right, Angelo," said Mrs. Di Marco. "I shouldn't have found more work for you to do when you'd already finished your punishment, and I admit I shouldn't have made that threat about the soap in front of your friends. I'm very sorry," she said, genuinely. "Will you forgive me?"

"Always mamma. Just like you always forgive me. And thank you," Angelo said, trying not to show his relief as he got up to give his mother a kiss on the cheek. She hugged him briefly before he sat back down.

"Well, Mr. Di Marco," began his father formally, "I'm impressed. I don't know where this all came from, but you handled yourself admirably during this discussion, and I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, papa," Angelo replied, waiting for the 'but'. 
"If you continue with this new attitude then I'll know that you're truly growing up and maturing, and I'll treat you as such. Does that sound reasonable?" he asked his son.

"Yes, papa. Thank you," Angelo said, holding out his hand to shake. It was an unplanned action on Angelo's part, but judging by his father's expression, it was the right thing to do at the time. Joshua put out his hand and took his son's, shaking it soberly.

"As far as these other kids go..." Joshua began.

Angelo tensed up but remained silent.

"You said that Amadeo had something to say in their defense, and I'll wait on that call until I've heard him out. Agreed?"

Angelo smiled, relieved that his father was at least willing to listen before making a decision. "Yes sir. Thank you."

"All right then. Now, if you're willing," his father said, stressing the word, "To help mamma here in the kitchen while I talk to young Mr. Rossi, we'll be one step further toward settling this matter. What do you say, Mr. Di Marco?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Di Marco." Angelo said with a grin.

Joshua clapped his hand on his son's shoulder with a grin and turned to leave the house. Once outside the door, he paused, stooped to pick up another hand basket and went to join his son's friend.

He found Amadeo in the strawberry patch, carefully picking the berries and filling a second basket. Mr. Di Marco joined the boy and knelt in the dirt beside him, helping pick in silence for a few moments before clearing his throat and beginning the conversation.

"Now, Mr. Rossi. My son tells me you have some things of import to talk to me about, and a proposition?" he asked, resting on his heels and pausing in his work.
Amadeo mirrored the older man's body language and looked him in the eye while speaking.

"Yes sir. First, my father told me you're looking to hire people to work for you for the harvests, and I'd like to be one of those people, if you'll have me," he said, hesitating, afraid that Angelo's father would come right out and say no, but the man remained silent and listened to the boy beside him. "I feel badly for frightening you and your wife, for that day that Ange and I disappeared, so the first thing that I'd like to propose is that rather than paying me, the money would go to the charity of your choice." he said, once again waiting for the man to say no.

Instead Joshua looked appraisingly at the boy and said "I couldn't have you working for me for nothing, no matter how guilty you felt about what happened or for your part in it."

Amadeo bowed his head, wanting to respectfully disagree and press his point, but before he could do anything more than take a breath, Mr. Di Marco continued.

"What I'd be willing to do, Amadeo, is pay you for your work, and then if afterward you still don't feel that your debt is paid, that you be willing to take at least half for yourself, as fair payment for your hard work, and the rest I would donate, as you suggested. Do you find that a fair compromise?"

Amadeo thought about that for a few moments and then nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Di Marco. Yes, that sounds fair," deciding that he could just donate the other half if need be.

"All right then. Just promise to keep your half. Now, what is the second thing you wanted to discuss?"

"How did you know there was a second thing?" Amadeo said with a puzzled little smile and blushing a bit at Mr. Di Marco's comment.

"Well, you said 'First, my father told me...' so I had to assume that there's a second thing on your mind."

"Yes sir, I guess there was. And please, Mr. Di Marco, hear me out before you make a decision?" Amadeo gently implored.
"Agreed, Mr. Rossi. Tell me your proposition."

"Well sir, I know that you don't approve of Angelo's other friends, but I wanted to tell you that I've met them, and they seem to be decent kids. They may have bad habits sir, but I think that's more due to lack of guidance than because they're bad, if you understand what I'm saying," he asked, looking at Mr. Di Marco's face for a reaction.

"All right," he replied dubiously, "Continue."

"Well sir, it seems to me, and I may be wrong, but it occurred to me that they act the way they do because they have nothing else to do. They're not the sort of kids who have daily chores. They strike me as the sort of kids whose parent's give them things instead of their time. My idea, sir, is that, since Angelo, myself, Felix, Dennis and the others, are going to be involved in the trial that's coming up in just a week, we're not going to be able to dedicate as much time to helping as we could and... well... those other guys, Angelo's other friends, could be willing to help harvest. They would have something productive to do with their time, they'd be earning their own money and learning responsibility."

"If they were willing to work at all, which I seriously doubt," Mr. Di Marco said frankly. "I'd be more concerned that they'd spend more time fooling around than working. There would be strict rules in place. There would be no drinking before, during or after working here. I'd need them dedicated and sober, I can't have them climbing ladders and reaching for the fruit that's high up if they're drunk. And there would be absolutely no smoking allowed on my property or on the street in front of it. Do you think his friends would be willing to agree to those terms? If they don't then I'm afraid my opinion of them will stand and Angelo will still be forbidden to 'hang around' with them. If they did agree, it would be on a trial basis, and they would have to earn not only their pay but my trust as well."

Amadeo smiled. "Thank you sir. We know Steve's number and can call him with the idea. If he's on board he can call the others and we can get an answer to you within a day or so. If it worked out, then you could have five or six full time workers at your disposal. Then of course, you also have Johnny, Paul, and between trials, myself and Angelo, Eddie, Jim, Felix, Aiden, Milo, Dennis and Charlie who all said they'd be willing to work part time, so we'd still get your harvest done. So sir, are you willing to give these guys a chance?"

"As I said, if they follow the rules, yes. If not... well I don't want to be the bad guy but if they can't stay tobacco and alcohol free for a couple of weeks, then I just don't want them here. Tell them that before anything else. Agreed?"

"Agreed, sir. Thank you. There's another perk I hadn't thought of before, if Steve and the other guys are willing to do the work," Amadeo said with a smile.
"What's that?"

"They'd be too tired afterward to have enough energy to get into trouble."

Amadeo and Mr. Di Marco shared a good laugh and continued to pick the ripe strawberries.

NOTES:

Elephant Jokes from 'Odd Jokes of the 1960s'
Elephants Gerald - Ella Fitzgerald
Harry Elephante - Harry Belafonte

No disrespect is intended toward those two magnificent performers, and no copyright infringement is intended.
After lunch, with Amadeo beside him, Angelo dialed up Steve and told him about the conversation between 'Deo and his father.

Steve was quiet for a few moments, and Angelo was afraid the other boy was going to hang up on him. "Hang on a sec, Benny. Bruce and Carlos are here. Let me see what they have to say, OK?"

"Sure," was all Angelo said.

He could hear Steven talking, even though the sounds were slightly muffled. Angelo worried that the other boy was putting his hand over the mouthpiece was a bad sign, until he put the hand set back to his ear and said, "Bruce is gonna talk to Ethel about it, Carlos is going next door to Ralph's house to ask him, and they'll call Parker from there." he hesitated, "Ummm, Benny, not that it's a big deal or anything but Carlos asked me a question and I'm just curious myself what the answer is."

"What's the question?"

"Well, your dad said no drinking. Carlos wants to know if that means ever. Like, if he goes home and has a swig or two, is that gonna be a problem?"

Angelo's stomach knotted up. Just the fact that the question had been asked made him nervous that things might not work out. He covered the mouthpiece and told 'Deo what Steve had said. Amadeo put a hand out, wordlessly asking for the handset, which Angelo handed over, grateful that 'Deo seemed willing to handle the matter.

"Steve? This is Amadeo. How are you?"

"Good, 'Deo." the other boy said hesitantly, “Uh, what happened to Benny?"

"Angelo was a little concerned about your question and asked me to answer it. All I can say is that I
thought this would be a good arrangement for all of you, and I'd like for Angelo's father to give you
guys a chance. I'm pretty sure that Mr Di Marco only meant no drinking on the job or before. I
could ask him the question, but if anyone is more worried about having a drink than earning a few
dollars I'm afraid that he'll just say no to the whole deal."

"Ah, that's what I figured." Steve said unhappily.

"Look, if the drinking is that big of a deal..." Amadeo began to say, disappointed. His heart sank at
the thought that he'd been so very wrong about them despite the fact that they'd been so good to
Angelo.

"No, no, it's not the drinking, at least not for me, man." Steve reassured him, "Carlos is our bottle
buddy for the most part... the rest of us just do it 'cause we're bored. No, you just explained why
Benny..."

"Angelo."

Steve sighed, "Why Angelo would never come to my house or invite me to his. We're personae non
gratae. Benny... I mean, Angelo's father has us figured wrong, 'Deo, honest. I'm just kind of
disappointed that Be... Angelo made us out to be the bad guys. We're not bad, not really. But I
guess I understand."

"Steve, Angelo didn't make you out to be the bad guys. It's the fact that he was out till nearly two
o'clock in the morning meeting with you guys, and that he came home smelling of cigarette smoke.
As far as anything else goes, he didn't want to tell his folks anything, but his father can be very...
persuasive, when he wants to know something, and the fact is that Angelo is a rotten liar." he said
with a smile in his boy's direction, ignoring Angelo's extended tongue for the time being. "He
didn't give you guys up for anything."

"Yeah, that's what I originally figured when no irate parents came pounding on our doors for
keeping their kid out till all hours. I figured he'd either kept quiet or was one of us, like we
thought."

"One of you, in what way?" Amadeo asked.

"The fact is our folks don't care where we go or how long we're out. We figured Ben... dang!
Angelo was like us, so we just took him in. Just another 'lost boy'... and Wendy if you count Ethel
but don't tell her I compared her to Wendy. She likes Tinkerbell better." he laughed.

Amadeo laughed, and then grew serious once again. "So I have three questions for you, Steve. One is just out of curiosity... you keep insisting on calling Angelo 'Benny'. He's told me over and over how good you guys were to him, how you befriended him when no one else would. So why do you keep getting his name wrong?"

Steve laughed, "He looks like his name, you know?"

"I don't get you." Amadeo did in fact, know that his boy looked like an angel but he wondered where Steve was going with his comment.

"His name means angel, right?"

"Yeah," Amadeo agreed dubiously.

"I call *my* baby Angel Baby," he laughed again. "When the two are with us and I say Angel, they both go, 'Yeah?', so it was just easier to call him Benny for his second name... can't pronounce the whole thing right anyway, and he seemed good with it."

"Did you tell him that?"

Steve snorted a laugh. "No, I figured it was obvious. Did I need to tell him?" he asked.

"No, I was just curious." Amadeo replied, unwilling to admit to Angelo's friend that his boy really hadn't known the reason.

"So what's the second question?"

"Well, only how long do you think it'll take for you all to discuss the idea and get back to him? He and his family have been doing the work by themselves for the most part. They just need to know soon because if you're not interested they need to find other people."
"Well, we gotta get a hold of everyone. I really think the guys'll be good with the idea, but it might take a little while. Can I call you back or did you want to wait on the phone?"

"Whichever is good for you. We might be out and about so we could always call you back later if you're around."

"OK, sounds good. Now, third question."

"Angelo... Benny's father wants everyone sober for safety's sake, since you'll be up on ladders picking the nuts and fruit that are growing high up. So pass the word. If there's going to be an issue with someone not willing or able to stay sober, they shouldn't waste their time coming around. Do you think that anyone will be more interested in drinking than earning a few bucks?"

"That I can't answer, man, I can't speak for everyone," Steve said, an odd note in his voice. "But I'll pass the word."

"Thanks for your honesty, Steve. We'll call you a little later today, all right?"

"Yeah man, if you can't get a hold of us here then check out the park. Everyone kinda fell in love with the park in your town so we've been hanging out there a lot lately."

"Sounds good," Amadeo smiled. "Talk to you later. Tell everyone hi from me and Benny."

"Will do," Steve laughed. Then the two boys hung up.

"Alright, Benny, here's the deal." Amadeo said, explaining Steve's side of the conversation, including the other boy's reasoning for calling Angelo 'Benny'. "I'm just curious though, Ange. It obviously bothered you. Why didn't you say something? Or ask Steve to tell you why he insisted on calling you Benny instead of your proper name?"

"I was afraid they'd get mad or stop liking me if I made a fuss about it?"

There it was, Amadeo thought. It seemed to come out more when he was uncertain or nervous, 'Deo thought.
"After the first few times I just stopped pressing the issue. Steve's angel is a real angel, just a great person to hang with, and if that meant I had to go by the diminutive of my middle name... I mean, Ethel goes by Eth sometimes, but she's still her, you know.

"So you weren't sure about your friendship? You felt that if you said what you thought or told them something they didn't like that they'd stop hanging out with you?"

"I had a whole school full of people who didn't seem to like me simply for being the new kid? These guys liked that I was the new kid and hung with me. I didn't want to lose that."

"Now you know they like you for you, and now you know why they called you Benny instead of Angelo. You good with it?" Amadeo asked, wondering if his boy were going to 'ask another question'.

"Yeah, I'm good. Thanks for asking him to explain that. It sounded better coming from you anyway." Angelo laughed. "I'd rather be called Benny than Numbskull."

"You are a numbskull sometimes." Amadeo said affectionately. Looking around to see if they were alone he leaned toward Angelo and whispered, "But you're my numbskull. Ti amo, Benny." he whispered again and planting a quick kiss on his boy's cheek.

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NOTES:

personae non gratae - unwelcome, unwanted people
Angel Baby by Rosie and the Originals, 1960
"I swear; these babies are the smartest little things!" Carmie cooed. "Did you just hear the sound she made? I say she's trying to talk! Aren't you, you little darlin' you?" she burbled to the three-week old baby in her arms.

Olivia smiled and drooled on her aunt's hand. Carmie wiped the moisture gently with a spit up cloth and kissed the baby, telling her again what a smart and pretty little girl she was.

Terri, in seventh heaven with little Mara bundled in her arms was doing much the same, marveling over every little sound and smile.

"Sure. You get the smiling babies with the clean diapers, I get the cranky, stinky one." Gabe groused jokingly, as he changed Nathan's diaper for what seemed to be the tenth time that hour. The baby, for his part fussied, making the lalalalalalala sound that seemed to be his trademark from the day he was born. Even the doctors were astounded that he could make an identifiable sound at such a young age.

"Oh! Bethie told me to sing to him when he does that. Calms him right down." Terri said, clicking her fingers and then gently smacking her head. "I was so caught up with little Olivia here it slipped my mind. Apparently all the babies love music but Nathan quiets right down when you sing to him."

"When are they getting back?" Carmie asked, unconsciously snuggling Mara closer.

It was the third day of the trial and Beth and Dante had wanted to be there for at least one. "Bethie said she'd try her hardest to get back before the babies needed to be fed." Gabe said thoughtfully, "She left bottles here in case they couldn't wait that long, but she said she'd bring her pump along and use the ladies room if..."

"Gabriel! Men shouldn't talk about things like that!" Carmie scolded. "It's inappropriate!"

"But..." Gabe tried to defend himself. "But Bethie said..."
"But nothing, young man!" Terri said. “That's private for a woman and not to be discussed by men any more than any other... feminine thing... should be!” she said with a blush.

"But...!"

"Shush! That's final!" Carmie scolded.

Gabe scowled, finished changing his nephew, readjusted the baby's clothes and put the spit cloth back in place before settling his nephew back into his arms.

"Lalalalalalalalala." Nathan demanded.

Gabe, despite what he thought was his sister's prissy attitudes, smiled down at his brilliant little nephew and began to sing,

"Frog went a' courtin' and he did ride,
mmm hmmm, mmm hummm
With a sword and a pistol buckled at his side,
Ummm hmmm, Ummm hmmm

Hee mo hi mo keemo kimo
Rowdy rowdy ray, oh rop strop,
Pennywinkle flannel doodle yellowbug
Rop-strop by mister gammble.

He rode right up to Mouse's house,
mmm hmmm
Saying, "Please won't you marry me Miss Mouse?"
ummm hmmm, ummm hmmm

"Gabie! That poor little mite isn't going to know whether he's coming or going with you singing that gibberish at him! Honestly!" Carmie scolded again.

"Now you hush!" Gabe scolded back. "He loves it!" he said, gesturing to the wide, wet smile on the baby's face, "And he doesn't understand a word of it just yet so what does it matter if I sing to him in gibberish or... "
"Lalalalalalalalala!" Nathan protested, little hands and feet waving to get his uncle's attention.

"That's ok little Nate, the big mean ol' ladies just don't understand us menfolk," he cooed, gently chucking the infant under the chin before continuing to sing the rest of the song.

"Rop stropa... goodness!" Terri complained with a smile. It made her feel good to hear the songs and rhymes she'd told her little brothers and sisters being passed down to a new generation, but it also made her feel old at the same time, and she wondered why she hadn't said yes two years ago when Connor had asked her to marry him. These could have been her babies, she thought, then shook her head. No sense worrying about it now, she thought. Their wedding was coming up soon, and that thought bolstered her, as well as the thought that she and Connor would be, hopefully, producing their own children. She smiled and looked at the babies before her and imagined what it would be like to be a mom. Bethie made it look so easy.

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Things in the courthouse were in full swing. It seemed as though everyone in town had turned up for the spectacle. Even though normally it would have been a very quiet affair, except that friends and families had shown up to offer support, and the local reporter as well had insisted he be allowed in to cover the story and update folks on the outcome.

While the attorneys for the defense did their job, and did their best to defend their clients, there was no doubt in of their minds that Frederick Charles Argus and Brice Timothy Crighton were guilty, all that remained was to hear the testimonies of the people involved, the decision of the jury and the sentence from the Judge. Both sets of lawyers had discussed the case with the Di Marco's and the Rossi's and had requested that the boys, both still actually just shy of eighteen, not be charged as adults despite the viciousness of their attack.

Angelo and Amadeo's parents had thought long and hard about it when the lawyers had brought the idea up. If the situation had been reversed would they want their sons in prison with hardened criminals. They'd agreed that while the boys needed to be held accountable for what they'd done, they were still boys, and had agreed that they should be tried as minors.

Twice during the trial, members of Brice's family had to be told to quiet down. The first time his mother had stood up, crying and trying to get the judge to understand that he was just a boy, he didn't mean it, it was just boyish antics and he hadn't meant for it to go so far. The Argus's sat quietly, tears running down Mrs. Argus' face while Mr. Argus sat by stoically, holding his wife's hand.
At first Mrs. Di Marco and Mrs. Rossi both felt for Mrs. Crighton, until she accused Amadeo and Angelo of making it up and causing their own injuries. Then Mr. Crighton had gotten up and accused Mr. Cobrane, Mr. Barnes and Officer Delaney of leading the unidentified boy's testimonies when they'd 'met in private to collaborate and rehearse their stories', and that it was the fault of 'them Damn Yankees who didn't have enough sense to pound sand into a rathole' who were to fault. He then demanded to be informed of the identities of the other boy so that he could question them himself.

Before the Crighton clan could go any further with disrupting the court, Judge Thornton, who was hearing the case, thudded down his gavel and demanded order until everyone settled down.

"I'd like to ask the Honorable Judge Byron L. Thompson to please stand up and be sworn in," He ordered.

Judge Thompson, impressive his black pinstriped suit, stood up and was sworn in by the deputy, and then relayed his experiences the night that the 'witnesses' had gone to Cobrane's house to give their testimony.

Mr. Crighton then accused the judge of entrapment, as he was sure his lawyers were unaware of the fact that he'd been there listening. The lawyers for the defense, and prosecution, acknowledged that they had been aware of Judge Thompson's presence and had agreed to have him nearby so that there could be no question that Misters Cobrane and Barnes, or Officer Delaney had in any way led the witnesses' statements.

Judge Thompson then looked at the irate father and asked if he wanted to question the veracity of a highly regarded district court Judge and set his word against his son's. Mr. Crighton gave his son an outright dirty look at which his son blushed deep red, and then sat down, assuring Judge Thompson that he didn't care to do so.

Evidence was presented, testimonies given. The other six boy's testimonies had been read, as agreed, by their attorneys although they were in the hallway in the event that the Judge wanted to talk to them. Amadeo and Angelo, as the victims, had to get up on the witness stand and give their own statements.

Dr. Mendoza and Ms. Greer were asked to testify. Dr. Mendoza brought along a thick stack of evidence, the x-rays of Amadeo's arm and head. Photographs of the damage done to both him and Angelo, the wound beneath Amadeo's eye which was now only a thin scar but which at the time had been a deep and swollen gouge. He testified that there had been some question as to whether the boy would lose the eye or not.
Amadeo gulped. He hadn't been aware of that fact and ran an absent minded finger along the constant reminder of that day. He leaned briefly into his father's warm hand, gently squeezing his shoulder through the material of his suit jacket.

Ms. Greer testified to the fact that she had been there as Amadeo relayed what he could remember of his story, and that the words she'd written down were his as he had spoken them and witnessed by Dr. Mendoza. Officer Delaney testified as the first responding officer, as witness to the proceedings while the boys had been questioned and also regarding his conversations with Amadeo and Angelo when they'd been released from the hospital.

Next came the testimonies of Amadeo and Angelo, during which Mr. Crighton had to be removed from the courtroom for hurling obscenities at the two boys, questioning not only their legitimacy but also their right to be in the United States at all.

The jury was out for about forty-five minutes, which Attorneys Selby and Holt assured the nervous boys was a good thing, though privately they'd hoped for a much quicker outcome.

The jury filed back out and seated themselves, awaiting the Judge's next question. "Mr. Foreman. Gentlemen of the jury, how do you find?"

The foreman, Mr. Hollingberry, stood up, clasped his hands together, looked directly at the judge and said. "Your Honor. We find the two boys, Frederick Charles Argus, and Brice Timothy Crighton, guilty of all charges."

Mrs. Crighton's wail would have been heartbreaking if everyone in the court hadn't heard her spewing hatred and blame at the two victims only an hour before.

"Mr. Argus. Mr. Crighton. You have been found guilty of all charges. Normally charges of this magnitude would have meant that you were tried as adults and therefore sentenced to an adult facility. However, your victims have asked for leniency on your behalf, and you have been tried and found guilty as minors."

Freddie and Brice looked over at Angelo and Amadeo with surprise clear on their faces, then looked back at the judge as he continued talking.

"You will be sentenced to the Georgia Boy's Correctional Facility..."
"Nooooooooooo! They're just babies!" yelled Mrs. Crighton.

"Mrs. Crighton, one more outburst from you and you will be ejected from this courtroom to join your husband. Do I make myself clear?" the judge asked with iron in his voice and ice in his eyes. A woman next to Freddie's mother, a sister or neighbor perhaps, put a hand on the distraught woman's shoulder and whispered in her ear. Mrs. Crighton sat quietly, red eyed as the judge finished his verdict.

"You will be sentenced to the Georgia Boy's Correctional Facility where the juvenile justice system will exercise its authority within a 'parens patriae' relationship, in other words, the state will be assuming the role and responsibility of parent or guardian, until you begin to exhibit changes for the better, or until you turn twenty-one. Do you understand the sentence as it's been pronounced?"

The boys looked stunned and pale. Their attorneys patted their backs and whispered to them until the boys both answered "Yes, your Honor," in somewhat breathless voices before the guards came to escort them away.

The Argus's had been quiet during the entire proceedings. They remained silent as they gave their oldest son last, defeated looks, and then turned and walked out of the courtroom without another word or a look in his direction. Amadeo felt his heart squeeze in sympathy as the larger boy looked silently back as his family left, silent tears coursing down his face, no longer caring who saw or who might laugh. He looked over at Angelo who had an equally empathetic expression on his face.

They turned their backs on the Crighton's who were glowering at them, and headed outside into the bright, warm early August day.

"I thought for sure that was going to take weeks rather than just days," Angelo said as the two boys walked slightly ahead of their parents.

"Not with all the witnesses coming forward, the teachers and Dr. Mendoza, the dragon and Officer Delaney. Judge Thompson. I wonder what took the jury forty-five minutes to debate on, though. Ah well, we'll never know for sure, best not to wonder," 'Deo said.

"Mr. Di Marco! Mr. Rossi!" a voice called from behind. Five Mister Di Marco's, including Luke who had come for the weekend to be there for at least two days of the trial if it had lasted that long, five Mr. Rossi's who included Dante who had driven over for the same reason, and three women all looked backward at the person who was calling.
Mr. and Mrs. Argus ran up behind them, a little abashed to have so many people looking at them until Amadeo explained who they all were. Mr. Argus managed an embarrassed smile and tentatively held out his hand to the Rossi and Di Marco patriarchs, then to Amadeo and Angelo. His gaze took in the entire group.

"We just wanted to say we're sorry, folks. Real sorry. We didn't raise Freddie to be like that, we really didn't. It's just that, Freddie, he's a little slow and he don't always make the best decisions. He's not real sociable. I mean, he wants friends but he don't know how to really talk to folks. He kinda scares people when he talks cuz he... well he says odd things but he don't mean nothing by 'em it's just he don't seem to have the sense God gave a turnip sometimes and that Crighton kid was the only one who'd befriend him," he said in a rush. His wife put a hand on his arm and he took a breath and continued.

"He got too big for us to do anything with when he was about thirteen. He were too big ta spank and once he got goin' you couldn't catch up to him to take a belt to him, so we... well it's our fault, we just kinda let him do whatever he wanted to. Not... I mean... Dang, now who ain't got sense?" he asked himself. "We didn't let him just run wild, or at least we tried not to, but like I said there weren't much we could do 'cept send him off to a hospital, like the doctor told us. But the hospitals are... well they gave my wife nightmares, Mr. Argus said, pulling a red eyed Mrs. Argus toward him in a comforting hug.

"Please," said the birdlike woman who looked to be no more than five feet even and probably eighty pounds soaking wet. Her dress looked as though it had been borrowed from a neighbor and hung off of her despite the wide belt she'd used to cinch it tighter around her waist. "We can only apologize for our own mistakes and thank you for askin' the judge to go easy on those boys. When I heard what he'd done..." she said, choking up and beginning to cry again.

All of the women swarmed around the distraught mother and wrapped their arms around her, shushing her and offering forgiveness and consolation.

Mr. Argus looked on, his nose and eyes a little red but not giving in to the tears that wanted to erupt. Men just didn't cry, and if asked he would insist that he was suffering from allergies, though later he was surprised and grateful to find a clean handkerchief that he didn't recognize in his suit jacket.

Mrs. Rossi dug into her pocketbook and pulled out tissues and a little pad of paper and pen on which she wrote her and Mrs. Di Marco's numbers. "Now you call us, any time, all right? My name is... well never mind my name," she laughed, "But everyone calls me Natie, and I want you to as well, all right...?" she paused to let Mrs. Argus tell them her name.

"I'm Freida." replied the woman gratefully. "Freddie," she said, choking on tears again.
"And I'm Julia, Freida. We mean it now. You call us whenever you feel overwhelmed, or you just need a friend."

Mrs. Argus burst into fresh tears and the women looked helplessly up at her husband, who said "People been so scared a' Freddie. They tol' their kids not to play with 'im when he was little, and none of the parents'd have anything to do with us neither. You're all bein' so kind," he said, clearing his throat and muttering, "Dang allergies actin up again."

Mr. Di Marco patted Mr. Argus on the back. "My name is Giosua... if it's easier, and this is Gianbastite Rossi... Johnny. The same goes for us..." he also paused to allow Mr. Argus to provide a name.

"Vincent. Vinny." said Mr. Argus.

"Vinny, then. You have our numbers now. You call us when you need someone to talk to, or just need to get out of the house. Capire?"

He stifled a laugh at Mr. Argus's confused expression. "It means, do you understand? I break into Italian now and again so when it happens just say 'Oh! Giosua! Make with the English, eh?'" he said, increasing his New York accent.

Freida and Vinnie laughed, relieved and happy for the first time since the day they'd gotten the calls from the school and the police. With a final hug for Freida and hands being shaken all around, the families parted.

"I think this calls for a celebration." said Mr. Rossi. "I vote we go to..." he paused, looking at the faces of the younger boys who, dressed in their suits could only think of one place they could go dressed as they were. "The A&W!" Pazzo declared.

Angelo and Amadeo let out war whoops, taking off their jackets and ties and wishing they'd brought their grubs with them.

"They're in the back of the car." Mr. Rossi said quietly in Amadeo's ear. "You guys can slip into them in the back seat, just don't BA anyone."
Amadeo and Angelo and Con who had heard the words burst into laughter, leaving the elder members of the group, except Julia and Natie who were in on the joke and grinned, perplexed.

"I'd better get back to the house." Bethie said politely, tugging her husband's hand and leading him toward their car.

"But I wanted a Papa Burger!" Dante complained.

Mr. Rossi laughed and promised he'd bring home lots of food and they'd have a picnic at the house.

It was a toss-up as to whether Dante or Bethie smiled more gratefully.

When Dante and Bethie walked into the house they were greeted by the strains of the song Buffalo Girls being sung with gusto to their daughters, who, with wide grins and being held by their aunts in such a way that they were directing the music, were accompanied by Nathan who sang his trademark 'Lalalalalala'.

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NOTES:

1956, The Egnell SMB breast pump

Information regarding court proceedings for minors was found in Google search engine.

Lyrics for Froggie Went a' Courtin and Buffalo Girls on Mama Lisa's World http://www.mamalisa.com/?p=88&t=ec&c=23, though the lyrics were changed slightly

Grubs - comfortable clothes

BA - basically mooning passersby, could also be used to denote someone who is 'Bad A**' depending on the context.

As always, no copyright infringement is intended.
Angelo and Amadeo

With the trail being over so very quickly, Amadeo was able to begin working immediately for Mr. Di Marco, who, at Johnny Rossi's request, worked his son hard, but not cruelly. Amadeo for his part, relished the manual labor, the stretching and bending, using it as an opportunity to work on rebuilding muscle which had been getting soft during his enforced inactivity. Once or twice in the following weeks he'd been scolded by Mr. Di Marco for working through what Amadeo finally admitted were monster sized headaches, at which point he'd been brought inside, given aspirin, and made to lie down on the couch for an hour, despite his protests after about twenty minutes that he felt fine.

One day Mr. Di Marco raised his voice at Amadeo several times for taking on too much too fast. Lifting several bushel baskets at a time to stack in the truck. "You're gonna strain something, and I want to send you back home in at least as good condition as your folks sent you to me!" he scolded.

"It's like Mr. Young says, sir, can't let the bear getcha!" Amadeo laughed, referring to the gym teacher at the school who would use that phrase to encourage his boys to do 'just one more sit up' or run 'one more' lap.

"You slow down or the palm of my hand is gonna getcha! Got me?" the older man threatened.

Amadeo smiled and blushed, "Yes sir," he replied with a little laugh. He doubted that Mr. Di Marco would actually smack him but it just made him feel very at home and part of the family that he'd done so, rather than threatening to call his father.

Mr. Di Marco had a slight run in with Carlos, who thought that by mixing alcohol with his cola he would get away with it, but Joshua could smell it and rounded on the boy, immediately regretting shouting at the child as he cringed, arms over his head and face as if expecting to be beaten. Mr. Di Marco hugged the boy, who initially stiffened up in shock and then finally leaned into it, and then guided Carlos by the arm to the far end of the driveway. No one could hear what was said but Carlos came back, looking sheepish and Joshua held the offending bottle. No mention was made of the incident and Carlos reported for work every morning, sober, smelling of nothing more than soap and shampoo.

Ethel was offended at first that as the only girl she seemed to be relegated to working at ground level, picking the lettuce, cabbages, herbs and other low growing fruits and vegetables until her brother's third run in with an irate bird, or a hornet's nest in the trees.
Mrs. Di Marco kept the kids hydrated with lemonade and iced tea and fed them a hearty lunch every day. Amadeo had started the trend of tucking one of his nieces clean spit up cloths under his baseball cap to keep the worst of the sun off of his neck. Except for Parker and Steven, who turned red rather than tan, the majority of the boys took off their t-shirts and hats entirely as the heat abated around four pm. Angelo always won when they compared tans, Amadeo always came in second.

Carlos grunted that he should win hands down because Angelo was dark more than tan, and Amadeo was more bronze.

Parker and Steve joked that he could be red like them so not to worry about it. Bruce looked on quietly, a grin on his face, knowing that by mid-winter the three of them would still be dark and all of this forgotten. Ethel just rolled her eyes at the ridiculousness of boys and went back to washing the carrots and other foods that had been plucked from the earth.

Once the truck was loaded, Johnny and Paul drove the truck in to the farmer's markets or the local grocery stores, and would come home every night with very little unsold. The few things that didn't sell were baked in pies, baked or mashed with chicken or beef or cut up into soups and stews and carefully frozen for colder days.

As predicted, the kids went home too tired to want to go out at night. Mr. Di Marco received several interesting phone calls, first from Steven's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Christopher and Millie Walker, and then Bruce's parent's who'd gotten the number from the Walkers, thanking him for hiring their sons and giving them a chance.

"Steve didn't have a direction before he met you." said Mr. Walker. "He'd do a chore here or there when I asked him and bribed him with gas money for his scooter but for the most part he just hung out with the other boys and got into trouble. The fact is that once he hit about fourteen or so he was too big for us to do anything with, and we figured he wasn't doing anything too bad." Mr. Walker maintained, apparently unaware of his son's drinking, smoking and vandalism, "So we just let him run with it and be a boy. Now he's happy, he's earning his own money, and better he's offering to help pay some of the bills around here. I don't know what you did out there, Mr. Di Marco, but thank you, from Millie and me."

"Bruce is so shy he can't get the words out, and if Ethel goes with him they think there's something wrong with him and won't hire either of them," said Mr. Mustow. "Their little sister is the same way but she can at least talk enough to the kids in her class to say hello. Poor Bruce eventually came around and made a few close friends. And Ethel... well, she's a force, that girl," they'd laughed. "Thank you, Mr. Di Marco, for giving our kids a chance, and for hiring Ethel on too. She's a lot happier working for you than in a grocery store or the library."
The most stirring phone call came from Carlos' father. His story was much the same, in that Carlos had grown too big too fast and there hadn't been much that Mr. Reyes felt he could do as a single father of four.

"But Mr. Di Marco, I thank you," he’d said, voice gravelly. "He got the drink from me. What you told him, he told me. At first I was mad, and I was about to... Yo no estaba contento con lo que dijo, y yo casi...well... I almost...but then it made me think, about finding the courage to face a day away from the bottle and how that just caused more problems. I... I got rid of the drink. It was a tough few days but I got through it. If it hadn't been for your words coming from my son. De las bocas de los niños. If it hadn't been for him... I'd still be... and I'd'a never known about Carlos. Gracias, de mí y de mi hijo. Mis hijos." Mr. Reyes finished before hanging up.
(I wasn't happy with what he said, and I nearly...) (From the mouths of babes.) (Thank you, from me and my son. My kids.)

Joshua had gotten the numbers of the other two sets of parents and wished that Mr. Reyes had left his first name and number as the others had. He reminded himself to ask Carlos later if he thought his father would mind another friend. He also decided to ask around to people he knew who might be looking for kids to work through the winter months.

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With the summer quickly passing, the Rossi's planned their Welcome to the World party for the babies. Mrs. Di Marco had sent out what seemed like hundreds of invitations, which at Amadeo's polite request now included Bruce, Ethel and the others, and their families.

She, Bethie, Teresa and Carmie sat on one side of the table and, working like machines, produced one beautifully written invitation after another while the boys struggled to write neatly enough to pass muster. Mr. Rossi walked past now and again to get a drink and grin at his family as they labored.

"You could help, you know." Natie said in a tone which for her, approached snappish.

"You know I always failed handwriting in school, my darling. Chicken scratch, I believe, is what you call it?" he dug a little further into the refrigerator.

She pursed her lips and continued with her writing.
"How you got to be a businessman without being able to write legibly, I'll never understand," Gabe groused.

"That's what secretaries are for," said Johnny Rossi with a grin.

"And how fair is it that you always get on my... I mean... you've always insisted that I write neatly ever since I was a little kid," grumbled Con.

"There's only room for one rooster per household, my son. When you have your own family you have my permission to write as badly as I do."

"How am I supposed to do that after years of writing neatly?" Con asked, perplexed.

"Stick a pin in it and watch it deflate." were his father's words before he took his glass of ice water into the other room. "Carry on!" he directed with another grin as he joined his oldest son in the living room to play with the babies.

"Stick a pin in it?" Con mouthed.

Amadeo and his sisters who'd simply been watching from the sidelines looked at each other and shrugged before going back to their writing. Bethie paused a moment, looking at her perfectly formed cursive, the lower case L's and B's. The D's. She imagined taking a pin and deflating them like balloons and what they'd look like. In her imagination they looked oddly similar to her husband's horrible writing, and wondered if that's what he did and why he did it, because surely the Rossi's must have demanded at least passable writing from all of their children. She decided to ask him later how many times he deflated those balloons on purpose.
Even though Angelo would have much sooner preferred to spend his birthday on August eighth at the A&W with his friends he was told that the family was going to celebrate it at the Drover, since eighteen was such a special birthday. Keeping in mind his promise to behave more maturely, and what had happened the last time he'd gone to the Drover with his family and he'd fuss about going to the A&W, he smiled wanly and thanked his parents.

The smile became more genuine when he was told that he was going to be allowed to wear his best jeans and a button down rather than a suit, though he still had to wear his dress shoes. It was only two o’clock in the afternoon, so there was a good chance that he could arrange to meet with his friends afterward.

He tried to call ‘Deo and Steve, but there were no answers. He estimated that a luncheon at the Drover would take an hour, an hour and a half tops, no, make that two hours to be on the safe side, which would get him out of there by, let’s see, if they got there by three then that would make it around five they’d get out. Yeah, there was time but he had to get a hold of everyone. He hadn’t wanted to make a big deal about his birthday so he hadn't told anyone, but he did want to spend time with them and spend some of his hard earned money. He’d offered half to his parents to help pay for food and electricity bills with the money he'd been saving up, but the elder Di Marcos refused, telling him that he’d worked hard for it, and therefore it was his to do as he pleased.

Two more calls resulted in Parker telling him that he was grounded and wouldn't be able to make it, and Ethel telling him that they had a family gathering to go to before Joshua told him to get off the phone and get going. Disappointed, Angelo dressed and got into the car with his brothers and parents.

"I need to stop at the Elks Club for a few minutes, Pazzo asked the guy in charge of membership when I could sign up and today was the only time he was available till next month. You guys want to come in with me and get out of the heat or just stand in the vestibule if you get too hot?" Joshua asked.

"I'll go in!" Johnny said excitedly. "I've always wanted to see what the inside looks like." Paul agreed that he’d like to see the club as well, while Julia and Angelo decided to stay put.

"It shouldn't take long, keep the windows open or just stand in the vestibule if you get too hot." he said, parking in the front under a line of Sugar Maples which provided shade from the mid-day heat.
Angelo and his mother whiled away the time, chatting and joking, occasionally wiping away sweat. Angelo's leg began to jitter as he slowly began to lose patience. What had begun as 'a few minutes' had turned into nearly ten by his watch, and even in the shade of the maples it was still hot.

Before long he and his mother noticed Paul waving his arms from the doorway of the club. He walked quickly over to the car with an apologetic look and leaned down into his mother's window.

"Pop says he's making it a family membership cuz it'll cost less for all of us than just him, so he needs you to come in and sign the form, ok?"

Angelo was all for getting out of the heat, and frankly, the longer they'd sat outside in the car the more he wondered what the indoors looked like. He could just see the entryway through the bank of glass doors and he could just make out what looked like a fountain. So, getting out of the car and flexing his shoulders and tugging in a gentlemanly way at his jeans to get them to unstick from the backs of his legs as his mother flapped the skirt of her dress for the same reason, they walked into the club.

Paul led them into the entryway and they were immediately struck, not only by the cooler air but by the grand marble and brass fountain which bubbled and sparkled in the center of the foyer. The walls and floor were made of white marble streaked with grey. Several sturdy wooden chairs and a couple of items of furniture that his mother had once told him were called fainting couches sat along the walls, flanked by real, growing, vibrantly green albeit small trees. A large, filigreed, antique looking bronze framed mirror took pride of place above one of the couches.

Paul led them into a room which suddenly burst out in cheers and shouts of, "Happy Birthday, Angelo!"

A throng of smiling people advanced on him to shake Angelo's hand and pat his back. His friends from the track and wrestling teams, the supposedly grounded Parker, and Bruce and Ethel whose family gathering seemed to have been suddenly cancelled so that they could attend his birthday party.

Parker, Ralph and Steve all stood by, waiting for their turns, smiling and wishing him a happy birthday. Dennis, Charlie and the others contented themselves with throwing confetti at Angelo, getting it into the hair and eyelashes of everyone around him. Jim jokingly took bets about who could get it into Angelo's mouth first.

Behind the main table, which was covered in a bright red cloth, sparkling goblets and silver, flanking cream colored china, was a beautifully hand painted banner proclaiming, "Happy 18th Birthday, Angelo!"
The tables surrounding the main table were all covered in the same bright red cloth and set similarly. The brass backed chairs shone as though they'd just been polished. He was led to the head table and nearly sank into the comfortable cushion. Once he was seated, everyone else found a spot.

Goblets of non-alcoholic, sparkling cider were at every setting. Mr. Di Marco stood up and picked up his goblet, raised it and said simply, “To my son, Angelo. Happy 18th Birthday, and many more to come.”

To that everyone shouted "Cheers!", saluted Angelo and drank up. Angelo, after getting over his initial shock, picked up his glass and saluted them all back, resulting in a roar of approval that nearly deafened him.

The rest of the day was spent singing, eating and dancing. The adults, most sitting back indulgently while their children enjoyed themselves, some joining the wild gyrations that were considered dancing by their children during a song called *The Hippy Hippy Shake*. The children in turn, rolled their eyes but grinned as 'the rents' had their turn and danced to Tommy Dorsey and Louie Armstrong. Some of the braver boys escorted their mothers out onto the dance floor when Louie started singing Wonderful World, Amadeo and Angelo among them.

For appearance sake, and at the prompting of their parent's, Angelo and Amadeo danced with some of the girls who were in attendance. The boys smiled and laughed, and behaved in a perfectly gentlemanly manner, much to the obvious disappointment of many of the girls, and imagined that they were dancing with the boys instead.

Amadeo finally got the chance to dance with Sharon and he smiled broadly. "Share! It's been ages! How are you?" he asked, giving her a little kiss on the cheek by way of greeting, eliciting a little blush and a wide smile from Sharon, and a poker face from Angelo that Doyle Brunson would have been proud of.

The poker face became harder and harder to mask as 'Deo and Sharon shared several dances, leaning further and further in as they talked. When he saw them dancing "Twilight Time" by the Platters, holding each other close and talking into each other's ears, he excused himself to the men's room and went back outside into the midday heat. He went into the back parking lot where all of the guests had parked and walked into the woods beyond, wishing desperately for a cigarette or even a bottle of booze. He'd never liked the smell or effect of either of them but at this moment he didn't care. All he could see whenever he closed his eyes, was Sharon and Amadeo dancing cheek to cheek and whispering.
"Hey, birthday boy! What's wrong?" Called a female voice from the right.

Angelo stopped, much as a deer scenting danger, until he recognized the voice. Ethel. And where Ethel was, Bruce couldn't be far behind. The smell of cigarette reached him and he followed the scent to the brother and sister.

"Gimme some of that, would you?" Angelo asked, startling both of them by reaching over for it.

"First tell me what's going on with you, or no." said Ethel firmly. "We all know you hate this stuff, so what's got you wanting some now?"

There was no way Angelo could tell them so he said "Fine, don't give me any. I can just go to the store and buy my own." he groused, turning to leave.

"Got somethin' to do with 'Deo?" asked Bruce quietly.

Angelo stopped in his tracks. "What? No! Why would my being upset have anything to do with him?" he asked, trying not to panic.

Ethel motioned for Angelo to sit down, and reached into her pocketbook to take out a bottle of coke. Fishing round a bit more she plucked out the bottle opener and passed the fizzing bottle to her friend.

" 'Cause," Bruce said, still quietly, "A friend watching another friend having a good time doesn't usually look like he's carved in stone. Plus, I thought there was something going on between you two. Is there?"

"We're friends. Good friends," Angelo said, looking at the rich loam on the floor of the woods. "Nothing more than that. Just really good friends," he repeated quickly and with little conviction. He took a quick swig of the Coke and choked slightly.

"Methinks he doth protest too much," Ethel said with a grin.

"F*** off you two. What do you know about anything? I'm outta here," Angelo said, beginning to
"People who are just friends don't talk about each other nonstop," Bruce said quietly, as always. "People who are just friends don't look at each other the way you and 'Deo look at each other. And honestly, every guy we've ever met takes one look at Ethel and starts either mooning over her or tries to hit on her. You and Dae didn't even give her a second look. Not like that, anyway. So I ask again. Is there something going on between the two of you?"

Angelo was stunned. He'd never heard Bruce say more than four or five words at a time and even then he was sure he'd been under pain of death from his sister if he didn't contribute at least that much to every conversation. To get what amounted to several hours, if not days, worth of conversation from him in a short amount of time was unheard of.

Angelo began to get up and leave again. He had no idea how chatty Ethel and Bruce were at their school, or their neighborhood, or who might hear and pass the word on to someone else or how long it would take for it to get back to his town, his school. He'd only just found acceptance; he wasn't willing to lose it so soon.

"If it makes you feel any better, Carlos and Steve are a couple. We're all kind of that way except for me and Ralph." Ethel said quietly, but loudly enough for Angelo to hear across the several steps he'd taken away from them. He turned and looked disbelievingly at the brother and sister, sure they were going to start laughing. "It's why we have our own little group. We can be ourselves with each other."

"I never saw you... uh..." Angelo said, uncertainly.

"We weren't sure about you at first, we thought you were just a lost boy like us, with folks who didn't care, then, well, like I said, but then all you did was talk about Dae so... well." Bruce said looking shyly at Angelo. "I'd been hoping that we had a chance," he said in his quiet way, "But all you did was talk about Amadeo, so I just figured..."

Angelo looked at Bruce with an equally shy grin. "It was purely by accident, but if I hadn't found 'Deo..." he said, holding his hand out for the cigarette.

Ethel hesitantly gave it to him. "So which guy is he making eyes at? The beast. He should have at least not done it in front of you, and certainly not on your birthday," she said, sympathetically.
"It wasn't a he, it was a she."

Ethel and Bruce shared a look. "I'm sorry man, we thought we had the two of you pegged. So, you like him... but he doesn't know?" Bruce asked.

"No, he knows! That's what I don't understand! He said I was his, more than once but now he's dancing with Sharon and he danced three dances with her and the more they danced the closer they got and the third dance was a slow dance and..."

"Easy, Benny. Who's Sharon? Maybe it's a cousin of his or someone?" asked Ethel.

"I'm pretty sure she's not a cousin. I recognize her from somewhere but I can't place it. And he's dancing with her," he said, near tears.

"Benny, look. It's probably just for appearance. I mean, you and he can't exactly get up and slow dance together any more than Steve and Carlos can," said Bruce.

"That makes sense, I guess," said Angelo, trying hard not to get rid of the food he'd eaten. He took another swig of Coke and his stomach felt a little better. Ethel walked into the woods and then came back with her handkerchief wet and dripping.

"I'm not sure if you'd want to drink this water," she said, wringing out the piece of cloth. "It's from a spring a little further in, but it smells clean and it might make you feel better if you run it over your face," she said, taking what was left of the cigarette back from him.

Angelo tentatively took the cloth, sniffed it and dabbed it on his forehead. He had to admit he felt much better. He put it on the back of his neck and let the cool seep in.

"That's probably all it is, man. When you're alone just talk. I'm sure he can tell you what was going on, and it wasn't what you thought. OK?" Bruce offered.

"Bruce, can I ask you a question?"

Bruce shrugged, "You can ask." he smiled.
"Why are you always so quiet when we're in the group? Getting you to say more than a few words... What's up with that?"

"I get a little tongue tied around groups of people, even people I like," Bruce explained. "Besides, I prefer to listen."

"You like us, so you can't talk?" Angelo asked, trying to understand.

"Just in large groups, which is why we're out here," he said, gesturing between his sister and himself.

"Why didn't the others come out?" he asked casually.

"They gave up smoking. They said it was next to impossible to stand next to someone who was smoking and not want one when you were only just kicking the habit yourself. Not only that but Steve said it's hard to go up and down the ladders without getting winded, so it was just as well," the girl said.

"Aren't they going to smell it on your breath?" Angelo asked.

Ethel flashed a pack of mint gum with a grin. "Got that covered too," she replied.

Bruce looked at Angelo with a pensive expression, "Maybe you can help me?"

"I can try," Angelo replied with a shrug, "What's up?"

"You said it was kind of an accident? That you found Dae?"

"Yeah," he said, telling them about what happened in the lunch room, and then later when 'Deo was in the hospital, comatose because of him, leading them to the gazebo in the park.

"I was upset, and we were talking and I just couldn't hold it in anymore and I told him everything. I was sure he'd hate me and walk off, but... well, you know. So how can I help you? You said you're all... well, most of you are... well, like me and Dae... and you know it, so..." he said, looking back
"So," Bruce said looking at Ethel, who nodded. "I've always liked Ralph but he doesn't show interest in me. I'm so afraid of saying something stupid, or he'll laugh, or be disgusted. I mean, I know he's one of us, like us I mean, but... so rather than say something I shouldn't, I just don't talk. Like I said, I like to listen better, anyway. 'Better to allow others to think you a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.'" he quoted.

"It was like that for a while with me and 'Deo." Angelo tried to reassure Bruce. "I liked him, but neither of us could come right out and say it. So I figured I missed my chance. But then he said it first. And it turns out he was just as afraid as I was. Did you give it a chance?"

"What if the thought disgusts him? What if he turns and walks away? What if he says..."

"What if he says yes?" Angelo asked. "There's only one way to know. The question is, if he says no, and I doubt he'll be nasty about it, can you be friends still? There aren't many like us as far as I know and we need to stick together."

Ethel gave a wry smile, "If 'Deo turns out to be chatting up the ladies, are you gonna stay friends with him?"

Angelo flicked his fingers on her arm. "That's different! I supposedly have a commitment from him!"

"Yeah, I know. And yeah, if he's willing I'm willing, to stay friends I guess." Bruce said shyly.

"All right then. Ready to go back? Ready to give it a try?" Angelo asked.

"Wait." said Ethel, passing around the gum. "There we go. Let's head out."

Amadeo met them halfway in the parking lot. "Where were you?! You just disappeared! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, but there's something I need to talk to you about." he said, looking at Bruce and Ethel in a
silent plea to leave. They understood and went back to the party, Bruce in search of Ralph.

"What's wrong, Ange?"

"Tell me the girl was your cousin," Angelo said, stomach fluttering.

"The girl was my cousin." he said woodenly.

"She was not!" Angelo shouted, smacking Amadeo on the bicep, wincing a little at the impact of his fingers on hard muscle.

"Why did you tell me to tell you she was?"

"I wanted to know who you were dancing with so closely? Who is she?" Angelo asked, keeping his voice down in case anyone else was nearby.

"That's Sharon from the office at school. I had some questions I wanted to ask her. Besides, even if I were interested in her, Bull Ravinovsky would have had a problem with me making moves on her."

"Who's Bull Raven... uh."

"Captain of the football team, and not fond of sharing. No more than I am." he said sternly as he casually walked back toward the woods with Angelo following closely behind.

"What did you have to talk to her for so long for? You guys were practically licking each other’s ears while you were talking," Angelo said, becoming more brave the further they got from the festivities.

"The music was too loud and I didn't think Bull would like it if I left the dance with his girl. We were safer in plain sight. I had to, as you say, lick her ear, to be heard over the music."

"So what was so important for you to talk to her about?" Angelo asked, guiding Amadeo back to
the little clearing he'd just been in with the brother and sister team.

"I had to ask her a question."

"About what? What question could result in you dancing three dances with her? And a slow dance? And where was Bull while you were dancing up his girlfriend?" Angelo asked, unable to conceal the jealousy in his voice.

"He came over and asked us what was going on. We reassured him we were just talking and it was about school. That's when he invited me to sit with him and Share at their table rather than continue dancing. That's when I realized you'd disappeared. I finished up my conversation with her as quickly as possible and started looking for you," Deo said with an edge to his voice.

"So what did you talk about? Can you tell me that?" Angelo demanded.

"You."

"What?!"

"I'd seen you one day, walking with your nose in a book and nearly getting hit by a car. I asked Sharon about you. She couldn't tell me anything about you except that we had lunch at the same time."

"You were asking around about me?" Angelo asked, unsure whether he was flattered or insulted.

"Just Sharon, no one else. It's not like I walked all over the school asking everyone, OK?" Deo said gently.

Angelo nodded, slightly mollified.

"The thing is that afterward I found out that all student records are held under lock and key. Only Cobrane, Barnes and Mrs. Jennings have keys to the files. So I asked Sharon how she'd gotten into the records room to find out our schedules."
"What did she say? Did she break some rule or other? Did she get into trouble?" Angelo asked, concerned.

"No, she didn't break any rules, which is what I was worried about. She told me that Cobrane heard us talking. She told me that she asked him permission to give me some information about you. Nothing that would break confidentiality or student safety, just a little something, such as when we had free time in common. She said that Cobrane looked it up himself and gave her the information," he didn't mention that she wasn't supposed to give Amadeo his name, less said the better, he felt.

Angelo looked thoughtful for a moment. "What if you'd met me and you didn't like me?"

"But I did meet you. And I did like you. A lot." 'Deo said with that little smile and that glint in his eye. "Except," he said, turning Angelo to the side and smacking the other boy's bottom several times, "When you smoke!"

"Oooowwwwwww! Hey!" Angelo protested loudly. Then in a softer voice asked, "How could you tell? Ethel said the gum would get the smell off my breath!"

"Because number one, you don't chew gum. You told me yourself you don't like the texture. And two, I can smell it on your hair. I suggest that if you don't want your father to give you more than a few smacks that you head directly to the men's room, wash your face and hands and use a little of one of the colognes they have in there. You got two bits to tip the attendant?"

"No," Angelo said, flushing, "I thought we were going to the Drover and I didn't bring any pocket money."

"Don't worry, I have some. You owe me later though, plus interest," Amadeo said in a businesslike manner.

"What kind of interest? You know I'll pay you back as soon as we get home so what kind of interest are we talking? Per minute? Per hour?"

Amadeo looked around to be sure they were still alone then bent down to kiss his boy on the lips. "One of those. For every fifteen minutes I have to wait for repayment."
Angelo immediately began calculating how many kisses he'd owe Amadeo by the time they got home. "I agree to your terms," he said, putting out his hand to shake.

"Wait!" said Amadeo, "We still have to discuss the terms if for some reason you can't pay. But let's hold off on that until we get back inside, you still need to wash up."

"Spoilsport," muttered Angelo, which earned him a slightly lighter whack on his backside, to which he grinned and wiggled his butt, then hastily tucked it in and ran when Amadeo raised his hand again in a clear threat.

When they got inside Bruce and Ralph were sitting on one of the fainting couches in the entryway, smiling and talking softly. They waved when 'Deo and Angelo walked in. Bruce winked at Angelo and blushed at Amadeo's puzzled expression. Angelo raised his eyebrows in a question to which Bruce gave a faint nod. Amadeo, looking between the two of them and figuring he'd get the story when Angelo was ready, nudged him into the men's room.

After a thorough scrubbing with soap and water, including a quick wash and dry of his hair, 'Deo paid the attendant fifty cents for a towel and the use of a bottle of English Leather. He poured a little into Angelo's hands, made him rub them together before patting his neck, hair and a little on his shirt to hide any residual smell.

When they came out of the bathroom, Bruce and Ralph were gone, presumably back to the little clearing to celebrate their new level of friendship. "That reminds me, let's go outside, there's something I need to tell you," Angelo said as he began to guide Amadeo back outside.

"There you are! Where have you been? You've been ignoring your guests, Angelo!" came his father's voice from the doorway leading into the ballroom. "Get in here right now!"

Angelo blushed, "Sorry, Papà. I didn't mean to."

"You're lucky it's your birthday, ragazzino." Joshua scolded, landing a light smack to his son's backside. "Now get in there and behave yourself," he said before turning and walking back into the crowded ballroom.

Angelo and Amadeo shared a guilty grin and walked back into the room. Angelo looked at his watch and began calculating how much he would owe Amadeo once the party was over, and contemplated the penalty he'd incur if he weren't able to pay up, with a grin on his face.
NOTES:

Doyle Brunson - Poker legend
"So I'm confused, if Steve and Carlos are a couple, then who was the girl he told me about?"

"There was no girl," Angelo laughed. "It was only Carlos. Steve'd sometimes slip when we were all together, and call Carlos, Angel. I thought it was a joke 'cause if there's anyone else less like an angel once he got started it was Carlos. But like he said, he'd say Angel and we'd both say 'What?' It never occurred to me that they started calling me Benny because of that. I guess Carlos didn't want to give up his angel status, even for someone whose name actually means Angel," he laughed. "When you told me what Steve said, it just didn't click. Now it's so clear I wonder why I didn't see it before."

"Well, you're pretty easily distracted. It's one of your many charms." 'Deo said with that glint in his eye. "I don't know how you function with all those thoughts that go through your head on a second to second basis and still have brain power to walk and talk at the same time," he laughed. Their discussion was called to a halt when Mr. Rossi found them. He sniffed the air and looked at the boys. "Wasn't us, pop!" Amadeo said, holding up both of his hands. Angelo did the same thing, glad that 'Deo had insisted that he wash up.

"Well, c'mon, gentlemen, we need to get to Johnny's house and set up the canopies. Two of your brothers are there already setting up tables and chairs.

Angelo still looked bewildered so Mr. Rossi explained, "Since his yard is so much larger, he figured it would be better for the after party."

"After party?!" Angelo asked, amazed.

"Yep," Mr. Rossi grinned, "This one is for a few close friends and for neighbors who couldn't make it to the Drover.

Angelo and Amadeo grinned at each other and, after Ange finished saying his goodbyes, knowing that he'd be seeing most of the guests again in about a half hour, the man and boys headed out.
"And so now Ralph and Bruce are an item?"

"Looks like it. It's funny though, the two quietest people in the group hitching up. I wonder what they'll talk about," Angelo laughed.

"They seemed happy enough. I guess we just have to see where it goes from there."

"Yeah, now we just need to find someone for Parker and Ethel and we're all set."

"We'll be set once we get these canopies back up." groused 'Deo. "I just wish my mother would leave these things up permanently and install a bigger pool. I just keep imagining everyone trying to get into it at the same time, the water all being displaced and having to call the fire department to pry everyone out of the danged thing," He laughed.

"Georgia Sardines, packed fresh every day," quipped Angelo, causing both of them to laugh again.

Angelo sobered. "I don't mean to put a hole in your balloon, but, how is Beth Ann these days, Dae? Any better?"

Amadeo shrugged and continued erecting the canopy tents. "Some days are better than others, but I still worry about her."

Just as he'd guessed, guests began to arrive, and just as he'd expected, many of the people who had been at the first party had come to the second one as well.

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Bethie had been having a few problems since the babies had been born, sometimes sad and disinterested, sometimes crying for no discernible reason. She'd not only not lost the baby weight but she'd gained a little more, and she was sure that no matter how much Dante told her he loved her that he was only saying it and not meaning it. She'd been losing sleep, worried that if she fell asleep that one of the babies would need her or something would happen, and she was frequently fatigued. She was constantly worried about Nathan, sure that something was wrong but not able to put her finger on what the problem was since at eight weeks old he was now nearly as big as his
sisters, and a very happy, healthy, though somewhat clumsy, baby boy.

As the day of the party drew nearer, Johnny and Natie, as well as Dante and Terri had asked her over and over if she was sure she wanted to have this party. There was still time to cancel it, but Bethie insisted that she was fine, and Dante said that perhaps having a party would cheer her up. Natie, Teresa and Carmie, for their parts, had been going to Bethie's house to help with little chores and keep her company. Telling her stories to cheer her up, taking her out to stores, the movies, the park where they walked along in the sunshine with the babies cooing and giggling in their strollers, and some days they'd have lunch at the local diner.

August twenty second, the babies' party, was a success. The invitations had specifically asked that people not bring anything since this would be the Rossi's way of thanking everyone for all their help and care while Beth had been in the hospital.

People showed up with food and gifts, not only for the babies, but for Dante and Bethie as well. Beth Ann, who was overwhelmed began to cry. She was nearly crushed between concerned neighbors until she finally calmed down enough to tell them that she was happy and grateful, not sad, at which point she was nearly crushed between the neighborhood ladies who all wanted to hug and pet her.

Natie saved her daughter in law from sure death by cutting through the throng, smiling, gently patting shoulders and kissing cheeks and apologizing that she needed Bethie to help in the kitchen. Once there Bethie sighed and hugged Natie. "Thank you, mamma! I didn't mean to cry, it's all so, nice... everyone's so... it's... more than I ever..." she began to cry again. Natie hugged her and rocked her much as she did the babies.

"Oh sweetheart, you didn't need to be brave for us! We love you Bethie, and if you weren't ready to face all these people and have the party right now we'd have understood. Do you want me to ask them to leave?"

"Oh no, mamma! You can't do that! You put so much time and care and planning into this party. It would be ungrateful of me to do that to everyone now."

"Do you want to go lie down for a little bit, honey?" asked Dante, walking into the kitchen and putting his arms around his wife. "We can take a break, let everyone admire the babies and then when you feel better we come back down for a bit for dinner. All right?"

Beth didn't answer immediately, which was a sure sign that that's what she wanted to do but wasn't willing to put anyone else out.
"It's settled then, Bethie," said Natie. "You and Dante go on upstairs and rest a bit. When you feel more like yourself you come right back on down. I promise we'll take care of the babies," she said, patting the younger girl's arm and hugging her, "I had six and Zia Julia had seven. I think we can handle three," she grinned.

Beth Ann began to cry again. "I don't know what I'd do without you," she said pitifully. The absence of her parents at the party was as evident as would be the absence of colors in the state flag.

Natie sent her son and daughter in law off with kisses and hugs, and reassurances that they'd be called as soon as the babies needed them for anything. She determined that at least one of the children was going to need their mamma at one point during Bethie's rest period. What she really wanted to do was drive to Atlanta and smack some sense into the poor child's ignorant parents. Unfortunately, she knew that very little would get through to people as narrow minded as them, and would just reinforce their low opinion of 'Damned Yankees' and of Italians in general.

Natie went back to her guests and pled fatigue and overwhelming gratitude on Beth Ann's part, and explained that the poor girl needed to rest. Everyone was very sympathetic, especially since it meant that the babies weren't fatigued or overwhelmed and would be staying with the rest of the party goers.

Young children were sent outside in the front yard to play with older children with some adults who enjoyed the sunshine to keep an eye on them, while the men busied themselves in the kitchen, sauteing onions and peppers, frying green tomatoes, and marinating the steaks just so.

The women, for once were shooed out of the kitchen, and instead sat in the living room, drank iced tea and lemonade, and passed the babies from one set of arms to the other, marveling at every movement and sound the babies made. The babies for their part basked in the praise and adoration and, if the women hadn't known that it was possible for children so young, they could have sworn that the babies seemed to be in a competition to see which of them could say or do the cutest thing and get the most ooooh's and ahhhhhh's from their admiring crowd.

"Oh, come on, mamma, put him through his paces!" Amadeo joked, placing a blanket on the carpeted floor.

"Deo, you just behave yourself!"
"I am behaving myself. Is it my fault I'm so proud of these babies that I want people to know the amazing things they can do?"

"They're babies, not puppies," Natie scolded.

"What's the difference?" Amadeo laughed, gently taking Nathan from his mother's arms.

"Get over here and I'll show you the difference," Natie remarked, crooking her finger at her son as she reached to the side of the chair she was on and into the magazine rack. She pulled one out and began to roll it up.

Amadeo grinned, put the baby on his stomach and tickled the infant's ribs slightly on the right side.

Nathan rolled over onto his right side, to the ooooh's and aaaaahhhhh's of the watching ladies.

"Give him a minute, wait for it." Amadeo said mysteriously.

Everyone clapped as Nathan continued to roll to the right like a little barrel, ending up with a wide grin, once again on his stomach, and anointing the blanket beneath him with happy drool. "Lalalalalalalala," he told his adoring audience.

Amadeo picked the little boy up and began to chant;

"Round belly round belly," he said, running a finger around the baby's belly in circles. "Put a penny in," he said gently joking the little belly button as though putting in a penny. "One step," he said, walking his fingers up the child's belly. "Two step," he said, walking his fingers up the child's chest, "Chinny, chin, chin," he said, tickling the baby under his chin and neck.

The baby babbled happily at his uncle and grinned. Amadeo leaned down and planted a raspberry on the baby's neck, to which the infant wriggled and sang, "Lalalalalala!"

Amadeo grinned and began to sing,

'There's a garden, what a garden
Only happy faces bloom there
And there's never any room there
For a worry or a gloom there.'

'Oh there's music and there's dancing
And a lot of sweet romancing
When they play the polka
They all get in the swing.**

A couple of the ladies joined in, the two holding the little girls holding their hands and directing while Amadeo manipulated his nephew's body to kick one leg out after the other and bounce in time to the music, much to the pleasure of the little boy, who as usual, joined the singing in his toneless way.

"I think we have a new singing sensation in the making here! Nathan Rossi and his Rossettes!"
Mrs. Campbell crowed, kissing the top of Mara's strawberry blonde head. The hair on top was held up into two little tails with purple plastic barrettes which matched her little calico dress.

"Not at all!" declared Mrs. Witt, who held a pink ribboned Olivia. "We have the first two, lady musical conductors, and our little Nathan here is going to be a world famous tenor!"

"Watch out Lawrence Welk!" joked another woman.

"Watch out Bob Fosse!" one woman laughed as she watched 'Deo make the baby boy dance and jiggle.

"Give me that beer barrel... I mean baby! Give me that baby, you horrid, horrid, evil, rotten little boy!" Natie playfully scolded Amadeo, whacking him with the rolled up magazine which quickly began to bend and shred.

"I yield! I yield! Mercy kind lady! I cry your mercy sweet lady!" he giggled as he bowed low and handed the baby back to his mother. Natie took advantage of the bent position to smack him smartly across the backside before taking the baby, causing the magazine to give up and fall apart.

Amadeo gamely picked up the bits and pieces of magazine, and the 'stage' he'd set up for Nathan to perform on, then bowed his way out of the room to the laughter and delight of the ladies.

"Your son is priceless, Natie, I wish I had one like him." Mrs. Domville said, chuckling with the others.
"I'd say you can have him, Maggie, but he comes with a cast of thousands and I wouldn't do that to anyone who wanted to keep food in their refrigerator!" Natie complained jokingly.

The women laughed again, and a thoroughly delighted Maggie Domville was next to hold little Nathan. She'd been married when she was sixteen and had had seven children of her own. Those had given her grandchildren and a couple of the older grand children had already given her great grandchildren, but she never tired of babies and treated all as though they were hers.

She looked down lovingly at the baby and cooed to him, telling him funny little stories and jokes, none of which he understood but he would chortle on occasion as though he did. She knew babies this young didn't normally laugh and she delighted in the sound, but then she noticed that Nathan didn't focus on her face the way his sisters had. He smiled just as brightly, but his gaze seemed to be glued to her right shoulder.

"Nathan! Nathan!" she called gently, almost a whisper. Nathan smiled. He looked in her direction and past her, as though looking through her, but he never focused directly on her. She continued to smile as she reached into her skirt pocket for her house keys. She dangled them silently in front of the baby where he would surely be able to see them but he didn't react to them. She jingled them to his left. The baby frowned in concentration at this new sound and turned his head but didn't seem to see the things that made the sound. She jingled them again to his right. Once again, he turned his head but didn't focus on the keys.

She put the keys back in her pocket and called his name softly. He sighed, cooed, and smiled. He turned his head in the direction of the voice but once again didn't focus on her face.

Some of the other ladies had also brought out their keys and were laughing as the girls followed the path of the keys, sometimes going cross eyed and frowning at the strange things being jangled in front of them, sometimes smiling at the pretty sounds.

Maggie worried at first but then kept in mind that while little Nathan had grown quite a bit in the six weeks that he'd been home, and even in the two weeks he'd been in the hospital, he was still just a hair smaller, and possibly a little behind in development compared to the girls who had been much bigger and stronger at birth than he had. She decided to tell her suspicions to Natie after the party.

She worried about how poor little Beth Ann would react. It was no secret in the neighborhood that the poor girl had been having a bad case of the baby blues. She wasn't a doctor and she wasn't entirely sure, but her own grandson, Devon had been exactly like Nathan at eight weeks, and she only had personal experience to go by. She hoped she was wrong.
The women all gave Natie ideas of what they or their daughters or daughters in law had done when they’d gone through the same thing. Mrs. Witt had actually brought along a little basket lined with a bright, pretty cloth that contained bottles of various vitamins and sticks of incense. She laughed deprecatingly at the incense but said that they were supposed to help mood, and that her daughter Meaghan swore by them.

The women quickly and efficiently cleaned the house while the boys cleaned the back yard. Very soon, the dishes, glasses and utensils were washed, dried and put away, and the house put to rights while the men, who claimed they’d done all the cooking and deserved a break, drank ice cold beers in the living room telling war stories, jokes and complaining about their wives who aimed good natured complaints right back through the open kitchen door way.

The party ended at ten o'clock that evening. Parents with young children had left much earlier, and even the Rossi’s own little triplets had been in bed for four hours, Bethie and Dante had come down for a few hours to greet the guests, eat and open presents, after which they’d thanked everyone profusely, then gone back upstairs as soon as the last guest but one had gone home as well.

Maggie made sure she was the last to leave. It was nearly eleven by then, but she needed to tell them her concerns before she left.

"Natie, Pazzo, do you have a minute? I know it's late but I needed to talk to you. I'd like to talk to Bethie and Dante but I'm not sure and I don't want to upset poor Bethie more, especially if I'm wrong, and I could be, but I had something I needed to tell you before I left," she apologized quietly.

"Of course, Maggie. Have a seat. What's wrong?" Natie asked, pouring out more iced tea as they sat in the kitchen.

Maggie told them what she'd noticed about the babies that afternoon and reminded them of her grandson Devon. "Now I don't know, hon," she was quick to say. "As you know, I'm not a doctor, and of course I have no way of being sure, only what I remembered from what we went through with Devon. It's not the end of the world!" she assured them when she saw their faces. "I'm a hun'ert percent sure he can hear. But I'm afraid he might be blind."

Southern Jokes: What's the difference between -
A Yankee - is a northerner who comes for a visit and then goes back home
Carpetbagger - a northerner who comes for a visit and goes back home loaded with loot.
Damned Yankee - a northerner who comes for a visit and never leaves.

* The Beer Barrel Polka, Jaromír Vejvoda, 1927
The Lawrence Welk Show,
Aired from July 2, 1955 to April 17, 1982
on ABC: the American Broadcasting Company
as always, no copyright infringement is intentional
Angelo and Amadeo

It took some time, but apparently the vitamins and change in diet, combined with all the things that Natie and her daughters had already been doing made a huge difference in Beth Ann, who once again smiled and laughed, and took interest in the things around her.

At first Natie had lit one of the incense sticks and placed it on the ash catcher that Mrs. Witt had given her, but the scent was overwhelming. Unsure as to how to put it out without ruining it by putting it under water, she opened the windows. The breeze came through and dissipated the dense cloud of smoke, making the air smell wonderful and clean, of lavender and lilac and fresh laundry just in off the line. She thanked Heaven that the babies hadn't been born in the coldest part of the winter.

Natie hated to be the one to upset her so soon after her daughter in law was beginning to feel better but someone had to say it, and she felt it should be said sooner than later. She and Johnny invited Beth Ann and Dante over for brunch. The younger kids would be in school and the girls would be at work. They weren't sure how much the others suspected or knew, and would rather allow Dante and Bethie to tell everyone else when and if it turned out to be an issue.

Dante and Beth Ann had no idea what their parents wanted to talk to them about but knew when they'd asked if Dante could arrange to go to work later or perhaps call out for the day. They arrived at nine thirty on the dot and the elder Rossi's met them at the door, helping with babies and all the baggage. After settling the babies down in the play pen with the radio playing softly and plush toys acting as bumpers, the adults gathered in the kitchen where coffee and muffins waited on the table.

Beth Ann sat tentatively, looking between her in laws and her husband. Dante sat down with more purpose and spoke directly.

"Mom, pop, we know there's something important on your mind and we know you're trying to break it to us gently, but the waiting is killing us. Is everyone all right? Is one of you sick or something? Is it serious? Just tell us, please?"

Beth Ann quietly took her cup of coffee but didn't add milk and sugar as she normally did. She merely sat and stared at the liquid, steaming in her cup. This did not go unnoticed by Dante or his parents.

"Bethie?" Dante asked, recognizing the signs of his wife's discomfort. "Bethie Bean? Do you know what's going on?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't know. Anything. For sure. But I have a feeling. Have had for a while. If it's what I think it is." she said, vaguely.

"Mamma? Pop?" Dante asked, looking to his parents for clarification.

"Bethie, tell me what you suspected." Natie said softly.

"I don't know, mamma. I just feel something is wrong. I don't know what. It's just a feeling I have. Do you know what it is?" she looked beseechingly at her mother in law.
"What's..." Dante began nervously.

"Dan," said Johnny calmly, "Maggie noticed something at the party last week. She told us about it and we wanted to tell you sooner but we wanted to make sure Bethie was better and could handle the news."

"About what?!" Dante demanded, trying to remain calm but becoming more upset the more his parents and wife talked around him rather than to him.

"Dan," Natie said, looking directly at her oldest son, "There's a chance that Nathan might be blind." she said as gently as possible.

"How can anyone tell at this point? They're so young!" he protested. "I mean, do any of them really see anything? Aren't they all basically... well, not blind but they don't see more than shadows or blurs now, right? So how can you tell? What makes Maggie an expert on anything like this?" he demanded.

"Dan, calm down," Johnny said, the Drill Sergeant tone coming out in his voice despite his attempts to remain 'Dad', and not Drill Sergeant Rossi. "Maggie knows because she has an eight-year-old grandson named Devon. Do you remember him?"

"Not really dad," Dante said, becoming frustrated and ignoring the tone in his father's voice, "What does Maggie's grandson have to do with Nathan?"

"Devon was born prematurely, and he was small and sick, just like Nathan was." He held up a hand to forestall his son's next question. "Sometimes it happens, with premature babies, that the oxygen levels are too high in the incubators. It causes blindness."

"I don't know what you mean." Dante said, trying to remain rational and mature but close to tears. "You mean he might have been born being able to see but the oxygen blinded him?"

"It's a possibility. I don't think there's any real way of knowing," he said.

"We have to get him to the pediatrician!" Dante said, getting up and striding to the telephone on the kitchen wall.

"We thought that might be your first reaction so we've already made a tentative appointment for him. He's scheduled to be seen at eleven with Dr. Mike. Doc Stockwell called an ophthalmologist up in Macon, Doctor Mark McQuillen, who has agreed to see Nathan around three o'clock depending on what he finds when you see him. We're prepared to take care of Mara and Olivia. It's all pending your OK."

"Of course, OK." Dante fairly shouted.

All this time Beth Ann had been sitting quietly, staring at her coffee, hands listlessly in her lap. Natie walked around the kitchen table to gather her daughter in law in her arms. "What are you thinking, Bethie?"

"I knew something was wrong. I knew it." she said.

"Did you know what? Did you suspect that he was blind?" Natie asked gently.

"No, they were so little, so young, I know babies that young don't see clearly, but I knew something was wrong. It's all my fault. Doctor Stockwell asked if I had any questions and I did but I didn't know what they were. I didn't know what to ask. But I knew something was wrong. I should have
known. It's all my fault." she said softly as tears ran down her cheeks.

Natie quashed down a surge of irritation. She loved Beth Ann but sometimes the girl just expected too much of herself and then she'd become depressed or anxious because of some fault she found in herself. Natie blamed the girl's parents and not the child herself, and she hoped with some unconditional love and common sense talk that Beth Ann would stop being so hard on herself before Natie lost it and smacked the girl's backside.

"It's nearly ten o'clock now. It'll only take you a half hour to get to Dr. Stockwell's but I'd leave in about fifteen minutes to give you a little leeway for traffic problems. Now, have your coffee," Natie said, dumping out Beth Ann's slightly cooled coffee and refilling the cup with hot before pouring for her son, husband and herself. She put the softened butter in the center of the table along with the sugar and milk and prompted everyone to eat.

Beth Ann sat, a dejected set to her shoulders, and didn't move even when her husband fixed her coffee and put it closer to her.

"Beth Ann Rossi!" barked Johnny.

Beth Ann nearly jumped to attention at the tone, her spine straightened and her head came up abruptly so that she could look at her father in law with wide eyes. Dante opened his mouth to complain at this treatment of his wife but his father gave him a look and raised his hand, and Dante backed down.

"Beth Ann Rossi." he said again in a much gentler tone, "There is no way you could have known anything was wrong, if anything is wrong, any more than you could have known you were having triplets when your own doctor said it was twins. Now young lady, you still stop blaming yourself for things you have no control over and no way of knowing. Is that understood?" he demanded, his tone firm but not hard, his eyes soft on the daughter in law he loved as much as one of his own flesh and blood.

Beth Ann, shocked out of her funk, nodded and looked at her father in law, seeing and hearing him in a way that her husband obviously hadn't, and appreciating it. "Yes, dad." she said shyly.

"Now that we've got that settled." Johnny said more quietly and with a little smile for his daughter in law, "We'll take things one day at a time. We'll know more in a little while than we know now, and regardless of what the outcome is, we'll deal with it as a family. Understood?" he asked, leaning toward her and giving her a kiss on the forehead.

"Understood." she said softly, smiling back.

Dante looked back and forth between his father and his wife and shook his head slightly, uncomprehending. If he'd raised his voice to her, she'd have been reduced to tears and he'd have spent the rest of the day apologizing and doing every little thing he could to make her feel happier, and still have run the risk of spending the night on the couch. He looked at his father, who with an otherwise straight face, winked back at his son.

The younger Rossi parents did their best to relax. Beth Ann went into the bedroom to feed the babies before they prepared to leave, trying not to cry as she fed her little boy. He was by far the more sensitive of the three, she'd noticed. She wondered if his lack of sight made him more sensitive to her moods, and she didn't want him to feel sad or scared about whatever was to come. She rocked and sang as she fed the babies, grateful for the little lullaby that Tia Julia had taught her. The girls were asleep when her husband carried them to the car. Nathan was dozing, little cupid bow lips smacking quietly.
They arrived at Dr. Stockwell's office in plenty of time and sat with little Nathan, enjoying the cool waiting room. The windows were open and the fresh air wafted through, bringing the scents of freshly turned earth and cut grass.

"Dr. Mike can see you now, Mr. and Mrs. Rossi." said Sarah, the receptionist, with a smile.

"Thank you." They said, fairly rushing into the examination room she indicated.

Marilynn, his assistant, set up the room with all of the equipment the doctor had said he'd need and chatted amiably with the nervous parents. "Now, if you can just take off his little jumper and socks we can get a current weight on him, all right?" she smiled.

Beth Ann deftly removed the items of clothing and soon Nathan was in nothing more than his diaper, which she changed quickly.

"Oh aren't you just the most handsome little boy?" cooed Marilynn, taking the baby from his mother and cradling him in her arms to chuck him under the chin with her finger.

The baby smiled and drooled and looked past Marilynn much as he'd done Maggie and his grandparents when they'd tried the same thing.

"Now let's see how much you weigh and how big you've gotten, shall we?" she continued her monologue to the baby. "My goodness! We're gonna have to start calling you the jolly green giant pretty soon, little man! You're a half a pound heavier from your last visit two weeks ago!" she praised the baby who burbled and drooled a little more.

"Seven pounds, Mrs. Rossi! My goodness he was just a little bit of a thing and now look at him, so big and healthy. Such a big boy now, Nathan! Let's see how tall you've gotten!" she said, placing the baby on the paper covered examination table. She took a pen and made a long mark at the crown of his head on the paper, straightened out his legs and made a quick mark where his heels ended. They all laughed as the pen apparently tickled his feet and they both flew into the air as he made a noise that sounded very much like "Hey!"

She laughingly handed Nathan back to his mother who stood waiting with a little blanket to wrap her son in against the slight chill in the examination room while Marilynn took a tape measure. "Twenty-two inches!" she announced before taking the tape and measuring around his skull. "He's got a lovely shaped head." she admired.

"Is that good?" Dante asked nervously.

"He's an amazing little guy, Mr. Rossi. He was just about three pounds and fifteen inches when he was born. He's gained four pounds and has grown seven inches in almost ten weeks. He's a little miracle! He's obviously a very happy and very healthy baby. I don't know what you've been feeding him but keep it up and I won't be surprised if he's taller than his daddy when he's grown." she joked.

Dante and Beth smiled. Beth planted a happy kiss on the top of her son's head, forgetting for just a few moments that her remarkable son might be blind. No, she corrected herself. Perhaps blind, but still remarkable.

Dr. Mike Stockwell came in moments later with a smile on his face as he greeted Dante and Beth Ann. He tickled Nathan's tummy and the baby burbled and smiled, blowing little spit bubbles which made the adults all laugh. He tickled the baby's tummy again and the baby giggled. "Well,
Master Nathan, what's this I hear that you've been worrying your folks and grandparents, eh? How about let's see what's going on, shall we, little man?" The doctor said, smiling and speaking gently.

"Baaaabbbrrrrpppph." agreed Nathan.

Dr. Mike laid the baby back on the table and took off his stethoscope, listening to the baby's heart and lungs. Then he took it off from around his neck, coiling it like a black rubber snake with the bright shiny metal diaphragm in the center. He held it within a couple of inches in front of the baby who should have been able to see it, if not focus on it perfectly. He held it closer and then pulled it back, then moved it side to side. As they'd worried, the baby didn't react to it at all.

The doctor put the stethoscope aside and picked up a tuning fork. He tapped the fork against the wooden frame of the table and held it to Nathan's right. The baby's head swiveled toward the sound, a small frown puckering his features as he tried to identify this new sound. Dr. Mike stopped the vibrations, switched hands and did the same thing on the baby's left with much the same results. He did the same experiment with several different tuning forks at different frequencies with the baby even responding to pitches that the adults had trouble hearing.

Finally, he shone a light into the baby's eyes. Unlike most babies, Nathan didn't react at all to the stimulus. Beth Ann nearly started to cry again.

"There is loss of vision." Dr. Stockwell said gently. "I could make out a little scarring at the back of the eye, but as far as that goes Dr. McQuillen can tell you more."


"There are many reasons why Nathan here could have lost his eyesight, Mr. Rossi..."

"Dante. Mr. Rossi is my dad. Every time you say Mr. Rossi I'm looking for him." Dante joked despite his fears.

"Dante then," Dr. Mike said, smiling softly. "There are many reasons why Nathan might be blind. Are either of you aware of blindness running in either of your families?"

Beth Ann and Dante looked at each other for answers but each shook their heads. "No one's ever mentioned anything about it in my family." said Beth Ann quietly. "But then I don't believe it's something they'd admit to," she finished, an embarrassed expression on her face.

Dr. Stockwell looked enquiringly at Dante. "Bethie's family holds some rather... strict opinions on things like this." he hedged. "As far as my side of the family, mom would be the one to ask but when she told us about her suspicions she only mentioned a neighbor's grandson, not anyone in the family."

"That may rule out genetics and heredity then, but without a more detailed family history it's hard to say for sure."

"The next cause could be, as I suspect, that Nathan may have been exposed to high levels of oxygen in the incubator. The scarring on the back of his lens could be a sign of that. It's called RLF. Retrolental Fibroplasia, where the baby is given too much oxygen in the incubator which causes a film over his eyes."

"The third possible cause could be something we call TTTS... Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome. It was discovered in 1875 by a German obstetrician, Friedrich Schatz, who noticed that frequently in multiple births, one twin would receive more of the natal blood flow and oxygen than
the other. It's just something that happens with multiples sometimes."

"Considering that your girls were two pounds heavier than he was and healthier, that could be a possible reason. TTTS has been known to have many side effects, such as one of the multiples being smaller, sicker, such as Nathan... heart problems, which this little guy seems to have avoided, though blindness has been linked to this phenomenon as well." He didn't mention the chance of death, since these poor people had already lived through the reality of that particular nightmare.

"Now, Dr. McQuillen is the specialist and he can most likely tell you more than I can. If anything can be done he'll tell you, but..." he said holding up a warning finger, "There may be nothing that can be done, and you should keep that in mind."

"What... I mean, I've heard of babies being born blind and going to special schools. Will we have to send him away?" Beth choked out, clutching her son to her chest.

"No. Mrs. Rossi... Beth Ann," he amended. "Yes, there are schools for the blind but there are places in nearby cities that can help as well. It's not like it used to be where the only school for the blind was on the other side of the United States. We understand blindness a lot better than we used to, and a blind person is capable of doing many things that a sighted person can do with the right training. There is a future for Nathan that wasn't there just ten years ago. What I'm saying is, don't give up hope." he said, placing a gentle hand over Beth Ann's, rubbing the cold fingers.

Now at least knowing the problem the younger Mr. and Mrs. Rossi were more at ease but once again Beth Ann began to blame herself for not knowing, and began crying. Dante asked for a moment alone with her in the doctor's office to talk to his wife.

With a request to take one last close look at Nathan while they talked, Dr. Mike took Nathan and shut the door behind himself.

"Bethie Bean," Dante said, sitting down on the black leather couch and pulling his wife down next to him wrapping his arms around his weeping wife, "You know I love you more than life itself. I love you more than breathing. I love you more than blue skies and sunshine and the smell of flowers. You know that don't you?" he asked, rubbing his face lightly in her hair.

Beth Ann took a deep breath and said in a quavering voice. "Yes, I know, and I love you too, Dan."

"And I know you were going through a really tough time for a while there, but you feel better since then, right?" he asked gently.

"Yes, honey. Everyone was so good and understanding and helpful. It was horrible, feeling that way, and I'm so glad it's over."

"But it's not over Bethie, not completely is it?" he inquired.

"It's not the same, really. It's not like it was, that... that feeling... it was terrible. I'm so glad that's over with." she said snuggling into her husband's broad chest, considerably calmer, wrapped in his strong arms and warmed by his words of love.

"OK then, Doc has said it's not the end of the world right?"

"Right." she said reluctantly.

"He said there's things we can do, and places that are close that can help, and prospects for Nathan
are good, right?"

"Right." she agreed softly, relaxing into his arms.

"Then Missie, you're gonna stop blaming yourself for things you couldn't have known, including not knowing what questions to ask," he said softly. "Your mother's intuition told you something was off and if you'd been feeling better... and it's NOT your fault how you felt so don't you dare go into that!" he scolded, "If you'd been feeling better you might have seen it, but Bethie Bean, the rest of us weren't going through what you were and we didn't see it. Understand?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts about it, Bethie. We none of us caught on til Mrs. Domville did, and she only did probably because she'd already been through it once before. If she hadn't noticed, chances are we still wouldn't know for sure. Understand?"

"Yes, but..." Beth tried to protest.

"No buts," he said firmly, holding her closer. "You didn't know. We didn't know. No one knew not even the doctor whenever we brought the babies for their checkups. So now, Mrs. Dante Rossi, I'm gonna tell you this just once. It is not your fault. It is no one's fault. Despite what your, he bit back a particularly harsh word in reference to her parents, which he knew even now at the age of 30 would get his mouth soaped out if it got back to his mother, "Parents," he slurred the word, "may think or say, this is not a bad thing, it is not a punishment and it is NOT anyone's fault, especially not yours!"

"Those babies are thriving because of you. Sick as you felt, you still took care of them when I know you didn't feel up to it. You still fed them and changed them and did everything in your power to make sure they were taken care of."

"I had you, and mamma and dad, and Terri and Carmie and the boys. I can't say I did it all myself, Danny." she protested quietly.

"The point is those babies are fat and sassy and happy as pigs in mud." he joked.

"Dante!"

"My point is," he said, more sedately, "Is that you are a fantastic mother no matter whether you have the whole U.S. Calvary helping you or not, and I'm not gonna listen to you blame yourself anymore. I'm gonna get it through your head that you are not at fault for anything. Now, mamma and dad had a sure fire cure for 'histrionics' as dad would call them."

"Historyon..." she protested.

"You heard me, Mrs. Dante Rossi. Histrionics. Blaming yourself, being ridiculously hard on yourself. Amadeo does it to get himself out of his latest trouble with dad and dad falls for it ninety-eight percent of the time. Gives dad those big brown doe eyes and verbally spanks himself so that dad doesn't do it with his hand. All he needs is the sackcloth and ashes. It drives me insane." he muttered.

"I may be wrong," he said in a more normal tone, focusing back on his wife. "But you might be being so hard on yourself so that no one else will do it. Well Beth Ann, no one else blames you, and anyone who does is a narrow minded, unrealistic fool and we don't have room for those in our lives. The people who matter don't blame you, and you're one of those people who matter. Got me?" he demanded quietly, his eyes flashing.
Beth Ann had never seen this side of her husband and she looked up at him as though seeing him for the first time. "OK, Dan." she said quietly.

"Now you listen to me Beth Ann Taylor Rossi, if I hear 'It's my fault.' or any other self-recrimination coming from your mouth, I'm gonna do what mamma and pop used to do to us and take you over my knee and paddle your backside until you change the tune. Understand me?"

"You wouldn't!" She said, pushing away from her husband to get a better look at his face. "If that's some kind of joke it's not a very good one!"

"It's not a joke, Bethie. If a spanking is what it takes for you to get it through your head that you are a stellar mother, despite your unnatural habit of being human and prone to the same mistakes as the rest of us inferior mortals, then that's what I'll do." he said, trying hard to keep a straight face at the look of indignation on his wife's face. It was the most emotion he'd seen from her in weeks and even though it was anger at him he was still happy to see it, instead of the listless, sad one he'd seen prior to that.

Beth Ann was about to let her husband have it verbally when she saw the glint in his eye and the fact that he was biting the insides of his mouth to keep from laughing. How dare he laugh! She thought. Well then two can play this game.

"All right, Dan," she said in a timid voice, looking at his from beneath her lashes as she bowed her head. "If that's what you think is needed."

Dante's eyes widened. He'd expected yelling, maybe for her to even sock him one on the arm. He'd only wanted to shock her but instead he was the one in shock. "I... I... Bethie... I mean, all I... I mean..."

"On one condition," she said docilely. She looked at him for a response. All he could manage was a numb nod.

"I'll agree on the condition that the next time you try to pull a stunt like that on me I get to take you over my knee. And believe me I'll use your mother's entire stock of wooden spoons until either you or them are worn out. Got me?" She said, eyes flashing, gritting her teeth and looking frighteningly like his father in Drill Sergeant mode.

Dante caught on and let out a laugh of relief that his wife wasn't furious at him, or any more serious about her threat than he'd been, and that his words had seemed to have finally made the impression he'd been going for.

"Agreed." he said, looking coyly at her. "Forgive me for the shock treatment?"

"Yes." Beth Ann, his sweet wife replied, her voice softer but with an edge of steel in it that Dante was afraid he'd get cut on, "But I meant it when I said don't ever do that do me again. And don't you ever threaten to spank me, Mr. Dante Rossi. Mr. and Mrs. Psychopath Taylor have their faults," she said, shocking them both with her blatantly disrespectful name for them, “But I'd scream bloody blue blazes if they ever lay a hand to me, and I'm sure as shootin' not going to allow anyone else to do it, and I love you!"

Dante looked down at his wife, impressed, and yet sad at this new insight into what her life had been like. He knew some of it, having met the people and listened to what he thought of as some of their whackier views on politics and religion but had always remained respectfully quiet. But he'd been witness to many instances of verbal abuse when he'd first been dating her, not only from her parents but from her brothers as well. He had, on several occasions, taken her by the hand and
pulled her physically out of her parent's house, unable and unwilling to listen any more to the horrible things they said to their only daughter and youngest child.

"And I love you, Bethie Bean," he said quietly, wrapping her in his arms again where she willingly stayed for a few moments more before going to retrieve their baby from the nursery area.

The drive to Macon took most of their afternoon. They stopped for lunch and to call the Rossi house for an update on the girls. One of them, Mara, apparently, was in the middle of a hissy fit and refused to be consoled but Natie was working on it. Johnny reassured the parents that both of their girls were in fine health, had eaten and had, until Mara had begun to wail, been content and happy.

"Put the phone up to her ear, dad, please?" Dante asked.

"OK, here she is." Johnny said, his voice muffling as he put the phone down to his granddaughter’s ear.

"Mara and Olivia, come out to play, 
The moon's shining bright as a summer's day; 
Leave your supper, and leave your sleep, 
Climb with your playmates up the tree. 
Come with whoops, and come with a call, 
Come with a smile or not at all.
Up the stairs and down the halls, 
A dinner roll will serve us all.
You find milk, and I'll find flour, 
And we'll have cake in half an hour."** He sang.

He could hear his daughter settling down at the sound of his voice.

"Dad, you ready?" he asked, still in the sing song voice he'd adopted to recite the rhyme.

"Ready, you start." Johnny said quickly and softly.

"Vento sottile, vento del mattino, vento che scuoti la cima del mio pino." Dante sang.

Johnny, picking up the tune from the beginning, sang "Vento sottile, vento del mattino, vento ch scuoti la cima del mio pino..."

They sang it to the end. Beth Ann, who had been standing by listening with Nathan in her arms had grinned when her son began to sing along as he was prone to do. Suddenly Dante grinned and held the phone out so Beth could hear better. In the background, they could hear both of the girls singing "Lalalalalalalalala."
High-dose oxygen therapy led to retrolental fibroplasia (RLF) in premature infants, blinding about 10,000 of them. Seen as a membrane of scar tissue behind the lens. Would occur because due to too much oxygen in the incubator.

**
Based on the Traditional English Nursery Rhyme
"Girls and Boys Come Out to Play"
Published 1708
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girls_and_Boys_Come_Out_To_Play

Vento Sotille/Gentle Wind

http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=es&p=3746&c=120
Dante and Beth had driven home in silence. There had been nothing more that Doctor McQuillen had been able to tell them than Doc Mike hadn't, except that surgery might give Nathan back some of his sight. He might be able to see afterward, or he might only be able to make out shapes, perhaps only shadows. There was no guarantee that it would restore his sight at all. He'd sent the young parents home to think about whether they wanted to try the operation. He was of the opinion that the sooner they tried the better, but he was concerned about the baby's age and how he would react to the anesthesia.

After breaking the news to the family that night, they discussed their options over dinner at the Rossi Senior household. Oddly, Amadeo's eyes felt extra dry and he ran a hand over them until he saw red circles. He wondered if his nephew would ever see that much. Natie put a hand on his shoulder but he reassured her that he was fine, 'Shaken, not stirred.' to paraphrase James Bond.” he quipped with a little smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Gabe silently propped his forehead on his fingers and closed his eyes, trying to think of what life without sight would be like. Con, who always had a comment ready for anything, had been unnaturally quiet during the conversation. He also closed his eyes, hands on his lap. Imagining.

Carmie tried unsuccessfully not to cry and her sister and sister in law comforted her. "This is wrong," Carmie laughed, wiping away tears. "I should be the one comforting you." she said, putting an arm each around Beth and Terri.

"I've had all day to get used to the idea." Beth said quietly. "We just sort of dropped a bomb on the rest of you, but we weren't sure how else to say it."

"So, he can have surgery, but there's no guarantee." Gabe repeated softly, opening his eyes and looking at his family. He wondered what it would have been like if he'd grown up never seeing the faces of the people he loved. Even his little brothers, though he'd have to be threatened with a hot poker before he would admit how much he actually loved Con and Amadeo.

"No. No guarantees." Dante said. "So now we have to decide if it's worth the risk. If we try and the surgery fails then Nathan hasn't lost anything, he won't even have the memory of it so he won't feel the frustration or upset that he might if we waited until he was older. But then there's the problem with the anesthesia. Doctor McQuillen told us that there was the chance that Nathan might not wake up from it."
Everyone went silent as they thought about that. Johnny took a forkful of food, but his wife's normally perfect dinner seemed tasteless and had no texture. He put his fork down.

"If you do wait until he's older and stronger, what then?" he asked. "Did he say?"

"Only that the sooner we do it the better. The scarring behind his retinas could thicken and become harder to remove the older he gets, and his chances of regaining sight are lowered."

"But they're low now." Gabe said, a slight tone of desperation in his voice. "And no guarantees. And the possibility that he could d... that he could... No! Please Bethie, Dan. No," he pleaded.

"But there's a chance he could see." Con said, finally speaking. "Did the doctor say what the chances are of... of the anesthesia having a... a bad effect?"

"No, not in percentages." Beth Ann replied.

"How will they know if it works?" Con asked. "I mean, he can't say, 'Yes I see that.' I'm sorry I know I'm being dumb but..."

"You're not dumb until you say you're dumb." Dante tried to joke with a little smile for his brother. "Nathan is at the age now where if he can see he can focus on things. If you hold a toy up to him he can focus on it and follow it left to right and such... that's how we'd know. The question would be how well he sees, and we won't know that until he can talk."

"In another few weeks his vision would be almost where an adult's vision is. The girls will be able to focus on more and their range will be further. Doctor McQuillen suggested that we do the surgery within the next month and a half. He has Nathan scheduled for the surgery tentatively for September 25th, the babies will be ten weeks old by then."

"Two and a half months..." Con said thoughtfully. "And the doctor will be able to tell what he needs to know by then?"

"We could wait until he's six months old," Dante said, "That's why he scheduled it tentatively. We can cancel it all together or reschedule it. We just have to weigh the risks and the possible
outcomes and make a decision. But six months is the oldest he suggests we do it. There are doctors who will do surgeries when the kids are older, depending on the cause of blindness, and there may be some out there who think Nathan has a chance even later, but Doctor McQuillen is not convinced that the outcome would be any better by then. He gave us the name of another ophthalmologist we could go to for a second opinion. He even gave us a list that we could go through and choose ourselves if we felt more comfortable doing that."

"Why'd he do that? Wasn't he sure of his own diagnosis?" Con demanded, curious and a little leary of this new doctor's abilities.

"It wasn't like that, hon," Beth Ann replied patiently, "He just wanted us to get another opinion so that we could make up our own minds without him influencing us in any way. He said he'd told us what he thought but if we would feel better asking another doctor then that was our right and he certainly wouldn't take it personally. He told us that when he faced the same situation with his nephew Carter, he told his brother and sister in law to get a second opinion, and he gave them a list as well. He said that if we were willing, he'd ask them to give us a call and tell us what decision they made, and how things worked out, but he couldn't tell us anything himself. We allowed him to give them our names and number."

"May I see the list?" Natie asked.

"Of course, mamma, one moment," replied Beth Ann, getting up to get her pocketbook. She came back with the list. It was a depressingly short one. Ten names were on the list, five of those were in Georgia. She looked at it again. Macon, where they'd just been, Athens, Atlanta, Decatur and Camden. The rest were even further away, Maryland, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New York, Chicago.

"Doctor McQuillen said that there are other places some of them are way out on the west coast, some are even out of the country."

Natie put down the list, trying not to show the frustration she felt. Even the doctors in Georgia were a fair distance to drive with a cranky two-and-a-half-month old baby. "Well," she said with a brightness she didn't really feel, "You have options here, and you know we're here to help. The boys start school in a few days... that reminds me we have to go buy your school clothes and supplies, we'll go tomorrow" she added absently as an aside to her two younger sons, "But you make your decision and whatever you decide we're behind you and you know we'll help in any way we can." she reassured her daughter in law and oldest son. Natie belonged to several lady's clubs but she had no problem withdrawing from all of them if her children needed her.

"We know, mamma. We don't know what we'd do without you and dad." Dante said, blushing slightly as he made his admission. He loved is parents but he was upset that his family were left
taking so much upon themselves. He was very angry with Beth Ann's parents and brothers, who hadn't called or written or tried to keep in touch since the day at the hospital. Beth Ann had tried to call but her parents, ever mindful of having to 'Keep up with the Jones' as the saying went, had an Ansaphone and allowed that to take all calls.

So far they'd been ignoring all calls from the younger Rossi's but Dante had left one earlier that day when Beth had been upstairs dressing Nathan that should have burned their ears right off. Yet another soap-able offense if his parent's ever heard. He and Bethie didn't have an Ansaphone and he smiled when he thought about his in laws trying to get through to give him an ear full and getting nothing but a ring tone in response. He imagined them driving all the way from Screven to confront them and finding the house empty and locked, and found himself viciously enjoying the picture.

"I don't know what you're smiling about but you look like the cat that got the cream." Bethie said with a wry little smile toward her husband, who hadn't been as quiet during his phone call as he would like to have believed.

"Better," Dante said, leaning toward his wife and kissing her soundly, "I got the golden goose. And I'm starving, lets eat before it gets too cold!" he said with a grin, digging into the chicken fried steak.

Stunned by his sudden about face and heartened by his flash of humor the other Rossi's dug into the food, which even cool tasted better than the finest the Drover had to offer.

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NOTES

'Shaken and not stirred.' James Bond movie, Dr. No, by Ian Fleming 1958
Ansaphone, created by inventer Dr. Kazuo Hashimoto, and marketed by Phonetel in 1960.

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Angelo and Amadeo

School started on the eighth that September since it was closed on Monday in observance of Labor Day. The children, most dressed in brand new, and freshly washed clothing, greeted each other in the compound in front of the school, lazing in the shade of the trees or sitting on the brickwork in the sun, catching as much of the sun's rays as possible before being consigned to the dark depths of the dungeon otherwise known as school. It had taken a couple more weeks to gather the courage to go back to that school, but with Milo, Amadeo, Milo and a couple of guys from the wrestling team with him, he wasn't nearly as afraid as he'd been.

Despite his gang of body guards, Angelo approached the school with some trepidation, even with Amadeo and Milo right beside him. The 'What if's' had been running through his mind like a hamster on a wheel, going round and round and not getting anywhere. He nearly turned around and went back home twice and would have if not for his two best friends there beside him to urge him on.

Once at the school they saw Charlie, Dennis, Jim and Aiden on the brick wall. The four boys called and waved to the other three and motioned them over.

"Good to see you, Ange! I knew you'd come back! Good for you!" Jim said happily, clapping Angelo on the back with enough force to make the other boy stagger forward a few steps. "Oh, sorry man, I'm just really glad you got him to come back." Jim said, patting a little more softly, laughing.

"We're waiting on Eddie and Felix, want to join us? Do a little catching up?" Charlie asked.

Amadeo laughed, "We saw you guys last night at the back to school party!" he laughed, "So what happened between nine o'clock last night and this morning that's new?"

"My brother proposed to his girlfriend at some point last night." Charlie said with a smile. "They've only been going out for six years and he wasn't sure but I guess she told him a few days ago to make up his mind 'cause she wasn't going to keep waiting. According to him she put it to him in language that he thinks no proper lady should know but it sure did wake him up. He went to mom and pop and asked if they could help him buy a nice ring."
"Mom shouted 'Hallelujah!' and dad just said it was about time and what the h*** took him so d***ed long." Charlie laughed. "Then mom said he was lucky he found a girl that was willing to put up with him and he'd be a fool to let her get away. So they went out and bought the ring and he took her to a movie last night and afterward knelt down in front of the theater and proposed in front of all of the folks there. Apparently they got a lot of applause when she said yes and they hugged."

"That's great!" the guys chorused.

"I think it woulda been better if she'd said 'Too late, you missed your chance.' and then walked away." he laughed.

"That woulda been mean!" Jim said, smiling despite his protest.

"Yeah but I'd'a loved to see his face if she'd done it." Charlie laughed again.

Amadeo joined the laughter. "My sisters got their proposals this summer. They had their venue the next day and their dresses picked out the following week."

"Jenny had hers in her closet already. Shoes, veil, the works." Charlie announced grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "Her sister told everyone that Jenn'd gone to a psychic and the lady'd told her to buy the stuff, put the ultimatum to Gary and she'd get her proposal and the ring within a week. D***ed if it didn't go exactly how she said it would."

"Aww, come on, a psychic? Did that really happen or is that just a story?" Dennis asked, "Who believes in psychics anyway?"

"Apparently his sister did," Amadeo chuckled.

"My brother Matty believes in them," said Angelo tentatively. "He was worried he'd never find a girl. See, we're Italian but we have some really dark skinned ancestors so some of us come out with kinda darker skin than others, and people always thought he was black, especially in the summer when he tans, except his hair turns red." he laughed.

"So what did the psychic tell him?" Jim asked.
"She told him to stop looking, and he'd find the right woman when he least expected it."

"And what happened?"

"He stopped actively looking, then one day he was sitting in a booth at a diner he went to a lot, having coffee before going to work, and this really pretty woman walked up to him and said 'The other tables are full, or people are waiting for friends and there are no other spots available. Can I share the table with you?'"

"Well, Matty wasn't going to say no to anyone, particularly a lady, so he moved his paper and his coffee and started reading again. He said the girl asked if she could read part of the paper he'd read already and he gave her the sports section, kind of as a joke, but she looked at the headlines and let out a whoop when she saw the results of the NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Championship, with North Carolina winning 54 - 53 over Kansas. Matty said he was so surprised at the sound that he spilled his coffee all over the front of his shirt."

"So there she was busy apologizing and they were trying to get the coffee stains out of his shirt. She was offering to pay for a dry cleaner and he was telling her it was nothing. Somewhere along the line they introduced themselves and that was that. They've been married six years and have two kids." he finished his story, proudly.

"Ahhhh, sounds like a love story straight off the Bodice Ripper presses." joked Aiden, laughing as Angelo socked him on the arm.

"Do you believe in psychics?" Charlie asked.

"I dunno." Angelo shrugged, "I guess I'm open minded enough to go to one, but whether I believe or not would depend on what they had to say."

"Hey guys! Wanna pool our money and go see one?"

"Sure, where're we going?" asked Eddie as he joined the group.

"To see a psychic."
"Would we get a group rate?" asked Felix, sure that the whole thing was simply back to school nerves and silliness.

"How much did that psychic charge your brother... how many years ago was it?"

"If we did find a psychic would they take the lot of us or would they only take us one by one?" Jim said.

"Where are we going to find a psychic? And what the heck are we gonna ask her? When'm I gonna lose my virginity? Does Rose Marie Parnell want me? I mean... what do you ask a psychic?" Jim asked.

"And why do you have to ask a psychic anything? Aren't they psychic? I mean, they know everything so all we'd have to do it go there and sit and look at her and she can tell our futures, right?" Aiden asked.

"You guys are serious?" Felix asked, surprised.

"Why not? It could be fun." Charlie replied.

"Going to the amusement park is fun. Jumping out of the tree into Ketterly's Pond is fun. Going to the movies and getting into a popcorn fight is fun. Seeing a psychic who's gonna tell us what we want to hear and take our money isn't what I call fun."

"Hey, maybe we can find a psychic that sells Love Potion Number 9. I'd like to see if it would work on Farlee Frasier, my lab buddy in chemistry." Dennis said. "She's smokin' hot and she's only with me because I know what the heck I'm doing, but boy if she'd give me a second look... I mean, I'm pretty sure if she got to know me she'd find out she liked me."

"Beauty and the Beast?" quipped Aiden.

"It could happen." Dennis protested. "What would you want to know?" he asked Aiden.

"If we're ever gonna get a phone." Aiden joked.
"No, really, Denny, if you had only one answer to any question, what would it be?"

Aiden became serious and thoughtful and said quietly, “Will I ever make something of myself. Will I ever get out of this little town and be successful at anything. That's what I'd like to know. Will I have a wife and family and a good job and a house or will I always live in this little podunk town in the house I grew up in, working for minimum wage at the stone works. Can a psychic answer all that? Will she charge a fee for each answer? I mean, heck, I don't want to start my life in debt to a psychic because I couldn't afford to pay for all the answers I want.” he said, his voice heavy.

Before anyone could answer the first bell rang indicating the start of the day. The students who had been lounging around jumped into action, picking up knapsacks and satchels, comparing schedules with friends and stowing them away once again in pockets and pocketbooks before filing into the school and finding their home rooms. Within minutes the hallways were empty and quiet, not even a scrap of paper to indicate that anyone had been there.

Second bell had the children seated for announcements, eyes focused on the round speaker in the walls above the blackboard as though they could see through it to the vice principal who laid out the rules and expectations of the school before leading the students in the Pledge of Allegiance and My Country Tis of Thee before welcoming them all back for another year of learning, at which the third bell rang and the children scattered to their first classes.

Amadeo was pleased to see that he and Angelo had several of the same classes, but when they tried to sit next to each other they were placed on opposite sides of the room. The teacher, as each child came in, immediately separated students who were deliberately trying to sit next to each other. None of the students were stupid enough to complain or protest but none of them liked it.

"My name is Mr. Charles Franklin Adams." announced the fifty something year old man. "You, of course, will call me Mr. Adams. I am your American Literature and English teacher, since you cannot read American literature without being able to properly read and write English." he announced.

"These will be your seats every day,” the teacher said, holding up the paper with a grid drawn in pen. "Using pen only, write your name in the box that corresponds with where you are seated. When it reaches the end of the row that person will pass it behind him or her. The graph will make its way back up the row in the same manner, with each student filling in their name where they will be sitting. I will use that list to take attendance every morning so that, one, I will get to know each of you by sight as well as name, and two, we don't have to waste time calling roll to see who is missing."
He placed the paper in front of Angelo who had been seated in the first desk in the first row, far right. "Remember, simply write your name in the first box, then pass it to your left where the next person will write their name, etcetera and so on until it reaches the end of the class, at which time," he said raising his voice again, "I expect the last person to have the list in their possession to bring it to the front of the class and put it on my desk. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir." the students chorused.

Angelo wrote his name in his cell block, as he thought of it, then grinned as the teacher turned his back to begin writing on the blackboard. He quickly wrote Amadeo's name in the block to his left, and then passed the grid to the next student. At first Nicky Matin, the boy to Angelo's left, looked at Amadeo's name in 'his' grid block and he looked at Angelo with a frown.

Angelo frowned back, glanced at the teacher who was still writing facts from the piece of paper in his hand. Angelo looked at Nicky, then the teacher, then the paper, waggling his eyebrows. Nicky caught on relatively quickly, grinned and put his name in the third block with his best friend Carl's name in the fourth. The same unspoken prompts were passed down student to student until the students who had been separated were on the grid as next to each other, and the students who had been placed in the front or center of the class who had wanted to be in the back, found their names in their preferred seats.

The class went off without a hitch. Each time Mr. Adams turned to write something on the board two or three of the students would switch places quickly and silently. Several students also requested permission to use the lavatory which was ungraciously permitted by the teacher who resented having to take the time out of his class to write out hall passes for the bladder challenged of his students. Vacated seats were quickly claimed by their rightful owners.

The 'jig' was almost up when two of the boys came back from the boys room and sat back down.

"Those are not your seats." Mr. Adams accused.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but yes, they are. Just check your grid sir." Garret Freydon said. The rest of the class would swear to the end that butter wouldn't have melted in that boy's mouth.

"Give me your hall pass." Mr. Adams demanded of Shelton Eames as he swiped the grid from off of his desk. Shelton placidly handed back the hall pass. Mr. Adams looked at the name on the hall pass, then at the name on the grid. Shelton Eames. He did the same with the other boy with the
same results. Mr. Adams didn't say another word but went to the front of the class, placed the grid back down on the desk and finished transcribing his notes from his paper to the blackboard, during which the last of the class had finished playing musical chairs.

"Copy these facts. Once you've done that we will review, at which time you may ask questions about the subject matter." He said, sitting down at his desk and opening a book. The children opened their note books and studiously copied each fact. When the last student had put down their pen Mr. Adams got up and reviewed the material as promised, taking time for questions during which the students added the information to their notebooks.

"Do you all feel that you have a working knowledge of what we just went over?" asked Mr. Adams.

He was met with a chorus of “Yes, sir."

"Very good then. Take out a sheet of paper and fold it into three sections. Put your name, date, and the name of this course in the upper right hand corner." He directed, picking up the eraser and removing the facts from the blackboard. He turned and waited until the students had done as they’d been told.

"Very well then, children," he said, "This is your first quiz of the semester." he said, once again picking up the paper he’d been transcribing from. He held his hands up to forestall the groans and moans of the students who hadn't expected a quiz on their very first day of class. Some of them had only been half listening to the review, so they knew they were going to do very badly. Some of the students who had originally thought the idea was brilliant had changed their minds and were now shooting Angelo unfriendly looks.

"Lesson One, children. I may be old, but I am not blind, deaf, or feeble minded and I resent being treated as such. I also have a very good memory, so after this test you will all go back to the seats in which I placed you upon entering this class. You will then fill out the grid properly and those WILL be your seats until the end of the school year. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir." came the disgruntled replies.

"Whose idea was it to do this?" he asked.

No one moved or spoke. Angelo began to nibble on his thumb nail, sure that someone would rat
him out, but no one did.

"If the person responsible for this does not speak up, then the entire class will serve detention for a week, and will continue to serve detention every day until the person speaks up. The detentions will last as long as your resolve, children. I'm your teacher until the end of the year and if you insist on this stubborn silence then I can guarantee you that I can not only last as long as you but I can outlast you. I am very tenacious. You will look the word tenacious up in the dictionary tonight and write it one hundred times."

"I'll give the miscreant until the end of the test to turn him or herself in. If, however, someone else would like to tell me who the guilty party is we might avoid this test all together. It's up to you."

Once again he was met with silence, though he couldn't help but to notice some looks being shot toward the slender, dark haired boy in the front row.

"That's fine, children. You will add the word miscreant to your list of vocabulary words, also to be written one hundred times." he said conversationally.

"Now then, question one..."

"It was me, Mr. Adams." Angelo said, trying to keep the quaver from his voice.

"Me?" Adams asked, somewhat superciliously. "Who is 'me'? Who said that? Stand up please so that we can all see you." he said, scanning the classroom as though he had no idea where the voice was coming from.

Angelo stood up, fingertips and eyes glued to the desk top. "It was me, Mr. Adams. It was my idea."

Mr. Adams looked down at the chart. "Who would you be, young man? I cannot be sure now that my chart has been contaminated."

"Di Marco, sir. Angelo Di Marco."
"Look at me, Mr. Di Marco." ordered Mr. Adams.

Angelo looked up from beneath his lashes.

"Head up! Shoulders straight, young man. You must be proud of what you've started. Proud of your wit and cleverness, so you must show it. Head up!"

Angelo licked his lips, squared his shoulders and raised his head to look at his teacher full on.

Mr. Adams looked at the chart. It was then that he noticed that several of his students had identical writing, including the boy to the left of Angelo.

"So you must be Mr. Amadeo Rossi?" he asked, giving the boy the hairy eyeball. Nicky, who hadn't had the chance to switch places, wilted in his chair like a flower in high summer heat.

Amadeo stood up at his desk by the windows where he'd been placed, fourth seat back on the far right as Mr. Adams looked out at the class. "Here I am sir."

"You didn't change your seat. Explain."

Amadeo cleared his throat. "I was going to do it tomorrow sir." he admitted, "I thought that too many people switching seats so soon would be too obvious so I was going to wait." he admitted.

"Stand up." Mr. Adams ordered.

The class stood as one, the only sound they made was the slight scraping of chairs as they got up.

"All of you who switched seats, go back to where I had placed you initially." ordered Mr. Adams watching with a gimlet eye to be sure that no one tried to pull another one on him.

About a third of the class picked up their books and bags and went back to their original places. They began to sit down when Mr. Adams ordered the class to remain standing. He went to the bank
of drawers next to the window that held school supplies and took out another large piece of paper. He sat down at his desk and carefully, with a drafting square, outlined a new grid. When he finished he brought the new sheet over to Angelo who was still seated first seat, first row on the left next to the door, as Mr. Adams would look out over the class.

"Sit." he ordered.

Angelo sat, unsure if he'd still have that pleasure by the end of the day.

"Write your name in that box right there." Adams ordered. Angelo did as he was told. "Now sit on your hands and remain in that position until the rest of the class has written their names. Once again, Angelo did as he was told, glad of the order since his hands were freezing cold at that moment despite the September heat.

Mr. Adams went down the rows, ordering each child to sit, write their name and then sit on their hands.

Once the grid was completed Mr. Adams strode back to the front of the class.

"How many of you were in on this little scheme of Mr. Di Marco's?"

At first only a few of the braver souls raised their hands, but under Mr. Adams' steely grey gaze, eventually the entire class raised their hands.

"Then you will all receive a failing grade for your first quiz AND..." he raised his voice to be heard over the protests of the students, "You have no one else to blame but yourselves. Any one of you had the chance while you were filling out the grid to tell me what was going on and NONE of you spoke up, so you will NOT blame Mr. Di Marco without taking a portion of the blame on yourselves for your collaboration and silence on the matter. Understood?"

When no one answered immediately he barked, "UNDERSTOOD?"

"Yes sir." the class chorused reluctantly.
"Very well then. Add the word 'accountability' to your vocabulary list, and while you're at it write the definitions of each word." Mr. Adams said, once again seating himself at his desk and pulling out one of the dreaded blue slips which he began to write on furiously. Once he finished he stood and strode over to Angelo, holding the folded blue disciplinary slip between his index and middle fingers. "Mr. Di Marco, you will add the word 'consequences' to your list of vocabulary words and definitions tonight. Pack up your things, Mr. Di Marco, and report to the Principal's office."

Angelo packed up his things and left the room without a sound or a backward glance. He'd never been to the principal's office but he knew what the blue slip meant. He hated that his first day back at school was going to begin on such a sour note. He walked into the office and handed the slip to Mrs. Jennings who accepted it with an expression that wavered between disapproving and amused as she read it. Of all the students she'd expected on the first day, Mr. Angelo Di Marco was not one of them.

"Have a seat there, Mr. Di Marco," she said pointed to the wooden bench by the door, which had been smoothed and polished over the years by many bottoms. She went into Mr. Barnes' office to deliver the slip and calmly went back to her desk. She had read the slip, and while it was certainly not appropriate she had to admit she found it clever and amusing, and quite bold coming from a boy who only the semester before had been little more than a shadow in his classes, getting good grades but otherwise unnoticed by faculty and staff. Personally she thought that old Charlie Adams was a stick in the mud but she couldn't say that to the students.

Eventually the buzzer at Mrs. Jennings desk sounded and she told Angelo to go in.

"Have a seat, Mr. Di Marco." said Mr. Barnes amiably. Angelo had grown a couple of inches during the summer but the chair was so low that he still felt like a little kid.

"Now, perhaps you'd like to explain your side of the story to me." Mr. Barnes began, with his usual avuncular smile.

"Will it help me?" Angelo asked, respectfully.

"That depends on your answer, I suppose," Barnes said, unknowingly echoing Angelo's words from earlier that morning. "What made you think that defying the teacher and tampering with the seating grid was a good idea?"

Angelo swallowed and licked his lips again as he thought about it. "Well, sir, we're teenagers, not little kids. He... he separated us. Anyone who came in with a friend and tried to sit next to them, he separated, as though if we were allowed to sit together we wouldn't be able to behave ourselves."
"Some of us are better off in the front row because we see the board and hear the teacher better, and some like the back because we don't like being under the teacher's eye all the time. Not because we're necessarily doing anything bad it's just that being in the front makes us feel like we're on display. We're the first ones the teachers call on, and everyone behind us can see us and... well... it's stupid but..." Angelo's voice ground to a halt.

"Just tell me, Mr. Di Marco." Barnes said softly. He'd never heard Angelo speak more than a few words at any given time so for the boy to open up like this was something of a miracle. It seemed he'd grown in more than one way over the past summer.

"Whenever I was stuck in the front of the class I'd end up picking spit balls out of my hair at the end of class, or I'd find someone had taped a sign to my back. Sometimes I'd find stuff missing from my satchel, or worse, something nasty would've been put into it for me to find later."

“Sometimes, if I was called on to answer a question and I got it wrong everyone would laugh like I was the only person to ever get an answer wrong and they'd all look at me, there in the front row. The kids in the back, when they got an answer wrong, the class would laugh but when they'd turn to look at whoever gave the answer the teacher would yell at them to keep their eyes forward.” Angelo said, beginning to run out of breath. Mr. Barnes stopped him, made the boy relax and take a breath, then prompted him to continue when he saw the boy was calmer.

"I resented being forced to sit at the front of the class again, being separated from my friends... Mr. Barnes, I was afraid to come back today. If it hadn't been for Dae... Amadeo Rossi and Milo Jablonski, I might not have made it, but they kept telling me it'd be all right and I'd have just felt safer with them near me. I know it's childish but..." his voice trailed off. "And now because of my stupid idea the kids are probably mad at me, and Mr. Adams gave us three words, four for me, and their definitions to write one hundred times each and he said we all failed our first quiz which none of us expected on the first day and which he didn't even allow us to take because no one spoke up to tell him what was going on and it's all my fault and now I'm worried that I'm going to be like I was last semester and I can't do that again, Mr. Barnes." Angelo said, sounding close to tears but holding them back admirably.

"All right then, Mr. Di Marco. Is that all you wanted to tell me at this time?"

"No sir. I do want to apologize. I know what I did was wrong but... well, sometimes I do things without thinking ahead. Please, Mr. Barnes," Angelo said earnestly, "I've never been paddled. They didn't do that sort of thing in New York, not in the public schools, anyway, though I heard stories about the private schools. Can't I do detentions instead?"

"I'll let you discuss that with Mr. Cobrane." Barnes said, standing and holding out a hand toward the boy to precede him into the DOD's office.
Barnes, and Mrs. Jennings with her note pad at the ready, stood by quietly while Angelo explained his actions and the reasons for them, and repeated his apology and request for detentions rather than a paddling, even though he knew that Mr. Adams had requested the latter.

Mr. Cobrane had perched on the edge of his desk with his arms crossed as he'd listened to Angelo's story. Suppressing a grin, he looked at the boy who sat before him, and said, "Well, Mr. Di Marco, if I'd had any idea that having friends would turn you into a bad boy I'd have asked Mr. Barnes and the school board to think twice about allowing you back into the school."

Angelo blushed, "I'm not a bad boy, sir. Honest. My dad says I'm impulsive, but I'm not bad. I don't do things with the idea of hurting anyone or getting anyone into trouble." he said meekly. "I just don't think ahead, sometimes."

"We're not pleased with the trick you tried to pull on your teacher, Mr. Di Marco. It shows a lack of respect, and frankly a level of deceit that I would never have expected from you. I'm not insensitive to what you were feeling or the reasoning behind your actions, but what you did was wrong. So I'll ask you, do you believe you did wrong?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you believe you deserve to be punished?"

Angelo's heart sank and he looked at his hands which were twisting helplessly on his lap. "Yes sir." he said quietly.

Mr. Cobrane looked up at Mrs. Jennings and Mr. Barnes and held up two fingers. Both nodded. Mrs. Jennings wrote the verdict down and handed the clip board to Mr. Barnes before leaving the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

"You'll be receiving two swats with the paddle, Mr. Di Marco." Cobrane said, letting the words sink in. The boy looked up briefly as though he would plead his case, but then trained his eyes back on his hands, which had gone from wringing to clenching. "One for your disrespect towards Mr. Adams, and one for the deceit. Two swats are, I'm sure, preferable to a week of detentions, and I believe that the punishments that Mr. Adams has meted out already are adequate so not much more is necessary. Do you agree?"

"Yes sir." Angelo said, gripping his fingers which had gone ice cold.
"Remove anything you may have from your pockets, front and back, we don't want anything digging in. Just put them to the side." Mr. Cobrane directed.

Angelo stood up, removed his keys and his wallet from his pockets, patted himself down and nodded that he was ready.

"Turn toward my desk. Put your hands on the top. Step back. A little more. Spread your feet to about shoulder width." Cobrane directed. "All right then, are you ready, Mr. Di Marco?"

"Yes sir." the boy replied quietly.

It was quick and painful but not nearly as bad as Angelo had thought it would be. He gently put his wallet back in his back pocket and stowed his keys, then signed the form saying that he had been punished but was in otherwise good condition. Mr. Barnes took the form to give to Mrs. Jennings to file and went back to his own office.

"May I leave now sir? I have math next and I think I'm going to be late." Angelo asked respectfully.

Mr. Cobrane sat at his desk and took out one of the pink hall passes, which would excuse his tardiness. Before handing it to the boy, Mr. Cobrane looked at him and said, "You are a good boy, Angelo. I'm glad that you have friends, and to see that you've flourished over the summer. I want you to remain a good boy. I know that children do impulsive things, but you are growing up, I could see that the minute you walked into the office, and you won't be a child much longer. Learn from your mistakes, and don't repeat them. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Very good." Cobrane said, handing the hall pass to the boy. "I expect you to apologize to Mr. Adams on Thursday when you have class with him again. Understood?"

"Yes sir." the boy said, taking the hall pass and heading toward his next class. Math, and distinctly Fishburnless. He grinned.
The rest of the day went considerably better. He ran into several of the students from Mr. Adam's class who greeted him with smiles. A couple even stopped to whisper that it had been a great plan and they were sorry it hadn't worked. Not everyone had been so impressed after being faced with three hundred words and their definitions so Angelo was grateful for the encouragement.

Amadeo, Milo, Angelo and the other boys had a free period before lunch and they took the time to look at their schedules.

"You're in with me for choir!" said Amadeo, delighted.

"Have you ever heard me sing?" Angelo asked, surprised that anyone would be happy to hear him sing.

"I can't sing very well either, but people like us are usually in the background singin' one note. The really good singers are the ones Ms. Mastroiani puts in the front. It's easy credits. All you have to do is show up and open your mouth." he laughed.

"And look! You, me, Charlie and Milo are in Art together!" said Dennis. "Don't worry, Mrs. Christoff is happy if you draw a stick figure as long as you put some real effort into it." he joked.

Amadeo glanced at Angelo who looked away and blushed. Dae had seen Angelo's sculptures and drawings which had been tucked into the furthest recesses of the cellar. Several of his pieces were on display in the house but Angelo was prolific and had so many that there just wasn't enough room in the house to put them all. He had no doubt that Mrs. Christoff would love Angelo.

Before he knew what happened, Angelo was roughly pushed from behind. All of the boys looked around angrily to see who'd dare to push another student around, and with witnesses to boot. They were only slightly mollified to see that it was Con, Amadeo's older brother, now in his senior year at the high school.

"Wayda go, Angel-o." Con said with a grin. "I heard what you did to Mr. Adams. That was a great stunt. It's all over the school!"
"Yeah, a great stunt that got me and the whole class in trouble." Angelo said unbelievingly. "I'm surprised that anyone is still talking to me after that."

Con laughed and grabbed Angelo by the arm, to turn him to the side. Angelo instinctively covered his backside and Con laughed again. "Nope, no scorch marks, no smoke, so if you got it you didn't get it bad."

"Con you have NO tact!" Amadeo said, finally finding his voice.

Con winked at Amadeo and then turned his attention back to his brother, "Don't worry my friend, I had Adams twice, once for English and once for Lit. He's a decent enough guy, just don't tick him off. Oops, sorry, should'a told you guys that earlier," he laughed.

"Con, remember how you told me that I was too young for you to associate with in school and for me to not bother you when you're with your friends? Well now it's my turn to tell you to bug off, got me?"

"Then I guess you don't want to hear the scoop on Adams. I'll see you guys later."

"Con!" said Amadeo. "When we wrestle, who wins?"

"Shuddup twerp." Con said, scowling.

"Then stop being a jerk and tell us what's going on."

"Fine, but all y'all owe me one, got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine, as long as it's not something stupid or that dad would tan you for if he ever found out." Dae replied, nearly smiling at the crestfallen look on his brother's face.

"OK brats, listen up. Adams is the top dog in his class, you know? You challenged him, he asserted his top doggishness, it's all well and good now cause unless you guys are brain dead you won't be trying any more stunts on him after this. You got those 'vocabulary words' to write, and man I gotta tell you you guys broke the school record! You should be proud of yourselves! The whole class punished within the first hour on the first day of school? You are my heros!"
"But anyway, here's the good news. Now that everyone knows who the uncontested Big Dog is he'll go easier on you after this and..." he said, dropping his voice an octave, "Adams always drops the lowest quiz and test grades, so that bogus quiz that you never took and failed doesn't exist. Just make sure you do good in his class and you won't have to worry about any more bad grades. Now, was that worth a small favor sometime in the near future?" Con grinned.

"Thanks for the heads up, Con. But it's like I said, if you ask us to do something you know mom and dad wouldn't approve of I will rat you out faster than a copperhead strikes. You got me?" Amadeo said with a smile which seemed to be aimed at something over his brother's shoulder.

"Shit head." Con threw at his little brother.

"What was that, Mr. Rossi?" came a familiar silky voice from behind them. "Constantin Rossi, if I'm not mistaken?"

Con glared at his brother, licked his lips and forced his features into something a little more respectful before turning toward the vice principal.

"Yes sir, Mr. Cobrane. I'm sorry for my language, I was just joking around with my brother and his friends."

"Is that true, boys?" Cobrane asked casually.

"Yes sir, and he also pointed out our error this morning, and offered suggestions on how to make things right with Mr. Adams." Amadeo offered.

Cobrane leveled his gaze on Amadeo, waiting for the boy to crack under the pressure, but Amadeo's expression never changed.

"And what would that advice have been?" Cobrane asked.

"Just not to mess with him again, work hard in his class, and don't fail any more tests or quizzes." Dennis said.
Once again Cobrane's eyes slewed across the line of boys, looking for any sign of deceit. Finding none Cobrane nodded. Training his eyes on Constantin he said "I'll see you in detention at three o'clock this afternoon, Mr. Rossi. You're very fortunate that there were no ladies present when you decided to 'joke' with your brother. Good day, boys." he said, striding off.

"I'll get you later." Con threatened Amadeo, with slitted eyes.

"You better get to your next class before Mr. Cobrane remembers that you're not in the same year as us and gives you another detention for not being in class right now.” Amadeo said, unconcerned.

Con clenched his jaw, looked guiltily over his shoulder, turned quickly and headed to his next class just before the bell rang.

"What do you guys have for lunch? Mom gave me ham again. Anyone wanna trade for some chicken?" Milo asked.

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NOTES

A drafting square is an L shaped ruler used by engineers.

"Love Potion No. 9", 1959 by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, originally performed by The Clovers.

From the previous chapter, for those who may have missed it:
Ansaphone was the first answering machine.

Thanks all!
Angelo and Amadeo

Music class was an eye opener. All of the boys had decided to take it even though it meant losing a study period for some of them. A sacrifice they were willing to make for what Jim called an easy A.

Amadeo it turned out, had a respectable baritone though he would on occasion lose his focus and slide slightly off key, something that Ms. Mastroiani assured him he could overcome with practice, in which case she had a lovely solo for him. Jim was, unsurprisingly, a bass, which he used frequently to crack his friends up while speaking. Eddie, Charlie, Felix and three other boys that none of them knew had lovely mid to low soprano voices which thrilled the teacher no end and made a few of the girls a little jealous.

When she called Angelo up to audition so that she could find his range and put him in the right place when the choir sang, he nearly ran. Milo grabbed his friend's sleeve and gently pulled him back. "Don't worry, just sing, like, Humpty Dumpty or something. Chill." he whispered.

"Come on now, I only drink blood on Tuesdays." the four-foot-tall, sixty something, salt and pepper haired woman said with a smile. "Just sing a little something for me. Don't worry about staying on key right now, we can work on that during the year."

Angelo hesitated a moment, taking a step backward into Amadeo. 'Deo bent down, not nearly as much as he'd used to, he noticed, and whispered, "Just close your eyes, and pretend you're in your cellar painting, you can do it." before giving Angelo a little shove back to the front of the group.

Ms. Mastroiani didn't frown or growl, she didn't rush him or brush him off. She simply stood there with a friendly smile and waited patiently.

Angelo took a breath as though to sing, then let it out slowly. He squared his shoulders and took another breath. Nothing came out. He closed his eyes as Amadeo had told him to do, imagined himself in his cellar with the radio playing as he worked on one of his clay pieces, and began to sing.

'They say the neon lights are bright on Broadway," he didn't try to sing the chorus, thinking that
doing it would make the song hard to follow.
"they say there's always magic in the air.
But when you're walkin' down that street,
and you ain't had enough to eat,
the glitter rubs right off and you're nowhere.'

He was vaguely unaware of the fact that everyone had gone completely silent as he concentrated on his singing, as 'Deo had suggested, in his cellar.

"They say the girls are something else on Broadway,
but looking at them just gives me the blues.
'Cause how ya gonna make some time,
when all you got is one thin dime?
And one thin dime won't even shine your shoes." He waited for the teacher to stop him but when she remained silent he continued.

"They say that I won't last too long on Broadway," He sang, beginning to get into the song and forgetting that he had an audience.

"I'll catch a Greyhound bus for home, they all say.
But oh! They're dead wrong, I know they are,
'cause I can play this here guitar,
And I won't quit till I'm a star on Broadway."

He hummed the instrumental piece, dancing and swaying slightly, and clicking his fingers to the beat.

"Oh, they're dead wrong, I know they are,
'cause I can play this here guitar,
and I won't quit till I'm a star on Broadway."

He finished with a smile and opened his eyes, surprised to find an utterly silent group of people and a thoughtful teacher in front of him. He blushed bright red and turned away with the thought of running home, never to be seen again, perhaps donning a mask and living in the darkest part of his cellar where no one would see the new, perpetual red of his face, when the applause broke out.

"Way ta go!" someone shouted.

"Ange, that was... great!" someone else said in his ear, putting an arm around him, effectively preventing him from running.

"Wow!" was the response from several different voices. One disgruntled sounding voice muttered "Son of a b****."

When the applause stopped finally, and Angelo's complexion was somewhere back to its normal shade and he was no longer contemplating a life of solitude in the darkness of the cellar, Ms. Mastroianii gave a friendly, sideways smile and said, "Tenor. You'll be in the middle between the
soprano's and the basses." she said, pointing to a spot between Amadeo and another boy he didn't
know.

Amadeo leaned in toward Angelo while the next person was being auditioned and placed and said,
"You said you couldn't sing."

"No," said Angelo with a laugh, “I asked if you'd ever heard me sing. There's a difference.”

"Don't mess with my head, brat." he whispered. "The way you made it sound was like you croaked
like a frog. That was... beautiful.”

Angelo shrugged. "If you ask my brothers they'll tell you I do croak like a frog. They're constantly
yelling at me to stop singing."

The last word, despite his low voice, rang out in the sudden silence. He looked around to see Ms.
Mastroiani giving him a look and he blushed again.

"Mr. Di Marco. We would not have been able to hear your lovely singing if the rest of the students
hadn't been respectfully quiet. I ask that you return the consideration. That goes for you too, Mr.
Rossi." she said, not unkindly but firmly.

"We're sorry, Miss." the boys said contritely.

She nodded acceptance of the apology and gestured for the girl who was trying out to continue.

With strict instructions to return on Friday at three for their first rehearsal, Ms. Mastroiani waved
them off, with a final little smile for Angelo, who grinned and blushed. He hated that he seemed to
have no control over it lately but he felt good as he left the auditorium.

Art class was next, between Music and Social Studies. When Angelo arrived he immediately sat
with Dennis, Charlie and Milo, waving at a few of the guys he knew from the wrestling and track
teams, who smiled and waved back.

Mrs. Christoff selected several of the wrestlers and asked them to accompany her to a large box on
her desk. "I’d like you boys to please deliver one each of these to every student here, thank you."
she said with a smile. She picked up a bag and followed along as each item was delivered.

There was something about the tall, slender woman that Angelo immediately liked. Was it the
fact that she was the physical opposite of the short, stout, brown eyed Ms. Mastroiani? Was it the
sparkling grey blue eyes, or the greying hair done up in a bun that somehow resembled a fountain,
a playful style for an older woman. Was it her smile which seemed very similar to the music
teacher's, kind and wry at the same time. He had no idea, but he knew he liked her immediately.

He was surprised when Walter plonked a piece of rock down in front of him. It was approximately
6" x 6" x 5", smooth and a dusty looking, slightly mottled grey. He knew it wasn't marble but he
had no idea what it was or what the teacher had in mind for them to do with it. Seconds after the
rocks were placed in front of the students, Mrs. Christoff placed a small packet next to it. When
they were all done, she went to the front of the class and smiled.

"Don't worry, I haven't gone off my rocker." she said with a straight face. The students groaned
appreciatively.

"I thought we would try something new this semester. We'll still be drawing and painting, but I
thought it would be fun to try sculpture as well. We'll be using different mediums which should
make it a little more fun than just picking up a pencil and drawing stick figures." she grinned.

Dennis blushed.

"What you have before you is a block of soapstone. It's very soft and easy to carve. The little
packets contain the tools with which you will do the carving. Soapstone is sensitive, so if you use
too heavy a rasp you can leave marks in the surface. Unless it’s something you mean to do in your
sculpture, and believe me I'll know if they're there on purpose or not, then you can usually smooth
them away with sand paper. Just remember, the harsher the sand paper, the more chance you have
of leaving more marks on the stone. Vy ponomayete?"

"What?!" asked one student loudly, blushing fiercely when she realized not only that she'd said it
aloud but how she'd said it.

Mrs. Christoff only smiled and said, “It means, do you understand? One of the few phrases I
learned from my husband.” she joked.
"Yes, ma'am." chorused the class, including the still red faced girl.

"Very well then. Your first assignment will be to turn that little block of stone into anything you like... except a block of stone."

Some of the students groaned and Mrs. Christoff laughed.

"It can be almost any shape you want to make it, but be careful, it is soft, and it does chip easily, so if you make a mistake you might be able to glue the piece back on but it'll show. Don't try to make anything too intricate. I realize that for most if not all of you, carving in stone is a new experience. There is no wrong way to carve it. However, I will not accept a pebble as a completed work either." she joked again. "You'll have all week to work on it since I expect you to take it home as homework from this class. It doesn't have to be completed by Friday next, but I'd like to see that some progress has been made. Vy ponimayete?" she said again with a grin.

"Yes, Mrs. Christoff!" the students chorused.

"My ponimayem." She corrected, "It means, we understand. Can you say it?"

"Me ponymim." was the closest that some of them were able to manage. Mrs. Christoff smiled and praised them for trying.

"All right then kiddos. You can get started now. Look at your stone and see if you can see a picture in it. Draw your picture once you have it, to scale, and then use the picture as a blueprint for what you want to sculpt. That might work for some of you, it might not work for all, just do what feels right and you can't go wrong. Start now." she said, turning on the radio to a local pop station, which made all of the kids smile. Then she went to her desk to work on a block of her own.

Angelo sat for several moments, looking at the stone one way then the other, first cocking his head one way, then another, then turning the stone. With a little nod he opened his packet of rasps and began to carve away the edges. Despite his care a chunk came off of the corner he was working on. He nearly forgot himself and dropped one of the many forbidden words but he bit his tongue instead, emitting a little gasp rather than the word that pressed against his front teeth for release.

"Did you catch yourself?" asked Mrs. Christoff, standing and walking over to him with a concerned look at his hands, checking for blood.
"No ma'am. I bit my tongue."

"As long as you're all right then." she said, "Continue."

Angelo frowned. Now that the edge was broken off like that he had to come up with a different idea, so once again he went to work, smoothing edges and jagged surfaces. By the end of the class he had a nearly perfect round stone.

"That's very good for one hour’s work, Mr..."

"Di Marco, ma'am."

"You're not done are you?"

"Oh no, ma'am, not hardly! I mean, no ma'am, there's still more to go." he blushed.

Mrs. Christoff smiled, then clapped her hands to get the student's attention. "Time to pack up kiddos! Work on it again for homework. There's no such thing as perfection so don't drive yourselves crazy. Have fun with it and have something to show me come Friday. You can go to your next class as soon as you're packed and your space is cleaned up."

"So how was your day back? Was it as horrible as you'd expected?" asked Joshua when he son walked through the door later that afternoon.

"It was amazing, dad. At first I was really scared and didn't want to go into the school at all, but it turned into a really great day." he said with a smile. "How was yours? You're home early." he said, glancing at the clock over the kitchen table. Normally his father wouldn't be home until for another hour or more, depending on the day.

"We had an accident at the site." his father said wearily. "Gas leak."

"Dad! Was anyone hurt?" Angelo asked, looking his father over for injuries.
"We lost Scheffy and Gus." he said, referring to Louis Scheffield and Gustav Molina, two of the construction workers. "Apparently Scheffy nicked a gas line behind the wall when he was cutting. The measurements were off. Somehow the main had been turned on although it wasn't supposed to have been. No one admitted to turning it on or knowing how it had been. Only the electricity was supposed to be on. The Fire Marshall guessed that the vapors were caught between the walls and leaking out through the cuts. Gus lit up a cigarette."

"It was an accident, dad." Angelo said, trying to reassure his father and thanking the powers that be that his father had been spared. "Was anyone else hurt?"

"A few others got caught on the periphery of the blast but only sustained minor injuries. It was just those two..." Joshua said with a shudder, not wanting to think about the remains. "We shut the gas off, called the fire department, police and ambulance. We pretty much had things under control by the time they got there."

"A wall of the building is gone, and part of a floor. They have to decide now whether to make the repairs or if I have to start searching for a new site. I just got off the phone with New York. They're sending one of our contractors down here to check out the damage, rather than have a local do the report."

"Dad, they don't blame you, do they? You can't possibly be blamed for this." Angelo said, suddenly worried for his father who looked more tired and worn out than he'd ever seen him.

"No, Angelo, they don't blame me, but they're obviously not happy." he said tiredly. "It's just been a long day. I had to call Scheffy's and Gus' wives. Gus's wife just had a baby." Joshua said, his voice choking slightly. "I'm going to go take a nap, Ange. Would you start dinner so that mamma doesn't have to do it when she gets home from her ladies group?"

"Sure papa, anything in particular you want?" Angelo asked, ready to braze an alligator if that's what his father said he was hungry for.

"I'm not hungry, hon," Joshua said, surprising Angelo with the endearment he hadn't used since Angelo had been around five years old, "Right now I just want to sleep."

"Sure, papa. You rest. I'll take care of everything." Angelo promised, watching, concerned, as his father stood from the kitchen table and walked the few steps to his room like a ninety-year-old man instead of one in his late early fifties.
As soon as his father had closed his bedroom door Angelo began casting about for something to make for dinner. He didn't think he'd have to make anything too complex because he had the feeling that no one was going to be particularly hungry that night.

He set the table for five just in case John and Paul came home for dinner, refilled the water pitcher and emptied out an ice tray into it before filling and putting it back into the refrigerator. He filled a pot with water and put it on the new electric stove, shuddering a little as he realized how close they'd come to having a gas stove, and that something like that could have happened in their own home if they'd been able to afford a gas hook up. He made a promise to himself never to have a gas stove and never, ever to smoke again, no matter how frustrated he got.

******************************************************************************

Dinner at the Di Marco home was, as expected, quiet. Mr. Di Marco, who had come out of his room an hour ago to take a hot shower only to return to his room directly afterward, declined to come to dinner, saying that his stomach was bothering him. The others picked listlessly at the spaghetti and meatballs that Angelo had made and managed to only slightly burn, since his mother had come in the door and caught it just in time before the food could burn past the edible stage.

The boys helped with the cleanup, Angelo drying and putting away the dishes his mother washed, Paul cleaning the table and stove top and John sweeping the floor and porch. He also cleaned up the clothes his father had dropped on the bathroom floor. A big NO in the Di Marco home, but no one was going to point that out to Joshua. He took them onto the enclosed front porch where the washer and dryer stood beneath the stairs that lead to the upstairs apartment and put them in with a little extra detergent and fabric softener, since they still smelled charred.

When he went back into the house he asked his mother if she minded if he went to visit his girlfriend Heather for a little while, to which his mother replied in the affirmative with an injunction to her son to be home by ten, latest.

Paul also asked to be allowed to visit his girlfriend. He was also allowed, with the condition that he be home by nine.

"Mamma, may I go over to Amadeo's for a little while?" Angelo asked.

"No, Angelo, it's getting late and it's a school night." she replied, unwilling to let her youngest, who had a tendency to wander, out at night.
"But mamma! It's only just after six! If I ride my bike I can be there and back before seven thirty, eight latest. Honest!"

"Angelo." his mother said calmly, eyebrows rising just slightly as she looked at her youngest who seemed to have regressed to a ten-year-old.

"Sorry mamma." Angelo said contritely. "Please may I go over, just for a little while?"

"Did you finish your homework?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Including writing those words and their definitions one hundred times each?"

Angelo's eyes grew large. He'd forgotten about that, and his father had been too upset about the incident at work to even address it. "Yes ma'am, that's why supper nearly burned."

Julia didn't bother to mention that Angelo had a bad habit of forgetting dinner on the stove anyway, so homework was no excuse. Instead she said, "Did you write out a formal apology to Mr. Adams for disrupting his class?"

"No ma'am. Mr. Cobrane told me I have to do that in person. He didn't say I had to write one out too." he said quietly, wondering if his parents would adopt Charlie's family's tradition of continuing a spanking at home if he was spanked at school.

"You know how we do things in this family, Angelo. If you have to make an apology in person you also have to do it in writing, especially if it's to an adult. Now have a seat and do it, then you can call 'Deo. I want to see it before you put it in your bag and if I don't like it you'll have to do it again, so make it good." his mother said, going to the highboy beside the living room door and taking out a pen and pad of paper.

"Yes mamma." he said, obediently sitting before the pad of paper and pen at the now clean kitchen table. He considered his words carefully.
He finished the first letter in less than a minute.

"I'm done mamma." he announced.

Julia took the first piece of paper from the pad, rumpled it up and tossed it into the waste basket. Wordlessly, she pointed to the blank page and then to him, before turning to get a pitcher of iced tea from the refrigerator.

The second draft took slightly longer and met with the same results.

He let out a soft sigh of frustration and began the third draft, making sure to take longer writing it so that it seemed as though he were putting time and effort into it.

'Dear Mr. Adams,

I'm sorry that I behaved badly today. However, I felt that you were treating us like children, and talking to and treating us as though we were eight instead of teenagers and it really bothered me.

That doesn't excuse my behavior. Whatever the cause of my actions I could have responded differently. Perhaps I could have raised my hand and asked, in a respectful manner, why you wanted us to sit where you had placed us. Or perhaps I could have asked you, politely, after class was over.

What I did was impulsive and rude, and I'm very sorry.

Sincerely,

Angelo Di Marco'

"Mamma, I'm done." he announced.

"No you're not. I haven't even read it yet and I can tell you that it's inadequate. Try again."

"But mamma! You didn't even look at it!"

"That's true, Angelo. Let me see it." she said calmly, holding out her hand for the paper.
He handed it over, slightly mollified until she handed it back to him less than fifteen seconds later.
"Write it again, and choose your words carefully this time."

"But I did!" he protested.

"Angelo, it took me less than ten seconds to read that and it was not a proper apology. So write it properly this time, and put more thought into it."

Angelo huffed in annoyance. "Can you give me a hint? What did I say that was wrong? What can I say instead?"

"If I tell you what to say then it will be an apology from me and not you, and I'm not the one who disrupted his classroom with a childish prank. Now get to work, young man." she said firmly, gently tearing the last draft off of the pad.

He propped his cheek on his fist and scowled down at the blank piece of paper before him.

'Dear Mr. Adams,

I'm sorry we behaved like children, but you treated us like kids and we responded in kind. You are, in your opinion, dealing with children after all, so I'm not sure why you found what we did so unexpected. The only difference is that we're teenagers and not second graders, which is what most of us felt like, being separated from our friends that way, and which is why we did what we did.

As the person who started it, I heartily apologize. I was impulsive and what I did was wrong but I believe that you, as the adult, could have handled things differently as well. Please keep in mind that we are nearly adults, and if you want us to behave as adults then we deserve to be treated as adults.

Please accept my apology as I am truly sorry for my actions.

Sincerely,

Angelo Di Marco'

He signed with an angry flourish, nearly tearing the page with the tip of the pen. He was sick of having to write copy after copy of a letter he didn't feel he should have to write in the first place.

"I'm done mamma." he called, barely disguising his feelings.
Julia took the new page, read it impassively, put the page on the table, then turned toward the stove to remove the largest of her wooden spoons from the crockery pot in which they were stored.

Angelo jumped up from his seat between the wall and the table and put them between himself and his mother, eyes wide and hands up in supplication.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I don't know what you want me to say! I'm sorry! You always tell me to tell the truth but now you're getting mad at me for doing it! Just tell me what you want me to say and I'll say it! I'm sorry, mamma!" he said frantically, preparing to run into the bathroom and lock himself in there if she advanced on him any further with the dreaded spoon.

"What is going on out here?" asked a grumpy Joshua as he emerged from his bedroom, effectively blocking his son's retreat.

"Don't worry, Gio. I'm taking care of it." Julia replied, her voice low and tight.

Joshua took one look at his wife's slitted eyes and compressed lips and knew that his son had finally broken the last straw on the camel's back. His wife loved their children with a passion and rarely smacked them as anything more than a joke, careful not to hurt them in any way. Even during the few times that she put some 'umph' behind the swats she was calm and rational while doing it. The look on her face right now was like nothing he'd ever seen on her. She was truly angry with him, and her tone of voice was giving him the shivers.

"Angelo?" Joshua asked. Entire questions stated clearly in the one word.

Angelo licked his lips. "It's nothing, papa, really. I just... I just... I was..."

Julia calmly picked up the last two pieces of paper and handed them wordlessly to her husband.

"No, mamma! You don't need to do that!" Angelo said, trying to keep the panic from his voice as he went back around the table and closed the distance between himself and his mother.

Joshua read both notes, nodding. "I remember now, yes. Mr. Barnes called mamma and she called me. It seems that the problem now is that you've forgotten what an apology is?" he asked, arching his brows.
"No, I do papa, honest. I'll do it right this time, honest." Angelo said, trying to sidle behind his mother who was having none of it. She took him by the arm just above his elbow and held him firmly.

"I've got this Gio. You've had a rough day, go rest. Dinner is in the refrigerator if you decide you're hungry." she said. "Don't worry, I won't kill him. I'll just maim him a little, all right?" she asked, smiling tightly.

Joshua nodded, placed the pages on the table and walked back into his bedroom, once again closing the door quietly.

"Vieni con me, adesso." she said quietly, pulling him toward his room with a grip like iron which gave him the choice, either follow, or lose an arm. He chose to follow.
(Come with me, right now.)

*********

NOTES

The Drifters
Origin New York City, U.S.
Genres R&B, doo wop, soul, pop
Years active 1953–present
Labels Atlantic, Bell, Neon
Website thedrifters.co.uk

_Current Members____________________________________
Charlie Thomas
Louis Bailey
Stephen Brown
Jerome Manning
Jeff Hall

Associated acts
Ben E. King,
Clyde McPhatter
Artist: Barry Mann
Album: Soul & Inspiration
Recent Release: 2010
Genre: Pop

Other recordings of this song

On Broadway
Gary Numan · 1979

On Broadway
Johnny Mathis · 2000

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Chapter End Notes

AN

All of these stories were actually written in the early 1990s to the late 2000s, I'm just too lazy to keep changing the dates, so since these new posts have been put up with the current date, I consider the date to be more of an upgrade, since there are some minor differences between the chapter as it was to how it is now.
Thanks again folks, for tuning into the story.

Snarks
Angelo and Amadeo

Angelo was thrust, with surprising force coming from his tiny 5' 2", one-hundred-pound mother, into his bedroom. He staggered forward after she let go of him, turning quickly to get his vulnerable nether region out of reach of the nastiest, in his opinion, of his mother's spoons. The smaller, thinner ones stung, but this monster covered nearly as much area as his father's Sasquatch sized hands, stung like the devil, and his mother was an expert in wielding it.

Unlike his father's hands, which would frequently leave hand shaped imprints that would last a day or two, the spoon, besides stinging like the dickens, left imprints that lasted several days and had been known to leave bruises if it landed the wrong way. He knew his mother never deliberately hurt him or his brothers, and that that spoon was a last resort; they had to really mess up before she pulled that thing out of the crockery pot for anything more than stirring sauce. He was now very, very sorry that he'd pushed her to this action, but he was also grateful that he was now facing Spoonzilla and not his father's belt.

"Per I'm sorry mama, please! I'll do better, I promise!" he begged, opening his large brown eyes even wider and pouting out his full lower lip 'just enough'.

Julia Di Marco took her son by the arm and began swatting away, pulling back on his arm sharply when she realized that he was arching away and they were going around in circles. She sat on his bed, and using her lack of height, pulled him off balance and over her lap.

"Oh! No! Mama! Please! Not like this! I'm too old for this! Mamma, please!"

His words fell on deaf ears as the spoon landed on his buttocks, thighs, hips and everywhere else she could reach with him wriggling and twisting in an attempt to get his rump out of reach only to expose other parts he was equally as keen not to have swatted. He could feel it as the rim of the bowl landed wrong and he hissed and jumped, trying to use his hands and feet, which actually touched the floor, to lever himself up and off of her relatively tiny lap.

Mrs. Di Marco took a hand full of the waistband of her son's jeans and held it taut, keeping him in place and making it feel as though she were smacking skin and not two, unfortunately thin, layers of material. She spanked for about two minutes before she began to ask her son questions.
"This is what it feels like to be treated like you're eight years old, Angelo, do you remember now?" she asked.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Yes! Mama please! Basta!" he cried, throwing back a hand and wincing as she gave his knuckles a mild crack with the handle. He immediately moved his hand. He crossed his ankles in an attempt to alleviate some of the sting.

"Is this what Mr. Adams did to you?"

"No, mama! OWWWW!" he cried as the rim caught him again.

"So he didn't treat you like an eight-year-old then, did he?"

"OW! No, mama! OW! No! OW! Ow! OW!"

"You've gotten off to a very bad start at school, Angelo. We're very disappointed. Dad and I thought you'd matured over the summer but I guess we were wrong," she said, sadness and anger in equal measure in her voice.

"No mama! I did grow up, honest! Let me prove it! Please don't spank me mom, I'll be good! I'll do better! Owwwwwwwwwww! Maammmmmmmmmm!" he cried, tears running down his cheeks as he tried to convince his mother that she'd made her point.

It was approximately eight thirty before Angelo was able to sit long enough to work on his written apology. His mother placed the blank notepad, the pen and the spoon on the table, then sat calmly across from her son as he worked on it, occasionally stopping to blow his nose or wipe his eyes or shift a little to find a less tender spot to sit on.

"I'm done mama." Angelo said.

Mrs. Di Marco reached over to take the paper from her son's hand. Angelo sat quietly, nervously wiping his hands on the thighs of his jeans as she read. When her eyes were trained on the paper he took the opportunity to rub the seat of his jeans.
'Dear Mr. Adams,

I apologize for my bad behavior and take full responsibility for disrupting the class with my childish antics. I know that no one else would have thought of doing it. The thought of being able to get away with something I knew was wrong made it seem like such a good idea.

I understand now that it was not a good idea. It was not funny. It was not mature. You did not deserve to be treated like that. You are an adult and a teacher and you deserve respect, and I didn't show you that respect, for which I'm sincerely sorry.

I hope, sir, that eventually you will be able to forgive me, and accept my apology.

Sincerely,

Angelo Di Marco'

Angelo looked anxiously at his mother and licked his lips, unconsciously holding his breath. She held out her hand wordlessly and at first Angelo was afraid he was in for another dose of the spoon, but she pointed to the pen. He handed it to her. She signed it at the bottom and handed it back to him.

"You can get washed and dressed for bed now," was all she said before heading quietly into the living room to turn on the television.

Angelo let out the pent up breath and felt the tension he hadn't realized he'd built up leaving his shoulders and back. He got up gingerly, backside still stinging from the vigorous application of the spoon, put the approved apology into his satchel, washed his face and hands and brushed his teeth, then headed toward his bedroom to put on his pajamas and go to bed. He meekly wished his mother a good night as he passed her, not daring to complain about the early bed time.

"Angelo." she said firmly, as she stood and pointed to the floor in front of her.

He took a tentative step toward her. She reached for him and pulled him close, wrapping her arms around him. Even though he was now about five inches taller than her he bent down and laid his cheek against her temple, wrapping his arms around her awkwardly. "I'm sorry, mamma." he said quietly.

"I'm sorry too, il mio angelo. I hate to punish you," she said softly, stroking his hair.

"I know, mama. I deserved it. I was acting like a little kid. It was all my own fault," he admitted.
"Ti amo, mio. Good night."
(I love you, my own.)

"Ti amo. Good night, mamma." he said, gently disengaging and walking into his room. He flopped down on his stomach on his bed and fell asleep without changing. His mother checked on him before she went to bed and found him sprawled across his bed. Smiling, she shut the door and went to see to her husband.

Angelo didn't see or speak to Amadeo until the following day at school, and he was nearly late for homeroom, arriving only about a minute before the first bell rang.

"Where were you?" Amadeo asked quietly.

"Went to talk to Mr. Adams. Couldn't wait till Thursday, it was driving me crazy."

"What'd he say?"

"Tell ya later." Angelo said, as the bell rang.

It was obvious to all of his friends during home room that he wasn't sitting comfortably. They all seemed to accept the story he told about slipping and sliding down the flight of twenty, pine cellar stairs on his back. All but Amadeo, who suspected differently but wouldn't have said anything to the contrary even if he'd known for sure.

On their way to Mr. Webb's science class, Amadeo gave his boy a look. "Those stairs are pine but they're soft as butter and so worn it's like walking on a mattress. So what really happened?" he whispered, knowingly.

"Shut up." Angelo grumbled. "We're gonna be late for class."

"Come on, Ange. What happened?"

"I'll tell you the whole story at lunch." he growled, “Now let's go. There's a frog with my name on it in Mr. Webb's class. Mmmm mmmm," he said sarcastically, "I do love the smell of
formaldehyde, and cutting open squishy things first thing in the morning right after breakfast."

"You're in a mood." Amadeo joked gently.

Angelo scowled and stuck his tongue out at his man before stalking into Mr. Webb's class.

The rest of the day went off without a hitch, although with all of his new found friends wanting to sit with him during lunch he wasn't able to tell 'Deo what had happened the night before. The main topic of conversation was the accident at the stone works which had been the headlines in that morning's paper.

"Your dad works there, doesn't he?" asked Charlie, concerned.

"Yeah, he's actually an engineer but he does electronics too."

"Like, putting in light switches and stuff?" asked Felix. "Not that I mind, but they made you guys come all the way here from New York for that? Why couldn't they get someone from around here to do that?"

"If he runs trains what's he doing working in a building like that?" Dennis asked, confused.

"He's not that kind of engineer," Angelo laughed. "He designs and invents things, usually electronic devices, which is what his company does. He works on inventing new things and improving on the designs of things that have already been invented."

"Really?" said Aiden, excitedly, "What's he working on now?"

"Well, right now all he's doing is making sure that the building..." he stopped and sighed. "Well, he was making sure that the building was set up for maximum production, making sure that offices had an adequate number of outlets... the stoneworks used electricity for lighting but they apparently did most of their work by hand. They used power tools for certain things but the plugs and wiring are messed up from rot and rats so one of the things he was working on was updating the wiring. That's not technically his job at his company but he's a talented guy, which is why when he told them we were moving to Georgia they kept him on and gave him the job of searching out sites here for the company to expand, and overseeing renovations."
"So..." Jim said, “Did he say what happened to the guys? I mean, I know they died but... what'd they look like? Was there much left of them?"

"Jimmy that's disgusting," said Dennis angrily.

"Hey! You can't say you weren't wondering." Jim defended himself.

"No, actually, I was wondering more about what the building looked like, and if it could be fixed. As far as those guys go, all I could think about was their families." Dennis said testily.

"Yeah, well," Jim replied uncomfortably, "I guess I'm just morbid. I've always been interested in cause and effect. Sorry if I grossed you guys out."

Dennis sighed. "No, Jimmy, I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little more freaked out about what happened than I thought and your comment just... took me off guard."

"Look guys," offered Felix, “Lets talk about something else. That was a pretty horrible thing to happen. I mean, my dad works for the Tribune, and he told me a long time ago that if the paper doesn't give more information on something like that then it was because it was even worse than they were admitting. If they didn't give more detail, then it was because the details were too gory for print."

Conversation quickly changed to the subject of their next classes. Unfortunately, they weren't in all classes together, so they spent the rest of their lunch period comparing teachers and class mates, laughing as Jim did superb impressions of some of the teachers. They all agreed that he had a talent for imitation.

"I have to hit the lav, I'll be right back, don't talk about anything til I get back," Jim said with a grin, before taking off as though his tail were on fire.

"We walk in this school, Mr. Barkis!" came the familiar voice of Mr. Cobrane. "We do not run."

"Yes sir. Sorry sir," Jim said, immediately moderating his stride and walking toward the hallway and the boy's lavatory.
The others continued to talk and laugh for the next several minutes until they heard Cobrane's voice. "I'll see you in detention at three, Mr. Jablonski."

Milo turned around and began to protest that he hadn't done anything until he realized it was only Jim, who had returned quietly from the restroom, and who was nearly doubled up laughing.

"You creep! I nearly had a heart attack!" he shouted.

"Yeah, maybe, but the look on your face when you croaked would'a been hilarious," Jim laughed.

"I'll see you in detention at three, Mr. Barkis," came the silky voice from behind Jim, whose transition from highly amused to stunned was even funnier than Milo's had been. The boys put their hands to their mouths to keep from laughing, worried that Mr. Cobrane would send them to detention if they laughed at their friend. "Good day, boys," he said as he turned away.

The corner of Cobrane's mouth quirked up slightly as he looked at Amadeo. The boy was startled and nearly laughed as the man's eyes twinkled and he gave Amadeo an otherwise solemn wink before departing.

AN
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NOTES

An engineer is a professional practitioner of engineering, concerned with applying scientific knowledge, mathematics, and ingenuity to develop solutions for technical problems. Engineers design materials, structures, and systems while considering the limitations imposed by practicality, regulation, safety, and cost.
(Wikipedia)

Teachers and Subjects for Angelo and Amadeo's Class/Year - 1966 (Now 17 years old)

Mr. Barnabas Janco Spanish and Latin W - F
(beginners & intermediate)

Brandon Miles Price: British Lit T - Th

Anna Celeste Wright: Composition T - Th
Creative writing

Christine Mastroiano: Music T - Th - F
Dolores Christoff: Art T - Th - F

Charles Franklin Adams: English/American Lit T - Th

Clifton James Webb: Science M - W - F

James Harris Young: Gym W - F

Caroline Dana Higgins: Gym (girls) T - Th

Edward Nelson Robinson: History/ Social Studies M - W - F

Carter Gregory Mason: Geography M - W - F

Hector Garcia: Spanish M - W - F
(Honors Students Only)

Penelope Cooper: French M - W- F
(Honors Students Only)

Vosam 'Blossom' Ward: Latin M- F
(Honors Students only)

Hugh Kyle Barnes: Principal
Oversees study halls and will occasionally cover classes, including Spanish, if a teacher is sick or otherwise unable to conduct their class.

Shandon Liam Cobrane: Vice Principal
Oversees detentions and study halls, and will occasionally cover classes (except languages) if a teacher is sick or otherwise unable to conduct their class.
Angelo, despite the events of the night before, was motivated in Mr. Young’s gym class and overexerted himself to the point where the teacher sent him to the showers early.

"I appreciate your efforts, Mr. Di Marco but I can't have you passing out on the gymnasium floor. You're beet red right now. Take a lukewarm shower and get dressed. Go to the fountain and get a drink. Drink slowly! You're done here for the day," the man ordered. "I expect you to take things more slowly on Friday. Understood?"

"Yes sir. Thank you." Angelo replied, walking quickly toward the showers. Once in the locker room he glanced around, then turned his back on the large mirror above the sinks and gently pulled down the back of his gym shorts. There weren't many of them but he couldn't help but notice the round, spoon shaped bruises. A couple were crescent shaped where the rim of the bowl had caught him rather than the bowl itself. He gently pressed one of the bruises, wincing as the muscle twinged. He'd been very concerned that the bruises would be exposed during gym, and everyone would know what had happened. While he was exhausted and sweatier than usual, he was glad that his plan had worked, and that Mr. Young took such good care of his boys.

He took a quick shower, keeping his shorts on as he soaped up and washed his hair just in case anyone else came in early, and then dried off and dressed in one of the bathroom stalls. He was doing a more thorough dry of his hair by the time the other boys filed in.

"What got into you today, Angelo? You made the rest of us look like snails in there!" joked Marshall Jakes, one of his classmates.

"Did you get your drink?" asked another boy named Kevin. "Your face is still kind of red."

"Hey, Angelo," called a boy named Adam Krahe as he entered the locker room, "Boss says he wants to see you in his office when you're done in here."

"You might want to drink more water from the tap there and go see him." Kevin suggested,
nodding toward the faucet.

"Did he look mad?" asked Angelo, looking at Adam worriedly, sipping some cool water and patting the rest on his face and neck, using the sleeve of his shirt to dry his face.

"Not particularly, no. I'd say more worried. I think you're OK," Adam replied. "But honest, Ange, what was with you today?"

"Just hyper I guess," he hedged. He took a breath, "OK guys, wish me luck."

"Luck!" the boys chorused, watching Angelo leave the locker room.

"He's toast," quipped Kevin when his class mate was gone. The other boys laughed uncomfortably. They didn't want to change places with Angelo if the coach was mad at him. Coach Young was the only other person in the school who would paddle the boys if they acted up in his class.

"Come in," said Coach Young amiably when he saw the boy standing uncertainly at his door. "Don't worry, you're not in trouble. Yet. I just need to understand what was going through your mind today? I've told you boys before to monitor your pulse. You had to have felt yours racing. You had to have felt the heat in your body and I know you were aware of how much you were sweating; you could barely keep it out of your eyes. So tell me what was going on today?" he asked, casually approaching the boy to put a cool palm on the boy's forehead before turning toward the cooler at the back of his office.

"I guess it was just nerves, Coach. I'm not really good at sports, you saw that last semester, and I think I just got a lot of adrenaline at once. I couldn't seem to stop myself."

Coach Young handed Angelo a bottle of water. "Here. Drink it slowly." the man said, looking at the boy thoughtfully. "All right then, Angelo, I’ll accept nerves as an excuse this time, but this is a onetime only thing. If I see you overworking yourself and not monitoring your pulse and breathing again, you and I are going to have a different kind of meeting after class. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir." Angelo said, taking a careful sip of the wonderfully cold water. He knew that if the coach hadn't been watching he'd have swallowed it all in one go. "It won't happen again."

"Everything is all right, Angelo?" the coach asked, gently, concerned. "I heard about what
happened. I know it had to have effected your father, being so close to the situation and the men who died. It had to have effected your whole family. Are you all right?"

"I'm feeling a little sick over it, sir, but I feel worse for dad and the people who got hurt... and killed."

Mr. Young nodded silently.

"Coach?"

"Yes, Angelo?"

"I was going to ask Mr. Barnes, I mean, I'm not sure who to ask but... Do you think there's a way to have a raffle, or... a rally or... something we can do to raise money for the families of the men who died? It was an accident and all but... I mean, no one had to have expected that and dad said that Mister... uh..., Gus's wife just had a baby. She's gonna need stuff for him... uh, or her. I don't even know which it is."

"That's a great idea, Angelo. If you like I'll talk to Mr. Barnes about it, or go with you. I think the school board is going to get the final say, and then of course we'll have to get a lot of people's cooperation, but it's not impossible."

"Will you go with me then? Please?"

"When is your next free period?"

"After social studies, at two."

"I had one appointment for then but I know I can reschedule. Want to try then?" asked Mr. Young.

"That would be great. Thank you, Boss."

Mr. Young grinned at the nickname and clapped Angelo on the shoulder. "Don't forget," he said to
Angelo as they left his office, "Mr. Barnes' office at two."

"Yes sir." Angelo replied as he went in the opposite direction toward his next class.

Kevin, Adam and several other boys had been standing about, waiting curiously to hear or see what was going on. When they heard the words, 'Mr. Barnes' office.' Kevin once again asserted that their friend was 'toast', and the boys scattered to get to their next classes on time.
That Saturday, the two men were buried and most of the people in town had shown up to offer the families their condolences. TechCorp NY, the company that Angelo's father worked for, had paid the burial expenses, caskets, funerals, hearses and limousines for the families, so some of the students and parents who showed up for the meeting felt that they, the families, had been more than compensated.

Darren St. Martin, one of the students, got up and reminded the audience that while the funerals had been paid for, there was still the matter of widows with young children to consider. Mrs. Molina had the new baby and two other children, ages five and three, and would need help until she could find a job and a reliable baby sitter. Mrs. Scheffield also had two young children and worked part time but had counted on her husband to be home nights so that she could work at her job as a waitress, which, even including tips, was not going to make up the loss of her husband's income.

Many of the people in attendance applauded. Some held out, refusing to be convinced. It was at this time that Angelo was asked to present his ideas.

"I'd like to add to Darren's comments," Angelo said, trying to remain brave in front of so many people, "That it's not just taking care of the children, but helping to pay their bills until they can get on their feet."

"One of my ideas had been for the students who like kids to offer to baby sit and then donate their fees to the project, but now I'm also wondering if there are any folks out there willing to baby sit for free while Mrs. Molina looks for a job, and if there are any adults out there who have jobs open where they work where they can refer her." he said, licking his lips nervously and wondering if there were going to be cries of protest at his first idea. No one spoke. He could see that people were really considering his words so he continued.

"Some of my ideas are run of the mill, some of them, some might consider funny although a rather unpleasant word was used for one of them in jest, but we have to remember that these ideas are for a good cause, and are meant in the spirit of fun, not mean spiritedness. All right?"

"What have you got for us, young man?" Mrs. Haver, one of the board members, asked kindly.
"Well, there are the usual bake sales and lemonade stands. I wrote out copies for all of you with the prices I thought people would find affordable and reasonable, such as cookies for a penny each, and brownies for five cents apiece. Whole batches of brownies or whole cakes for a dollar. Lemonade would be a penny a glass except for the special lemonade my mom makes with strawberries or raspberries in it, which, while it might sound strange tastes really good. We could charge five, maybe even ten cents for a glass of the specialty lemonade."

Again, hearing no immediate protests he continued down his list. It wasn't until he got to the idea that the students loved that the adults protested.

"That's extortion!" or, "That's blackmail!" or, "And who gets to clean it up afterward!?"

Angelo tried to smile. He'd known that this one was going to be a harder sell but he'd already spoken to the football team, who had, with Coach Young's permission, been more than willing not only to do the deed but to do the clean up afterward.

"Well," he agreed, "Yes, it could be thought of that way, but remember it's for a good cause, and the cost for either service isn't that high."

"So if I paid for Burt's house to be... treated, he'd be warned and able to pay to avoid it?" asked one man, with wide grin.

"You'd receive the same consideration, Mr. Greene, in case Mr. Carlton decided to ask us to TP your house." Angelo laughed, which got the audience laughing as well.

"Where do you plan to get all that toilet paper?" asked one interested parent.

"A... place... that wishes to remain nameless... has offered to donate as much as would be needed, but the hope is that people would be willing to pay the... fee... to protect their house from being TP'd which would make the offer of the donation unnecessary." Angelo grinned.

"What other ideas do you have?" asked Mr. Peters, another of the board members.

"Lots, sir. Donation jars in each classroom. The class that collects the most money gets a School Sanctioned Hooky Day," The announcement of that idea was met with cheers from the student population. "We already talked to Mr. Cobrane and Mr. Barnes about the idea and they said it was
up to you, so please, consider it?" Angelo asked politely.

"A bunch of us have already approached businesses in town about this next idea, ladies and gentlemen," Angelo continued, hoping to follow the apparently unpopular idea with a more acceptable one. "One is that they will match whatever we raise, and some have donated items in lieu of matching donations."

"The sporting goods store has agreed to donate darts, and Kregees has agreed to donate two hundred bags of balloons. Georges' Barber shop, the A&W, Grammarcy's and several other places have offered coupons for free or discounted services. We would put the coupons in the balloons, blow them up and mount them. We'd sell five darts for twenty five cents and people would throw the darts at the balloons and win which ever prize or service that was printed on the coupon."

That was met with applause and Angelo took a breath to calm himself. He'd never spoken to an audience before but the more he did it the easier he found it.

"One idea that was brought to me by Mr. Cobrane was a talent show. We would charge ten cents for students and twenty five cents for adults, and volunteers would put on a variety show. Mr. Cobrane says he knows several clowns in the school who would be worth the money to see."

The audience laughed heartily at that and Mr. Cobrane smiled and bowed genteelly toward the people who turned and saluted him.

Angelo went down the list, hearing no more complaints or protests from the audience or the school board, even when he suggested allowing students to wear inoffensive tee shirts to school for a week provided they paid ten cents per day and didn't violate any other school rules with them.

There were ten more ideas which Angelo had either thought of or had been given to him, and he credited each person with their idea

The only other idea he didn't present to the audience but which every student in the school knew about and looked forward to was 'the invasion of the Garden Gnomes'.

Morkey's, the store which had anonymously offered the donation of the toilet paper, had also donated the stock of Garden Gnomes which hadn't sold the year before.
The students would, sometime during the evening hours, leave the Gnomes on a lawn with a number to call for their removal, for a fee. The fee would be lowered if the person calling gave the address of another lawn which would be happy to host a party of Gnomes.

NOTES

Other ideas for fund raisers:

car wash .25 cars, .50 pick ups, 1.00 for large vehicles (No 16 - 18 wheelers)

donate portion of birthday money or allowance

offer to babysit and donate earnings

Garden Gnome invasion - A large number of garden gnomes will be left on someone's lawn, they will have to pay for removal, and if they want the gnomes 'relocated' to a different neighbor's house, that will cost a little less.
(Make sure it's a house where they don't *like* garden gnomes or you might not get them back.)

Communal tag sale where everyone donates something for sale

Silent bidding - tables/chairs, donated crafted items

Tee Shirt Day - anyone wanting to wear a tee shirt must pay .25 per day (with restrictions)

Halloween in September - door to door wearing Halloween costumes and asking for pennies, nickels or dimes instead of 'candy'

Arrest and Bail - Pay to have someone arrested and then bail must be raised.

Sale of better art projects from Mrs. Christoff's classes

Cook Book - collection of favorite recipes made into booklets and sold, 2.00

woven bracelets and necklaces made from embroidery threads with bead clasps, the more intricate ones cost more


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There were class clowns galore, certainly. Some told jokes, others did prop comedy, the best one was Milo Jablonski who did startlingly realistic imitations of the male teachers, the best of which everyone agreed was Mr. Cobrane's 'I'll see you in detention at three o’ clock.' "I hear it enough," he’d joked, "There's no way I could get that wrong!" to the laughter of the audience.

Amadeo and Jim sang 'Save the Last Dance For Me' while Adam Krahe played the guitar in accompaniment, which had many of the girls starry eyed as they imagined being Amadeo's prom date. Girls who had til that point overlooked Adam had their eyes opened when they realized what a stellar guitar player he was, and even Jim, who had always been considered something of a lunk by the girls was getting looks and a few smiles as his baritone echoed through the auditorium.

Angelo wouldn't sing anything solo despite the fact that he'd pulled off the presentation for the fund raiser without a hitch, but he agreed to get up with Amadeo, Jim and Felix to sing Sam Cooke's, 'Wonderful World'.

Sharon Parker, Amadeo's friend from the school office, and her boyfriend, Scott, entertained the audience with their rendition of 'There's A Hole In The Bucket' beginning with Scott downstage right, his back to 'Liza', stealthily drilling a hole in the bucket with an awl while her back was turned.

Over six hundred dollars had been raised and divided between the two widows. They'd been stunned when they received the checks and the offers for free babysitting. The change that couldn't be split had been used to buy penny candy for the older kids. The left over coupons from the balloons had been gathered up and ironed out to be given to the widows, with the stores' permission, for them to use when and if they needed. Coupons for diapers and services had been somehow been found as well and given to the women. Enough, apparently, to last the children well into their twenties.

A few of the gnomes had found their way to the women's lawns and seemed quite happy to stay where they were. The others, tired of being shunted around, had apparently run off and found a home of their own somewhere else.
September quickly changed to October and before they knew it everyone was getting ready for Halloween. Angelo and Amadeo had both been warned that if they went out on Mischief Night and anything at all happened while they were out they'd be held responsible, so it would make sense to simply stay home that night and have a little quiet fun.

At first the boys had been disappointed until Angelo's mother told him that he could have Amadeo and the rest of his 'gang' over for dinner.

Being intimately associated with Mrs. Di Marco's cooking, none of the kids said no. They were told to wear old clothes that they didn't care about, and to bring a change of clean, comfortable clothes along.

The directive got some raised eyebrows but everyone did as they were told, showing up in their tatters and tears with their grubs in bags of one sort or another, which they put aside.

The boys all blushed as Mrs. Di Marco greeted them in her usual exuberant way, and Ethel's eyes sparkled when the woman gave her a kiss on each cheek and called her beautiful in Italian.

The main topic of conversation had been Amadeo's nephew, who had had the surgery and whose bandages had come off only recently.

"Well, he can track it when you take a toy and move it left to right or up and down, and when you smile at him he smiles back. But the doctor says there's no way to be sure exactly how well he sees until he's old enough to talk, then we can find out how clearly he sees, and if he can see color. But everyone is thrilled that he has any vision at all."

The other fourteen children were happy to hear the news but no one asked about Beth Ann's parents and brothers, and Amadeo didn't mention them.

They began the night by baking cookies, cutting out skeletons and ghosts, cats and pumpkins with special cutters that Mrs. Di Marco had.

While the cookies baked, they made popcorn which Mrs. Di Marco drizzled with melted toffee and shook in a bag. The kids had never had anything like it before and couldn't get enough of it. When the cookies were cooled they decorated them with homemade orange, green, black or white vanilla flavored icing.
Afterward, they went down into the wine cellar to Angelo's 'Hobbit Hole'. They gasped in surprise when he turned on the lights. There were paintings stacked against the walls, covered in a tarp, and another on the easel which was obviously of Mrs. Di Marco washing dishes, head tilted. Her face could only be seen in profile but it was serene and happy.

"Wow, Ange! Way to hide your light under a bushel!" Ethel said admiringly, moving the tarp and looking through the pictures on the floor.

"NO! Don't!" Angelo begged.

But it was too late. Ethel pulled out a painting that could be none other than her. She was seated at a desk, pencil eraser pressed to a lip as she contemplated her answer before writing it down on the paper in front of her.

Another was of Bruce on his blue Vespa, head down as he checked his throttle. A close up of Amadeo. Jim swinging a bat. Felix and Aiden flying multi colored kites in a cloudless sky. Ralph, Steven, Carlos, and the others seated in a line, tallest to shortest, left elbow on the shoulder of the one next to them, right leg crossed.

"We never posed for this!" Steven said, impressed at the detail.

"It's nothing, I'm sorry." Angelo said, blushing darkly. He'd wanted to hide the pictures but there hadn't been anywhere to put them except on the back porch and he'd known that they'd be going out that way eventually.

"When did you take the pictures? We never saw you with a camera." said Ralph with a smile.

"I didn't take pictures, it’s just from my head."

"You did these out of your head?" Carlos asked, awed.

"Look at this!" Aiden said, picking up something that fit into the palm of his hand.

Everyone looked. It was the stone from Mrs. Christoff's class. It had been chiseled into a perfect
ball. The center had been carved out at an angle, leaving a smooth empty space. He put it on a table and rolled it gently, perfectly, looking like a large marble with a bite taken out of it.

"Look! Look! If you hold it this way it looks like a turtle with his head sticking out!" said Felix excitedly, "But if you hold it this way, it looks like a dove about to fly! How did you do this?"

"It was an accident." Angelo admitted blushing. "A chunk came off and I just went with it."

"How'd you get this shine?" Milo asked.

"Car wax. Look guys I didn't mean for you to see this stuff. I wanted to show you this so we could have some fun!" he said pointing to a barrel of what looked like muddy water, effectively getting their attentions off of the other things as he covered them back over.

"Stick your hand in there, nice and deep, and pull out a hand full."

Amadeo was the first one brave enough to do it. "Ange, man, I can't tell you what this stuff makes me think of." he quipped, wrinkling his nose as he pulled up a slimy looking mass of mud. Milo, Charlie and Dennis had a few suggestions as to what it could be, making Eddie and the others even more reluctant to stick their hands into the mess.

"Clay, guys. Clay! Come on! Go wild! What have you ever wanted to see that you never did, what thing did you ever believe should have been made but never was as far as you know? Make a vase, make a dragon, make an ent! Just make! It's clay, it can take it!"

The kids worked feverishly for over two hours making the most outlandish things they could think of using sculpting tools that Angelo provided.

Ethel created a very realistic looking tree. Each leaf was hand cut and 'slipped' onto her tree after Angelo showed her how to use the more liquid 'mud' to use as glue.

Jim created a very realistic... something... that was out of a fascinating nightmare. It had feet like a chicken, the hind legs of a jack rabbit, the front end looked like a beaver with the horns of a ram and the front legs of a t-rex. He'd carved fur on the body with a small blunt knife.
"That has to be the coolest thing I've ever seen." the usually quiet Bruce said admiringly as he worked on a finely shaped vase for his mother.

Mrs. Di Marco's voice wafted down the cellar. "Are you kids nearly done down there? It's almost dinner time."

"Just in time!" said Jim. "I was about to topple over from hunger!"

"You could always eat your critter, there." Ethel quipped.

"You kidding? In real life, this thing is as big as a rhino, didn't you know that?"

"Thanks for the warning." She said with a grin.

"Oh yeah, and if you see one, don't bother to run."

"Why not?"

"You'll never get away from it. Just say your prayers and shake a little salt on yourself."

"Idiot." she laughed, shouldering him gently. He smiled back.

"Come on guys, put your things in the kiln, then lets go out back and rinse off, then we can change into our clean stuff." He lead them out the back door, turned on the hose and they washed as much of the clay off of their hands and out from under their fingernails as they could.

Mrs. Di Marco allowed Ethel to use her bedroom to change. The boys took turns in Angelo's room and the bathroom. They were all clean and dry and their mouths were watering as they smelled the roasted chickens and potatoes with onion and herbs that Angelo's mother had made for dinner. The kitchen was packed.

Even though it was October it was still around seventy-eight degrees outside, so Mr. Di Marco set up tables outside to accommodate the fifteen teenagers and also give the rest of the family space to
have their own dinner.

Angelo and Amadeo brought the food out and set it on the mish mash of tables, Felix and Aiden set out mismatched chairs from the barn, Jim and Dennis helped bring out utensils and napkins, Ethel and Bruce juggled glasses, Steve and Carlos brought out jugs of lemonade and iced tea.

There was some discussion as to a prayer over the meal since they weren't all the same religion. Finally, one had been successfully made up and Angelo sat respectfully by as Dennis intoned the prayer and then they all dug into the food. His mother had gone all out tonight and the food was, as usual, magnificent.

After they'd brought in, washed, dried and put away the dishes and utensils Mrs. Di Marco set out plates of still warm chocolate cake, filled with still soft chocolate chips, drizzled with hot chocolate sauce and glasses of milk, which the teenagers brought back out to the impromptu picnic tables.

"I have died and gone to heaven!" said Ethel. "Think your mom would give me the recipe for this cake? Oh, my word!" she said between bites.

"Ask her, she probably has it written down for everyone already." Angelo laughed.

After they finished their dessert, they brought the plates and glasses back in and everyone pitched in, washing, drying, putting away, folding the tables and putting them and the chairs away before settling into the kitchen for another large pan of freshly made popcorn, pulling in more chairs, but even then there wasn't enough room in the kitchen for all of them to have a seat, so no one thought twice about Carlos sitting on Steve's lap, or Parker on Bruce's.

"You know," Carlos said suddenly, "This is the coolest house," as Paul came in through the back door to the kitchen.

"It is. Did you know that there's a long history of this house before my uncle even came to live here? It was only one level back then, just a little farm house in the middle of nowhere."

"Really? When did the second floor get put in?" asked several voices.

"Same time as they installed the plumbing I think, about thirty or so years ago. Before then it was just this kitchen, the living room and bedrooms. And the cellar of course. When my uncle
expanded and added the bathroom and alcove he expanded the cellar as well. There's a great story about the cellar if you want to hear it." he said conversationally.

"Sure," said Milo. "Of course, this place is so fascinating anyway, nothing would surprise me now." he smiled.

"Well," said Paul, "It was always a farm house, but for a long time the only people who lived here was a boy named Johnny and his parents, on this one floor, no electricity, no heat other than the big stove like we used to have, no running water. They'd have to go out to the spring and wait an hour for the pail to fill, or when it snowed they'd gather pails of snow to use as water to wash and cook and melt them on the stove.

"Anyway, despite that they were really happy. But then the mother got really sick and died. It was a really bad winter and the ground actually froze, so they put her in the ice house in town to keep til spring and then they buried her. In the meantime, one of the neighbor ladies, a widow, had been coming round, bringing food, washing and cleaning and doing for the widower and his son. The man fell in love with her, and he married her the next fall."

"Well there was a lot of scandal about that but they two didn't pay any attention to it. The boy was upset but he didn't say anything, you know? He didn't make any secret about the fact that he didn't like her, and she wasn't as obvious, but she didn't like him. She knew that if her husband knew she'd be alone again, since the man loved his son so much and who would most likely get the boy. Her own children had gone as soon as was feasibly possible, heading out to places unknown and as far away from their mother as they could."

"Anyway, the following winter the father had to go off on a trip and left the boy and his step mother alone in the house. Well once the father was gone she showed her true colors and would beat him, and make him do any nasty chore she didn't want to do herself. One night she heard noises coming from the cellar and she told the boy to go down with a candle and check the noise out. The boy said it was probably just rats or mice, or maybe even bats, and not to worry about it because they were down there and he and his step mother were up here."

"The woman beat him about the head and shoulders but he wouldn't go down, so finally she lit a candle and started going down herself. Her foot caught the hem of her long skirt and she went tumbling down the stairs and broke her neck."

"So the kid was alone in the house with a dead body?" Eddie asked with a shiver.

"Yep, and he was scared. Everyone knew that he didn't like the woman and he was afraid that that
when his father got home he'd think that his son had done it, so the boy waited til the next morning to go down the stairs when it was lighter, and there she was. All cold and pale, with her neck at an angle and her eyes all open and glassy, and staring right at him. So, he got a shovel and dug a deep hole in the dirt floor, and he buried her deep down as he could, figuring he'd tell his father that she'd run off when he got home.

"That night the wind was blowing and he was trying to stay warm next to the stove when he heard the voice." Paul said, lowering his. "You would leave me down here in the cold while you warm yourself by the fire? Let me join you,' came the voice from the cellar. Then he heard the first stair creak. 'Johnny, I'm on the first step,' she said in a low, quivering voice. Then the second stair creaked and she said 'Johnny, I'm on the second step,' the voice came again."

"Three more creaking sounds, three more stairs and she announced each as she was on it. 'Johnny, (creak) I'm on the sixth step. Johnny (creak) I'm on the seventh step,' he said dangerously. 'Closer and closer she came as the stairs creaked and she announced in a dead voice which stair she was on. Finally, she said 'Johnny, I'm at the door.' and the door began to creak open," he whispered, making the creaking sound slowly, "Johnny..." he said almost inaudibly... the teenagers leaned forward to hear his voice, eyes wide as they took in every word.

The door to the hallway leading to the back hallway slammed open and a white faced apparition screamed "I'm here!"

The teens jumped the proverbial mile and screamed as the gaunt, white faced, grey haired thing jumped out of the doorway with blood on its lips.

Paul and Johnny began to laugh, holding their sides as they saw the looks on the faces of their little brother and his friends.

"You... you! Bas...! You... sons of... you... you... ass..." Angelo yelled brokenly, stunned and startled as his heart tried desperately to jump up his throat and escape through his open mouth. He felt Amadeo's hand putting pressure on his shoulder so he managed to maintain enough control of himself to avoid getting into trouble in front of his friends.

Mrs. Di Marco came out of her bedroom just as suddenly, startling them again, and told her boys firmly and thoroughly off.

"You're lucky you controlled your mouth, ragazzino!" she scolded Angelo. Then she turned to her older sons who were still laughing, "And you two! Look at what you did to my refrigerator!" she yelled when she saw the indentation where the door handle had slammed into it. They immediately
stopped laughing and began to apologize.

Amadeo and Angelo used all of their will power not to laugh as Mrs. Di Marco switched to Italian, ordering them to get upstairs to their rooms and threatening the two older boys with a bottom warming they'd never forget. The other kids didn't need to know or understand Italian to know that Angelo's brothers were in for a rough time.

John and Paul scurried upstairs, apologizing for all they were worth. The other boys stifled giggles and struggled not to smile as they heard the tiny little woman delivering smacks to the two older boy's backsides as she followed them up the stairs. Ethel bit the inside of her lip and shook her head.

"That really was a great story though," said Eddie, laughing and causing the others who'd been holding their breaths to laugh as well.

Jim looked at the refrigerator and leaned down to ask Angelo a question.

"Why, is it backed up? No one's been in there for hours." he replied, a little embarrassed that the clog hadn't been dealt with immediately.

"No man, I just think I can get that dent out of your mom's door, or at least make it less noticeable."

Angelo wrinkled his nose. "With a..."

"Yeah, unless you think she'd be OK with me taking the door apart and doing it from the inside?"

"How long do you think she'll be up there with those two jokers?" asked Parker, catching on.

"A few minutes anyway," Angelo said, "There's the two of them and if she does what she said she was going to do..."

"Get me a couple of screw drivers quick, we can get this done before she even gets back down. We'll surprise her. Someone clear out the door fast."
Working feverishly the teens cleared out the refrigerator door, and took it apart. Angelo refused to use the plunger that stood out in the enclosed front porch even though it had been treated with bleach and had been standing in the porch for weeks since it's last use, so Jim used a dish towel as a cushion, and the handle of the larger screw driver to bang out the dent from the inside.

There was one little ding that he couldn't do anything about without possibly chipping the enamel so they left that and put the door back together, replaced the items and closed the door just as Mrs. Di Marco came back through the hallway door, muttering under her breath. She looked at the refrigerator door and then did a classic double take that had the teenagers grinning.

"I could have sworn there was a large dent in this door!" she exclaimed. "Who did this?" she asked, looking around at the smiling teens.

Seeing Jim with the screw drivers partially hidden behind his back she reached up and took him gently but firmly by an ear, pulled him down to her level and soundly kissed both of his cheeks several times, making him turn bright red.

"You sweet boy! You smart boy! You good boy! Thank you!"

She looked around to see who else she had to thank but Angelo spoke up and said quickly, "It was all Jimmy, mom! He was the brains and the brawn," he announced. He knew his mother well enough to guess how they’d spend the night as she praised and kissed the rest of the fourteen teenagers who were now in the kitchen. Besides, it had been Jim's idea and work, so he should get full credit.

She kissed Jim on each cheek again and proudly and happily said, "Grazie!"

"You're welcome, ma'am." he said, trying unsuccessfully to stop blushing and grinning. "Happens all the time at my house. It was nothing."

"Do you like lemon?" asked Mrs. Di Marco out of the blue.

"Ummm, yes, ma'am. I do." he replied, uncertain of where the question was leading.
"Good!" she said, turning back toward her bedroom. "Oh," she said, turning back, "Your folks will be coming for you soon, so get your things together. Angelo, call me when they're ready to leave." she said, pulling him down much as she'd done Jim and giving her son a sound kiss on the cheek, causing him to blush and grin and the others to smile, "OK mom."

"What was that about lemons?" Jim asked Angelo quietly after she'd gone.

"I think you're in for a treat," was all Angelo would say.

"Hey!" protested Ethel jokingly, "We helped!"

"Don't worry, I'm pretty sure mom knows that. I'm telling you, I can't wait now!"

"For what?"

"You'll see when you see." Angelo said mysteriously. "Ah ah ah! No punching the guy in the know or I tell mamma and then no treat for beating up on her baby boy!" he said, smiling and not the least bit worried, as he saw Jim advancing on him with a fist and a threatening grin.

"Not now, but later, I know where you live."

"Then no goodies for you!" Angelo said smugly.

Jim wondered, not for the first time, how someone so innocent looking could be such a brat.

*******************************************************************

The next night was Halloween and everyone was excited. A lot of the families didn't celebrate Halloween because of it's ties to pagan holidays and their strong Christian beliefs, but some people loved it and just had fun with it, despite their scowling neighbors.

The Rossi's were the second kind. Johnny Rossi would rig his house up with trip wires that would cause things to jump out of the bushes or fall from the trees, or set off recordings of screams and
howls. And every year he held a party to which even some of the scowlers would come and have a
great time.

With three infants to worry about, he toned it down quite a bit, much to the teenaged population's
dismay, but they were still happy with the candy he handed out that year with the savings. Some
folks bought bags of penny candy and handed those out. He handed out full sized candy bars, some
of which shocked the recipient who didn't notice the joy buzzer around the bar, eliciting grins or
frowns which turned into grins when Johnny Rossi told them a joke or added another candy bar to
the bag by way of apology for the trick.

Amadeo and his friends all decided to stick around the neighborhood, Bruce and the others came
on their bikes and parked them in Amadeo's driveway around the corner so that there was no
chance of a car hitting them.

"This is going to be great." Steve said. "We've never been out this way for Halloween. The kids
back home are starting to notice we're not around and have been calling us snobs." he laughed.
"They never noticed us before unless they had some stupid comment, so it's kind of funny."

"Any chance of you guys transferring to our school?" Eddie asked. "We still have our share of jerks
but not so many as we used to."

"They live in the whole next town over, numb nuts," said Jim. "They'd have to move here to go to
our school."

"Numb nuts?" the others asked, staring at Jim until he blushed.

"It's what my big brother Jack calls me sometimes, but I get away with calling him Jack-ass, which
is an animal so not a swear, so lay off," Jim said, shrugging.

"Numb nuts," Eddie repeated, and then laughed. "Numb nuts," he laughed again. "That really is
kind of funny. Not that I would wanna be called that all the time, but it is funny."

The other kids looked at each other with understanding looks. They all loved Eddie but it never
ceased to amaze them what little thing would take his fancy and give him hours if not days of
amusement afterward.
Mrs. DiMarco followed through on her promise and baked little round cookies with lemon flavored frosting and sprinkles on top. She'd made several dozen, all of which disappeared in a short time. She growled a little bit at that but everyone could see she was trying to hide a broad smile.

After the party was over everyone bid their goodbyes and left, but not before the 'oldsters' spent another half hour shaking hands and talking some more about what they were going to do the next day.

Carmie and Amadeo had been asked to finish up in the kitchen where they washed and dried the last of the glasses. Amadeo nearly fell when his foot came down on a half sized basketball.

"Holy crow!" he said as he and Carmie struggled to get his balance back and keep the glasses he'd been about to put away from falling. "What the heck is that? A basketball for the garden gnomes?"

"No! It's another toy that Bethie bought for Nate! I swear those kids are going to be spoiled before they're a year old!" she complained. "She spoils all of them, but especially Nate. There's not one day she doesn't go out grocery shopping or to a club meeting and she doesn't bring them something back. Some toy or other, but the other day she brought back a ball and bat for Nate. A couple of days ago she brought him home a football!" Carmie exclaimed. "And today it was that little basketball."

"It bothers you that she's buying gifts for the babies?"

"It bothers me that she buys them stuff all the time! Every day nearly, as though she has something to make up for! And there's no proof that Nathan has his full sight back or that he'll ever be able to use any of those things she's bought for him."

"They're three months old." Amadeo protested. "And the doctor did say that he was positive that Nate had some sight after the operation."

"But no one knows how much!" Carmella said, frustrated. "I mean, I'd love it if he had full sight too but I'm watching him compared to the girls and he's not like them."

"Carm," Amadeo said, putting an arm around his older sister, "He is different, for one thing he's a
boy." he joked.

Carmella batted at her little brother but smiled for a moment before becoming serious again. "I don't think he's ever going to be like them as far as sight goes. And it bothers me that she's trying to treat him like any other sighted child."

"We won't know til he's older how much sight he has. The fact is he's seeing something... anything... Doc said there might be more that can be done once he's older if it's needed."

"Dae," Carmie said as though Amadeo were a little dense. "She's going to get this little boy's hopes up when he's older. She's going to make him think he can do the same things we can and he can't! He's going to end up being hurt and I don't want to see that! I swear it's like she's trying to make up to them for being born early, or for Nate being born blind, like she had anything to do with it!"

"She doesn't, Carm. She knows she doesn't."

"Then why are they three months old and they have more toys than... the toy store! I mean, honestly, Dae, what is a three-month-old going to do with a baseball and bat?! Chew on them? Poor little Nate might not ever be able to do more than that! She's just setting him up to get his hopes dashed."

Amadeo personally thought that his sister was being overly pessimistic, and that it wasn't any of her business if his sister in law wanted to buy a baseball team for her kids, but he wasn't about to say that to her.

In an effort to disarm the situation he said, "Carm, maybe mom can talk to her OK? I'm still a kid so I can guarantee you she would tell me, nicely, to mind my own business, but mom she'd listen to." He thought wryly, hoping that he'd be around to hear what their mother had to say about Carmie's ideas.

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Amadeo was relating that conversation and his frustration with what he called his sister's nosiness to Angelo before classes the next day, when he noticed that Angelo looked pensive.

"What's wrong?"
"I just wondered something," he said quietly, looking around to see who was nearby before breaking into soft Italian, "Do you think you and I will ever have kids? What they'll be like? What kind of parents we'd make?"

Amadeo gave his boy a look but Angelo continued with a slightly sour look at his man, "I know all about biology, smartie, but I also know there's something called adoption," he said, still in Italian and even more softly. "I knew this woman in New York, a neighbor of ours. She wasn't married, but they let her adopt a little girl. She had to jump through all sorts of hoops to get the baby but they did let her adopt. And then there's surrogates? Surrogacy? Is that the right word?"

"What?!" Amadeo nearly shouted, forgetting Italian all together. Then he lowered his voice and switched back to Italian before hissing, "And who do you suppose we'd get to give up their baby to a couple of homosexual men, or let us adopt?"

"There's any number of girls here who'd sleep with you as soon as look at you," Angelo said, innocently, still in Italian.

"Look, this isn't..." began Amadeo in English before switching to Italian and keeping his voice low, "This isn't the place or time, OK? Let's talk about this after we get home. We can talk in the tree house, or better yet, let's meet at the gazebo at the park."

"Fine," Angelo said in English, slightly put out and unwilling to admit that that conversation really wasn't meant for a crowded school corridor, even if the other students didn't speak Italian.

As an act in front of anyone who might be looking, Amadeo grabbed Angelo by the arm as though he were angry but didn't grip tightly. He leaned down slightly and whispered in gruff Italian, "I'm not mad or upset, you just caught me off guard. If we weren't here in school I'd kiss you senseless. Now let's get to class."

Feeling a lot better, Angelo shrugged out of the grasp, stuck his tongue out and his nose in the air before walking into their next class.

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NOTES

Save the Last Dance For Me , The Drifters, 1960
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-XQ26KePUQ

Wonderful World, Sam Cooke, 1960
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNO72aCnVr0

There's A Hole In The Bucket
Based on the version by Odetta (Holmes) and Henry Belafonte, 1960
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD-ffhvefsw&list=PL2F58E0DA1A400F5C

grubs - comfortable clothes
downstage right - would be front, left to the audience

None of the songs belong to me. I just really like them. No copyright is intended.
Shandon Liam Cobrane was not having a good day. Actually, that was putting it mildly. Shandon Liam Cobrane was having an absolutely lousy day. It seemed to him as though the student population had gone insane. He’d checked to see if ‘the stoners’ had lit another pile of pot in the ventilation ducts again. He’d even had the gas lines checked surreptitiously to avoid panic, because he just could not figure out why the students were behaving as they were.

To be sure, Thanksgiving was coming up, and then Christmas, but that did not explain why students were seemingly, suddenly, inexplicably, breaking rules up, down and sideways. He’d handed out eight detentions that morning alone, and ten more in the afternoon. On a regular day he’d average five at most.

The night before, some students had broken into the school and spray painted graffiti in the gymnasium. If one boy named Mekhi hadn’t cleverly painted his name on the wall they would never have known where to start looking for the culprits.

Mekhi, unwilling to take the rap alone, quickly gave up his fellow conspirators, who were all sentenced to a paddling and suspension. The duration of their suspension would be spent repainting the gym with a color chosen by the school with paint paid for by the culprits.

Misters Barnes and Cobrane knew that the boys didn’t have the money to pay for the paint and that their parents would have to split the cost between them, which did not please their parents, who described to their children in great detail what would happen to them once they were home.

Between the aftermath of several pranks that went wrong, a student who was so nervous that he threw up on Cobrane’s shoes, students who’d been referred to him for repeatedly not handing in their homework or acting up in class and the school nurse walking off the job because one of the boy's had pulled up her skirt. That was the only pleasure Shandon Liam Cobrane had experienced all day, as the woman, who was only a mediocre nurse, claimed to be an expert in all things medical. Her only remedies to any of the children's various sick stomachs and bad headaches, was to tell the kids to lay down, then call their parents to come and pick them up.

By the time he got home that evening he was frustrated, and so angry that he was grinding his teeth. His jaw hurt from the constant pressure. He kicked his shoes off on the porch and took off his socks, even though he’d cleaned up at school hours before.
"Welcome home, Shan." Said Elias, understandingly, "Bad day, huh? Come here, let me help." he said as he took his lover bodily and sat him down at the table, where he began to massage his shoulders.

"Don't." complained Cobrane, pulling away.

"Come on, hon, you'll feel better once you relax a little. Can I make you some tea?"

"Whiskey." he replied.

"That bad, eh? Well, you know we don't keep liquor in the house so it'll have to be tea. A little honey and lemon, the way you like it?"

Cobrane got up and went to his room without answering. He picked out comfortable clothes and fresh socks and went to take a shower. He felt as though no matter how often he washed today he'd never get the smell off. He scrubbed himself three times head to toe before he was satisfied.

When he was done he found that Elias had put his dirty clothes, including the soiled socks, in the washer, and dinner was on the table along side a cup of tea which had obviously just been poured.

"Feel better?" asked Elias with a little smile.

"Why do I do this?" Cobrane complained as he picked at the food. "Why do I put myself through this every day? What on earth made me decide to take a position as a Vice Principal in a high school? Teenagers are ******** insane and they're taking me to the asylum with them!"

"Language," Elias reminded him. "At least you're not with them eight hours a day like you were when you were still exclusively teaching." Elias offered.

"No. Now I have to deal with the worst of them throughout the day and then sit and watch them for two hours after school because their parents don't do anything to control them at home. If it weren't for detentions half of them would never do their homework."
"Well, the worst of it is over for the day, so sit back, relax, take some deep breaths and have your dinner before it gets cold." Elias said with another smile, giving his lover a kiss on the cheek before sitting down to his own dinner.

Cobrane ate his dinner silently, not joining in any of Elias' attempts at conversation. He offered a wan smile and a half hearted compliment on the good news of Elias' promotion and possible partnership at the law office where he worked.

When he finished dinner he got up and nearly threw his dish and utensils into the sink. Elias winced at the sound but didn't comment until his lover drank off the last of his tea and threw the cup into the sink, cracking the handle off of the cup and splitting the plate down the center.

Cobrane let lose a string of invective and kicked the door of the cabinet beneath the sink.

"Shandon Liam Cobrane, I've had enough now!" Elias said sharply, "Everyone has bad days and I realize you had a less than stellar one today but we don't take it out on the dishes or the cabinets, and we certainly don't use language like that. Get the spatula." he said, moving his chair away from the table.

"Elias, that's not necessary, honestly. I'm sorry. I'll throw the pieces away and I'll see if I can find..."

"You can't replace those pieces, Shandon, if that's what you were about to say. This set is over ten years old, it's the first thing we bought as a couple. Now go get the spatula."

"Eli..."

"Now, Shandon."

Cobrane stood silently for a moment, debating on whether to refuse or not. Elias had always told him he could say no if he felt he didn't deserve it.

Elias tilted his head forward and looked up at his lover. "Do you really believe that your behavior, actions and language have been appropriate tonight?" he asked simply.
Shandon opened the drawer and took out the wide wooden spatula they kept for these occasions and handed it to his man.

"Over my knees, Shandon."

Cobrane licked his lips and began to put himself over Elias' knees.

"No! You know the drill." Elias scolded.

Cobrane sullenly unbuckled his belt and undid the fastenings on his slacks. He pulled them down to his knees before placing himself over Elias' knees.

Elias tugged his lover's underwear down until it was just below his cheeks and began spanking. He didn't say anything throughout the punishment.

Finally, judging by his lover's squirming and the deep red of his backside, Elias stopped.

"Now, do you want to tell me what's going through your head?" Elias asked with Shandon still over his knees.

Shandon tried not to but he couldn't suppress a snuffle. "I... I don't know." he tried.

Elias put the spatula aside and used his hand to deliver a quick, sharp smack to his lover's backside.

"That's not an acceptable answer."

"Ow! I... I just... why didn't I finish studying for my law degree? Why did I take a teaching job? Why did I take the position as Vice Principal? Is this where I'm going to be for the rest of my life?" Shandon said, unable to prevent a couple of rogue tears and wiping his eyes with a hand.

Elias helped his man up, readjusted his clothes and gently sat Cobrane on his lap. He wrapped his arms around his lover and Shandon rested his head against his lover's forehead, feeling spent and much calmer. It felt good to let someone else take charge for even a little while.
"You took the job as a teacher because you felt you could do some good for the kids that kept popping up in the court system, so many of whose parents you felt were failing them."

"You took the job as Vice Principal and DOD because you felt you could help the kids straighten out before they ever got into the court system."

"Look how much good I did there." Cobrane said, wrapping his arms harder around himself, causing Elias to do the same. "Two kids just this year put in prison."

"Two, Shan. Two out of how many hundreds? And you've been Vice Principal there for three years. Think about it Shandon Liam." he said sternly, "Two boys out of hundreds over the course of three years. According to what you told me they were trouble since grammar school. Some kids just can't or won't be helped no matter how hard you try. Maybe the detention center will succeed where no one else could. Maybe not, but it's not because you didn't try."

"You tried to get those boys involved in school activities, you tried to get the parents involved with their children. You'd have succeeded with one if it hadn't been for the influence of the other, Shan. Remember that."

"And what about that boy you told me about just a few weeks ago? One child, alone and abused by his peers. Because of a gut feeling you had, this child now has more friends than he knows what to do with and he's blossoming. He arranged a fund raiser? Presented it to the board when just a few months ago no one except his tormentors knew he existed? That's pretty amazing, Shan, and it's all because of you."

"You are doing good where you are," he said gently, "And if I have to use this spatula every day to remind you of that, I will."

Shandon smiled tiredly and kissed Elias' forehead. "Thank you, 'Eli. I can always count on you to keep my feet on the ground."

"And you remind me that life doesn't have to be taken so seriously all the time, Shandon Liam Cobrane." Elias said softly as they stood and hugged. Their kisses became deeper and deeper. Shandon's slacks, which Elias had tugged back into place began to fall southward again.

"I can't. Not yet." Shandon said breathlessly, "I have to clean up the mess, and it's my day to do
"They're not going anywhere." Elias said, kissing him more deeply, cupping his hands around still warm cheeks.

"So what was all that about kids today?" asked Amadeo, once they'd reached the relative seclusion of the gazebo. "I mean, I don't mind the idea but we're only seventeen first of all. We have years to worry about things like that... but what on earth made you start talking about that in school?"

"You were telling me about how Carmie felt about Beth Ann spoiling the kids and it just made me wonder if... you know... we'd ever have any? What kind of parents we'd make. If we'd spoil him. He could call you daddy and I'd be papa." Angelo said with a wistful smile.

"Ange," Deo said with a sigh, "I don't believe we'd ever be allowed to adopt. Even if only one of us went there pretending to be a single man, I think we'd be turned down."

"But then there's surr..."

"I know that." Amadeo said testily. "I'm sorry to interrupt hon, but... which one of us do you suppose is going to approach a girl with this idea? How many girls do you suppose would be willing? And which one of us would... which one of us would... I mean, I'm not sure, but I think that in order to have legal guardianship of a baby, one of us would have to be the biological father, so which one of us do you suppose..."

Angelo was quiet for a while. "I always said that I'd only ever do it for love, and after Paulie explained how it worked... We promised we'd wait til we were adults anyway." he replied, trying to deflect the subject, sorry now that he'd brought it up. He couldn't imagine having sex with a girl and he hated the idea of Amadeo being intimate with anyone but him.

"We still have a year yet before we're adults, and then there's college, and finding jobs, and a place to live. We'd have to be financially stable before we could even think of children, and then, as I said, we'd have to find a woman willing to... well, you know." said Amadeo, rationally.

He also disliked the idea of having sex with a woman even if it meant a baby for him and Angelo,
and disliked even more the idea of Angelo doing it. The idea of being that intimate, without love, without any real pleasure, mechanically. The image that came to mind was unpleasant to say the least.

He wondered what the odds were of finding a woman willing not only to have loveless sex but to carry a child only to give it up. The idea seemed less and less possible the more he thought about it.

"We could ask Ethel..." Angelo said tentatively.

Amadeo laughed out loud and immediately apologized when he saw the look on Angelo's face. "You could ask her, but I have the feeling you'd end up buried in a wall somewhere after she punched you out. Personally, I like you in one piece."

Sobering he took Angelo by the shoulders and pulled him into a hug. "Look, hon, we have several years yet to even worry about that, OK? In the meantime, let's just practice and be great uncles. After all, it's all right if we spoil the kids. As a matter of fact it's expected.

"That reminds me!" Angelo shouted happily.

"Ow! My eardrums! What reminds you of what?" 'Deo asked, smiling, theatrically rubbing his ears.

"My brothers are coming for Thanksgiving! All of them! Matty and Iggy with their wives and kids and even Luke with his new girlfriend. We'll get to be the doting uncles for the long weekend! I can't wait for you to meet Matt and Igs, and the kids are little angels, really, they're sweeter than Squirrel Nut Zippers!"

"Than what?!" 'Deo demanded, bewildered, completely forgetting to ask how they planned to get everyone into the tiny kitchen.

"Awww, they're the best candies! Mamma would give Luke a nickle and he'd take me to the little corner store and I'd get a whole bagful of Squirrel Nuts for a penny. The caramels were even better 'cause you could actually see the little bits of nuts in them. I haven't seen them since we moved here," he added, dejectedly.
Amadeo made a mental note to ask Mrs. Di Marco to ask her sons to bring Squirrel Nuts with them when they came to visit. He very much looked forward to meeting Angelo's older brothers and their families. Plus he really wanted to see for himself how good these candies were.

"Well, Thanksgiving Day I'll have to spend with my family. My oldest sisters, Vani and Rene are coming with their families, and Rene is due in a few months too, so she's going to have Christmas with us, but they have to leave on Saturday night, so it looks like we're all good for Sunday dinner at my place.

Angelo opened his mouth to protest that it was too much for Mrs. Rossi to handle when Amadeo reminded him that it was his mother's idea in the first place. "Mostly to get rid of all of the left over turkey, so don't get a big head." he joked.

Angelo doubted that with eight grown kids and grandkids there'd be little if anything of the original holiday dinner left. He also knew that no matter what Mrs. Rossi cooked it was going to be great. He also knew that his mother was not going to show up empty handed either.

Also, apparently Angelo and Amadeo's father's had been 'sampling' the wine in the Di Marco cellar and found, so far, that they were quite tasty and each had been unique. Joshua had gone so far as to have a wine connoisseur come in as well.

Each of the bottles had been meticulously labeled with the type of grapes or fruit that that particular wine had been made from. The type of wood it had been aged in, and the year it had been bottled.

The connoisseur had been salivating for more than one reason by the time he'd tasted the open bottles and seen what was left on the wine shelves. He'd made offers on several of the bottles, all of which Joshua declined.

Angelo knew that at least five of those bottles had the Rossi's name on them and even though they were teenagers, Angelo hoped that he and his brothers would get to taste a little. He wasn't taking bets, but 'hope springs eternal', as the saying went. And if his mother and father didn't allow them just one little taste, there was always the possibility that they could sneak just a little bit when no one was looking. Right?
Hope Springs Eternal, An Essay on Man
Alexander Pope
Born 21 May 1688
London, England
Died 30 May 1744 (aged 56)
Twickenham, Middlesex, England
Resting place St Mary's Church, Twickenham, Middlesex, England
Occupation Poet

No Copyright infringement intended.
The last day of school before Christmas vacation the kids at the high school spent their time making hand made cards for their parents and otherwise talking and laughing, and sharing their wish lists with each other, some smacking themselves on the head for not thinking of one thing or other, some boasting that they'd gotten it the year before.

With a large family, even one that was well off compared to the majority of families in the town, the Rossi's kept the wish list to the top three per child, although the lists were waived in the cases of the grand children who received things their parents hadn't even considered putting on the lists, which the grandparents demanded be written and presented by no later than November 1st.

Amadeo had, on November first, startled his father by asking for one thing.

"Absolutely NOT!" said Johnny, firmly. He was seated at his desk and had welcomed the intrusion into his study in the hopes that he'd get a happy break from his work.

"But dad..." the supplicant tried to argue.

"No buts! You are not getting a motorcycle."

"Its not a motorcycle, dad, it's just a scooter."

"Which is?"

"Just basically a bicycle with a motor on it.

"If it's a bicycle with a motor it's a motorcycle." his father maintained.

"Dad! It's..."

"No!"

"Dad..."

Johnny Rossi put his hand out in a familiar gesture, "Do I need to make my point on your backside?" he asked.

Amadeo's jaw had clamped shut. "No sir." he'd replied through his teeth.

"Do you think an attitude is going to make me change my mind?"

Amadeo relaxed his jaw. "No, sir. Sorry sir," he'd said respectfully. "May I go now?"

"Go on," he said, “And don't bother trying to go over my head and ask your mother because we discuss all matters of this magnitude!” he called as his son left the room.

Amadeo was a little put out. He really hadn't thought that a scooter was that big a deal, especially since he'd found one that needed a little work and it would cost as much as three reasonably priced presents, but his father hadn't even let him get that far.
'Deo had gone to the living room and sat on the couch to sulk. He wasn't normally one to engage in such a pastime but he felt that this was an appropriate occasion. If his father had at least listened it wouldn't have been so bad, he'd thought, but he hadn't gotten past the words motor scooter before his father had said no.

Terri had sympathized when she'd found him in the living room several minutes later, but she'd agreed with their father, citing all sorts of horrible things that could happen on a scooter.

"I could step off of a curb and get hit by a truck. Should I avoid curbs too?" he'd asked sarcastically.

"No," she'd replied mildly, "Just use your head and look both ways before you cross," Then she'd gotten up and walked away.

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" 'Deo? Dae?! Madman!"

"What?" Amadeo groused at Milo first for breaking into his thoughts and for calling him Madman again. He was just glad that they were in the gazebo and not at school where anyone and everyone could have heard and started calling him that just to get under his skin.

"I asked you three times, what were you hoping to get?"

"What I want and what I'm going to get are two different things." he grumbled. "What I want is cool and fun. I mean, I'll be grateful for anything I get, but I really wanted that Lambretta this year."

Milo rolled his eyes. "Me too. All I got was a lecture on how expensive they are, and how dangerous they are, and did I think my parents were rich enough to afford a motorcycle and hospital bills and who was expected to pay for the gas..." he sighed deeply.

"My dad didn't get past 'NO!'" Amadeo said. "And once the Drill Sargent has spoken his words are carved in stone and can't be broken even with a jackhammer."

"So how much was the scooter you wanted?" Angelo asked.

"It was only $150.00." 'Deo complained.

Angelo's and Milo's eyebrows shot up. "Only?!" Milo asked in shock. "Do you realize how long I'd have to work to earn that kind of cash?"

"Yeah, working for your parents. But in a real job... I wonder if I could get a job somewhere and earn the money, then they can't say no."

"You're seventeen, I think they can still say no." Angelo said quietly. "I mean, I'm not sure but..." he shrugged.

Amadeo let out a huge sigh. "I'm being an idiot anyway, it's not like I'll die if I don't get a scooter. I'm just acting like a spoiled brat, I guess."

"You guess?" Milo laughed.
Amadeo smiled and shouldered his friend, who made a show of trying to stay upright on the stone ledge.

"What do you do for Christmas, Ange? Anything?" asked Milo, knowing that Angelo's family wasn't religious and didn't attend any of the local churches, though they'd been seen dressed casually, driving through town in their car early Sunday mornings and coming back in the early afternoon.

"Not much, really. Mom makes a fantastic dinner, as usual. Sometimes Matt and Mark come over, sometimes not, it depends on the year, they switch between our house and their wives for holidays. This year they're both going to be with their in-laws."

"Anyway, we do gifts. Usually little hand made things. Letters to each other. Books or candy. We keep the store-bought stuff to a minimum though."

"Can't stand the crowds?" Milo asked knowingly.

"Crowds? You haven't seen a crowd til you've lived in New York." Angelo laughed. "Nah, it's not the crowds. Mamma and pop say that Christmas is too commercialized, and that people forget the real reason for the holiday. So we just have a small tree, and give each other little gifts."

He didn't mention that they normally didn't exchange gifts with friends, but Angelo had picked several of his better artworks to give as gifts to his friends. This would be the first Christmas that he had real friends to give gifts to.

"Mamma does this thing I love, when she sets up the manger." he said, gazing peacefully at nothing in particular. "She's very secretive about it, but she'll go around the week before Christmas and gather up little things." He measured about a half inch between his fingers to show the size.

"No one knows what because we've all been forbidden to ever look, but she wraps them up, and on Christmas day there they all are in the kresh at the foot of the manger with the statuette of the baby that she hides somewhere until early that morning."

"That's a great tradition." Milo said admiringly.

"I like that." Amadeo said thoughtfully. "Would you mind terribly if I adopted it?"

Angelo smiled shyly. "No, I don't mind."

Amadeo wanted so badly to kiss his boy at that moment.

"Go ahead." Milo said.

"What?" Amadeo asked, coming out of his reverie.

"I can see that you want to do it, so go ahead."

"What are you talking about?" Amadeo asked, hoping that he was hearing what he thought he was hearing.

"Kiss him!" Milo yelled, smiling. "If you're self-conscious I'll turn my back but I can tell you want to kiss him, so go ahead."

"How did you know? How long have you known? Who else knows?" Amadeo asked.

"I knew..." Milo looked up at the roof of the gazebo thoughtfully, "The day Angelo nearly got run

over by that car and you chewed me out. As far as anyone else knowing, other than Steve and his band who, if I'm right are mostly the same way except for a few, I'm pretty sure it's still a closely guarded secret. But..." he shrugged, "as far as how I knew? Man, you're my best friend. I've known you since we were five.

"We're like brothers, closer than most brothers."

"And you're OK with it?" Amadeo asked softly, "When did you first suspect? I thought I was really good at hiding it." Amadeo asked, stunned. Judging by the expression on Angelo's face he was feeling the same way.

"Yeah, I'm OK with it. I was pretty sure a couple of years ago, when all the guys were talking about this or that girl and you just stood there with a smile and didn't say anything. The other guys just thought that with so many sisters you had more respect for girls and wouldn't talk about them like that, but I saw the way the other guys looked at the girls and how you looked at them, and it wasn't the same look."

Milo looked embarrassed for a moment and then continued, "When I first suspected about you and Angelo I wasn't happy and I wasn't sure I could handle it. But what you said about Mikey held for you as well. If anyone treated you badly because you're a little different... would I stand by let them hurt you? The answer was no. I thought to myself, if I'd been like that, and you found out... I know you'd never have hated me for it. You know?"

"You got that right, Tonto." Amadeo said quietly with a gentle smile. "I know it's not the easiest thing to say or admit to but... it's what we are. I appreciate your understanding and not.... well, turning your back on me. Calling me names and such. And I've heard some really despicable things said about people... like us."

"Yeah, me too, which is why I couldn't stand the idea of someone doing it... saying those things to you. Your secret is safe with me, all right? Wild horses and all that junk. OK?"

"Jerk." said Milo, shouldering his friend.

"Idjit." Amadeo said, returning the gesture.

"So, get to it. I'll close my eyes, just don't do what my older brother does and make all those smoochy sounds, that's just gross." he said, closing his eyes and humming tunelessly.

Amadeo looked around to see if anyone was nearby then looked at Angelo who had apparently been struck dumb by the entire conversation.

"Well, you heard the man. Kissing but no smoochy sounds." he said, leaning in toward Angelo and kissing him soundly but soundlessly.

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NOTES:
Lambretta was a line of motor scooters originally manufactured in Milan, Italy by Fernando Innocenti, 1947
January first fell on a Wednesday in the year 1965, and as it was Milo's eighteenth birthday. His parents needed to recover from the New Year's celebrations so his party was held the following weekend.

Mrs. Jablonski didn't cut any corners for her son's birthday and had rented one of the smaller rooms at the Elks Hall to accommodate not only his fourteen closest friends, but various neighbors, aunts, uncles and cousins as well.

She had put up streamers and balloons, much to his chagrin. However, his party guests were delighted and immediately started batting loose balloons around, giggling and completely comfortable being kids for the day.

At first it was a little snug in the room, but outside the temperature was in the high 70's that day, so many of the young children were outside enjoying the sunshine under the supervision of some of their older brothers or sisters who had been bribed or coerced (threatened was such an ugly word) into watching their younger siblings.

Most of them, the ones who had been bribed, decided that being outside in the fresh air was more fun than being cooped up with the adults anyway and smiled at their good fortune.

The latter group soon forgot their gripes as they became involved in the younger children's games and were running and laughing, playing freeze tag or jump rope along with them.

As 'Man Of The Day', Milo had to remain inside and greet and entertain his guests which he did flawlessly.

Dennis, who had been watching nearby, admired his friend's skill. Even with his own family he always felt awkward and uncomfortable and preferred to speak only if he had something to say. In point of fact, given his druthers he'd be left alone completely to read or write, or even watch TV.

Amadeo and Angelo were under no such restrictions and came and went as they pleased. Earlier, Bruce and Ethel had showed them a clearing behind the building, but when they arrived the brother
and sister were already there.

"Oh, sorry." Deo said, "We'll find somewhere else to talk."

"Hey, no! Actually, I can use your advice. Bruce just keeps saying 'Do whatever feels right.' but I don't know what feels right which is why I asked him in the first place." she said, emphasizing the word by backhanding him on the bicep.

Bruce winced and grinned but didn't say anything else.

"All right, what's the problem?" Deo asked.

"Jim."

"Did he hurt you? Offend you?" Amadeo asked, becoming worried.

"No! Nothing like that, it's just... for a long time I was mostly only ever attracted to other girls and now... after meeting Jim and spending time with him... I think I like him, and I'm confused. I mean, I've seen men I thought were attractive too...but... I never really thought about any kind of relationship with one before. What do you think I should do?"

He thought for a while and then said, "I agree with Bruce. If it feels right then try it. I mean, when you knew you were attracted to a girl, what did you do?"

"I shut my mouth," she said as though the answer should have been obvious. "I look but I don't touch, and I certainly never ask. I'm already an outsider but at least I'm the kind they leave alone rather than pick on 'cause they know I'd deck 'em. If they found out about me..." she let the thought trail.

"Do you want me to ask Jim for you?" Deo asked.

"No. He already asked me, that's why I'm out here asking you numb skulls your opinions." she said, a little acid tingling her voice.
"The worst that can happen is that you and Jim don't hit it off. Go out with him a few times and see how it goes." Angelo said reasonably.

"But what if he decides he doesn't like me? What if I decide I don't like him that way? It'll be uncomfortable when we all hang around together. It means either him or me would have to stop hanging with the group."

Amadeo mentally patted himself on the back when he succeeded in not correcting her grammar.

"I can't guarantee what'll happen, Eth." Amadeo said. "All I can ask is how do you feel right now? I know you've been attracted to other people. Do you feel toward Jim, the way you felt when you were attracted to them? It could just be affection, one friend for another."

Ethel sighed. "It's more than affection, I think. Sometimes I think about him and I can't wait to see him. I haven't really loved anyone like that to know what it feels like. I just get this weird... feeling in my stomach when I'm around him. Sort of like what I feel when I know I'm going to ace an exam. Oh!" she sighed in exasperation, "That's not it exactly either but it's the closest I can come to explaining it."

"Do you feel like you're on a roller coaster on the downward drop?" Angelo asked quietly.

"Yeah! That's it!" Ethel said excitedly, brown eyes flashing.

"Give it a shot," he said just as quietly with a shy smile as he looked at Amadeo.
Chapter 54

Angelo and Amadeo

Amadeo's eighteenth birthday came up that March, and Mrs. Rossi arranged two parties.

One party, for his friends, would be held on the day of, and one for family and neighborhood friends, at which, no doubt, several of his friends would attend, for the Saturday after, giving Mrs. Rossi a week to relax and refresh after having a house filled with teenagers. The weatherman had said that the temperature would probably be down in the 30s and the kids, all the grandkids and some of the younger nieces and nephews, would most likely not want to go outside much.

"Birthdays during the week are the kind of days I wish it would snow. Then I could have my birthday off from school," Amadeo complained to his friends between classes. "Sometimes I wish we lived in a place where we had snow all the time in the winter."

"Alaska?" Jim asked, grinning

"Don't go nuts now, He smiled. "I don't know what I'd do in a place where there's no sun half the year. I mean seasonal snow... white Christmas and all that sort of stuff, you know?"

"It sounds romantic but it ain't that great." Angelo said,"It's real pretty when it's first coming down, but then you get the plows, and people throwing sand, and trucks and cars driving over it. It gets dirty real quick and it stops being so pretty," Angelo said with a grimace.

"Stop throwing a wrench in my works," Amadeo said jokingly.

"Sorry, Dae. Believe it or not I actually do miss snow. Georgia is a tease. It feels like it's getting close to snowing sometimes but then it doesn't, and when it does it doesn't last long. I kind of miss sledding and skating. I have to get you guys to New York, take you skating at Rockefeller Center, see the city all decked out in lights, the square."

"The tree... it's massive. The city searches all year for one big enough and then it's shipped in. That's a major event right there. I kinda wish though, that they'd just plant a tree and let it grow over the years instead of cutting down a tree in a different state and propping it up in New York. It just seems a waste of a good tree." he said thoughtfully.
"Someday we'll go to New York with you," said Jim eagerly. "I've heard stories about there but I've never been. Do you really have gangsters that go around shooting each other down on the street, like in the movies?"

"Not as often as the movies would like you to believe." Angelo said, rolling his eyes. "I don't think anyone would want to live there if that happened all the time, do you?"

"Nah, I guess not," Jim admitted with a guilty expression. "Look, we gotta get to Garcia's class right now if not a minute ago before we get into trouble. C'mon," he said, sprinting off. The sounds of Cobrane's voice reminding him to walk, not run in the hallways, followed him.

Angelo and Amadeo trotted along behind at a brisk walk, to avoid Cobrane's attention and possible detention.

The next day, while the boys were eating lunch they discussed their art teacher's latest madcap idea for a project. Sculpture using toothpicks as a medium. The boys and girls sat around discussing ideas and laughing at some of the suggestions.

"I wish we'd go back to working with that stone again." Dennis said, "I think I could do a better job now that I know more about it. I got a B+ but I'd like another chance to try. Plus, it was a lot of fun. I'm not too sure about this one." Angelo's stone project had gotten an A++ for it's perfectly round form and the fact that it seemed to be different things in different positions had earned him the highest grade in the class.

Amadeo had gotten points for turning his block of stone into a replica of a head from Easter Island. Another girl named Shelly, who had carved a bas relief of a very detailed butterfly, had gotten the only other highest grade in the class.

Angelo's painting of the class at work had gotten an equally high grade when she'd given them an assignment to work with paint as a medium.

Following that she'd had them work with clay. The clay sculpture assignment had Angelo's friends excited since they'd been creating things in his basement ever since the previous Halloween and they had experience and imagination. The little group 'blew' Mrs. Christoff away with their sculptures.
Angelo's three foot long cloth 'sculpture' of a hot dog and bun complete with streams of 'ketchup and mustard' had earned him a high grade and a lot of laughter from the class who had for the most part settled on making teddy bears, draw string pouches or other easy projects.

The only project that had gotten a better grade than Angelo was their classmate Melissa Marcone, who had made a doll as large as a three year old complete with yarn hair and embroidered eyes and mouth. She'd gone out and bought a dress with a pinafore and 'pantaloons', and little socks and shoes to dress the doll up in. Angelo didn't in the least begrudge her the higher grade. The doll really was clever and well done, and though he wouldn't say it out loud, very cute with it's black hair, big blue eyes and cupid bow mouth.

"So what are you making in Mrs. Christoff's class this time?" Eddie asked Angelo as they walked home.

"The Golden Gate Bridge," Angelo replied. "I'm gonna use string for the suspension cables. What are you making?"

"Dascha," Eddie replied. He'd gotten the terrier puppy for Christmas when he'd been seven years old and hadn't been able to pronounce Dasher with two missing front teeth, so she'd been called Dasha and wouldn't answer to anything else. She was getting old and while he had more pictures of her than he could count, he wanted to make the sculpture of her before as what might be a final remembrance of her.

"If you can pull that off that's going to be really nice. Do you plan to paint it to look like her?" Angelo asked

"I hadn't thought of that!" Eddie said, delighted. "Do toothpicks warp though?" he asked. "I mean, if I paint 'Little Dascha' is she gonna sag in the middle?"

"They do when my dad uses them. He can get them into a nearly perfect spiral by the time he's done with them," Jim joked.

Angelo shrugged, "Go light on the spray paint? Or paint her by hand?"

"What are you making, 'Deo?" Milo asked.
"Big Ben. I'm not as creative as you guys," he smiled.

"That's creative," Angelo argued. "Not like Martha who's making train tracks to put her toy train on. I mean, come on, train tracks?" he laughed.

"I felt kind of bad for Gary and his attempt at building Notre Dame." Dennis said.

"The Notre Dame Cathedral? Is that what that was supposed to be?"

At Dennis' nod all Aiden could say was "Holy crow!"

"Yeah, but he told me he's going to turn it into the Leaning Tower of Pisa." Dennis said.

"They don't look anything alike!" Felix said, stating the obvious.

"We're just gonna have to wait and see I guess. I really do want to see how he pulls it off," Amadeo laughed.

Angelo looked in the direction of his house and then the park. "You guys wanna go hang at the park for a little while?" he asked.

"Nah, man. I gotta get my homework done, and then I got chores. Dad'll skin me alive if I don't show up on time." Jim replied. "Later, maybe? If there's time? Call me, 'k?"

"Yeah, 'k." Angelo replied, disappointed when the others said basically the same thing and scattered to get to their houses.

"What's the matter, Ange? Are you in trouble again? I can guarantee you that if you're supposed to be home and don't show up you're not gonna like the consequences." Amadeo said in an understanding tone.

"No" he replied reluctantly, "It's not that really, I'm just tired of being the only one home and having to do everything. I mean, I don't mind helping mama and pop but it's the same thing every
day. I go home, check the animals, get dinner started, set the table, gather up anything that needs to
go in the wash, see if the floors need sweeping, do my homework, and without fail I end up burning
or singeing the dinner unless mama gets home time to save it. It's worse in the summer cause then
there's the gardening to see to. At least during the winter, I get a little break there. I feel like... jeez
Dae, I feel like Cinderella."

"Ange, just keep in mind that you're helping. You're the only one left." He hesitated a moment and
then asked tentatively, "Out of curiosity, where's your mom been running off to every day? I mean,
it doesn't matter I'm just curious. And I know your brothers get out of their college classes and go
to work or to see their girlfriends."

"Yeah, and that's another thing, they can come home and help instead of smooching with their
girlfriends." Angelo said, obviously avoiding the question.

Amadeo tilted his head and looked at his boy more closely. "Ange, where's your mom disappearing
to? Is she all right?"

"Don't tell anyone OK? But she's going to college. She's working toward her nursing degree."

"That's great! Why are you keeping that a secret? What made her decide to do that?"

"It's like you said, she's home alone pretty much all the time now. We take care of the animals first
thing in the morning and I see to them in the afternoons when I get home, making sure they have
feed and water and their pens aren't too bad. But when the morning chores are done and she studies
for a bit she heads out to the university and takes classes, then comes home and studies all night."

"It's not like Cinderella then, because you're helping, not being forced to work."

"I know, I just feel like I'm the only one working, you know?"

"I have a couple of suggestions for you then, ready?"

"Sure."
"First, feel free to ask me to help. I don't have many chores during the week and I'm sure mom'd understand. She still has a houseful and one less won't make a difference."

"I really appreciate that Dae, plus I'd like the company. What's the second thing?"

"Do something special for your folks for dinner. Mom's got recipe books coming out of her ears, we'll go through them tonight if you can get permission to come over after dinner. If not we'll do it this weekend."

"So first, you make something you've never made before. Second, you set the table like it's a fancy restaurant complete with candles on the table, get it all set up so all you have to do is put the plates with the food down, wrap up the silverware like they do at the Drover, tie it with a ribbon or something," he continued with a laugh.

"I can't do that every night," Angelo protested, "It wouldn't be special if I did."

"Not every night, nimrod," Amadeo said, shouldering his friend, "Pick one night randomly once a month. Choose a recipe from one of the books and make it. Make a list of what you want to make a week ahead of time. Ask your folks for money to buy them, just tell them it's for ingredients you don't have. It's the truth, right?"

"What about my brothers?"

"Remember how we practiced talking to your folks?"

"Yeah."

"Well, your brothers are technically adults too. Try talking to them the way you spoke to your parents. They might be more reasonable than you expect."

"And if they aren't?"

"Tell on them, Deo said matter-of-factly, with a smirk which got Angelo laughing."
"You know," Deo added thoughtfully, "talking about your brothers and college made me wonder... have you made any decisions yet about what you want to major in when we head out ourselves?"

Angelo raised his eyebrows and rolled his eyes slightly. "Mama and pop keep asking me the same thing. Mama thinks I have a future in the culinary arts. I told them I was thinking of going for plain old art classes, but pop kinda vetoed that idea. He said my stuff was really good but that it was really hard to get into the art world."

"Why don't you do both?" Amadeo suggested. "You really are a great cook, when you remember that you're cooking," he joked. "In a professional setting I know you'd be more aware if the food was right or not. I think in time you could even have your own restaurant."

Angelo's eyes widened slightly at the idea. "You really think so?"

" Wouldn't say if I didn't believe it," the other boy replied sincerely, "and that doesn't mean you'd have to give up your art. Your paintings and sculptures are amazing. You could do that as a side thing, you know? So even if you don't get your artworks into a gallery showing you could still sell them on the side. I think they'd sell."

Angelo sat quietly and thought about it. Finally he looked up and asked, "What are you going to college for? And... where will you go? I mean... what are we going to do for four years if we can't see each other every day? What'll happen to us?"

Amadeo put an arm around his boy and replied, "I thought I'd go into business management, which means I can go to school just about anywhere. Which means, if you go to school in Outer Mongolia, I'm sure I can find a school there as well. We wouldn't be far apart. And even if we were," he continued seeing Angelo's dubious expression, "we can still see each other on holidays, talk on the phone, spend weekends together. It's not like we'd never see each other again."

"And," he said, "I believe that what we have can withstand distance."

Angelo looked down at his hands with a sad expression. "I don't want to be anywhere that you're not. I know we won't go to the same school, can't if I actually go to school for cooking or art. I... I know I don't have any idea of how to run a business and I'd do terrible if I tried to go the same school as you. I kinda imagined us as roommates wherever we go."

"Here's an idea," Amadeo said, a light going off in his head, "if we find schools in the same area, then we can rent an apartment together and commute to our respective schools. Then we wouldn't have to be apart except during classes."

"And," he continued with a smile, "if I major in business, I can be your business partner when you open your own place. Oh, I know it's not going to happen immediately," he said when he saw the expression on Angelo's face, "but it can happen."

Angelo's expression brightened and he looked up at his man with a look of hope on his features. "Do you really think we can do that?"
"There are business schools all over the place, Ange. If you look to see where the culinary schools are, without a doubt I can find a business school in that same area."

Angelo fairly threw himself into Deo's arms. "That's a fantastic idea! 'Dae! Do you really think we can do it?"

"I'm sure we can. I've been looking at a school in Atlanta. It's still in state, but not so close that a commute from home and back would make financial or time sense, but not so far away that we can't visit on weekends or holidays."

Angelo's excited expression changed from one, of excitement to one of deep thought, and by the look of it, they weren't great thoughts.

"What's the matter, il mio angelo?" 'Dae asked, concerned.

"What would mama and pop do without me though? Mom's not done with school yet. Pop has work during the day. There's all the animals to look after..."

Amadeo thought long and hard for several moments. "The only alternatives are to sell the livestock and let the garden go..."

Angelo looked up, stricken.

"You can take a year before you head to college, which I don't think is a good idea, and I think your folks'll agree, or they'll have to hire someone."

"I think it'll be hard on them," Angelo hedged, "It's already a lot for just me and dad to work on. How much'll he have to pay for help? And he'll need two or more guys at least. Two people just can't run this place. Not efficiently, and the extra money from the farmer's market is a big help."

"Well, if we find a place in Savannah, it's not too far. Commuting will still be a bit of a problem if we try to make it a daily event, but you'd still be available on weekends and holidays."

"I may be working then." Angelo said pensively, "if I'm lucky I'll get an internship somewhere, once I've learned enough, or even a real job at a real restaurant somewhere. I don't think I'd make enough to give to my folks to help pay for the extra help."
"Angelo," Deo said quietly, putting a gentle hand on his boy's cheek, "we can help figure all of that out once we apply and have been accepted into our schools. We'll have to get a move on though. I know with your grades you'll have a choice of schools and you... we... can find the one's best for us."

When Angelo's father arrived from work that day, his son had dinner ready, and un-singed, a fresh hot pot full of coffee, and a big smile on his face.

"Ok, raggazino," what do you want?" Joshua had asked with a wry smile on his face.

"Papa," Angelo said hesitantly, "You know I want to go to college in September, right?"

"Yep," Joshua replied proudly, puffing out his chest. "I'm so proud of you guys."

"Papa, what'll happen to the farm once I'm gone? What if I can't find a place close by? I won't be able to help anymore."

Joshua clapped his youngest son on the shoulder, "Don't you worry about it." he replied with a smile. "We've already decided to get rid of the hogs..."

"But dad...!"

"Not because you're going to school." his father assured him. "They cost more to feed than what we get for them at market, plus their pen stinks the place up. Admit it," he smiled," none of us like going in there to clean the place up, or to wash down the pigs when the time came."

Angelo smiled guiltily, he'd found excuses to get in and out as fast as possible whenever he'd had to wash them.

"The chickens?"

"The chickens pretty much take care of themselves. Mama and I would only need to feed them and gather the eggs a couple of times a day. And I'm rebuilding the coop a little so that the top will be closed off. This way they can range outside and we won't have to worry about chicken hawks or
other predators flying in and carrying them off."

"That's a lot of work, pop." Angelo said uncertainly.

"Well, I still have you here with me, and I'm sure I can get your brothers back long enough to help out."

"With what?" Julia asked with a smile as she came through the kitchen door, bringing a draft of cool air in with her.

"We're just talking about remodeling the chicken coop." Joshua replied, getting up from his chair to help his wife get her coat off.

Angelo put her satchel to the side and pulled out a chair for her.

"Ok, mio angelo, what do you want?" his mother asked with a smile."

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Angelo huffed.

"He's just worried about what we'll do with the farm once he leaves for college." Joshua explained as he sat down at the table once again.

"Ah," Julia said with an understanding look, "don't worry about a thing, Angelo. We'll be fine. Papa and I have already thought about that. You don't need to worry."

"But pop said you're going to be selling the hogs..."

"All for the better, in my opinion," his mother replied, "some things are more important than whether we have, livestock or not."

"But I don't want you to give up everything just because of me." Angelo began worriedly.
"Angelo," his mother interrupted gently, "it's not because of you. Papa and I know we can't take care of everything by ourselves, and we're looking into hiring a few more people."

"But the cost..."

"Is negligible," Joshua said with a smile. "All the money it was taking us to feed and clothe all of you can now go into paying for some extra help."

Angelo looked upset for a moment before his father added, "Angelo, mama and I wouldn't have given up any of you for any amount of money, understand? Having you boys was the biggest blessing in our lives. You still are."

"But..."

"I'll be graduating soon, Angelo," Julia reassured her son, "We took our finals two weeks ago and I graduated top of my class... seems that it runs in the family," she said with a wink. I already have a job lined up. Between the money we'll get for the hogs, what papa makes and what I'll be making, we're going to be fine."

Seeing their son's distracted expression, Joshua asked what was wrong.

"I was just wondering how you're managing to put the three of us through college. I don't have to go, you know. I can stay here..."

"And waste all this talent?" Joshua asked, taking a bite of the dinner that his son had prepared. "You're an amazing cook, Angelo," he continued, "and while we'll miss you, you will be coming back on holidays to visit, right?"

"I supposed," the boy answered, sounding somewhat dejected.

Julia lifted her son's chin and asked quietly, "Angelo mio... do you want to go to college? You seemed so happy about it a few days ago, and now it seems as though you're looking for any reason not to go. You don't have to go if you don't want to."
"No," Joshua added, "no one is going to make you go unless you want to," he said, walking over to his son and putting an arm around him, "Lots of people haven't gone to college, and they did just fine. You can take a year off to make up your mind, then if you want to go, you go."

Angelo scoffed, "Name me five people who never went to college and made it?"

Giosua went even further and named 10. "All very intelligent men who made their own way thorough life and became famous for it."

"Take tonight," Julia said quietly, with a smile, "just think about it. No pressure from us at all. This your life and your future, and you have to do what makes you happy. Either decision is fine with us."

"Honest?" Angelo asked, trying not to show his relief.

"Honest," his parents said at the same time. Angelo was pleased and surprised when his parents linked their pinkies
Angelo nodded although he still looked doubtful.

"Sweetheart," Julia said softly, "we'll be alright, I promise you that. We've been saving since the day you boys were born to make sure you go to college. Paul only has one year left and he's helping defray the cost by working part time and buying his own books and supplies. If you're that worried, you can do the same thing if you like. But if you say that you are going to college, that's what you do. No parties or... smoking... anything, understand?"

Angelo breathed a little easier and smiled at his parents. "Understood." he replied, finally feeling able to breathe without feeling guilty. "Mama, papa, thank you," he said quietly, lifting his glass of milk to toast them.

The elder Di Marco's saluted back and proceeded to have their dinner, chatting between mouthfuls about their day and their plans for the future. Angelo especially, since he knew his parents would be fine without him, and now he could go to college with an easy mind.
Angelo and Amadeo

March twentieth, the day of Amadeo’s first party, was a success. The family had spent the week prior to it clearing space in the basement and buying children's 'bouncy' balls which they planned to bestow on the triplets and the little ones in the neighborhood, once they were done with them, and threw them down into the 'play area'... in other words, their semi finished basement.

Comfortable chairs and a couch or two had been set up around an old coffee table so that the kids would have places to sit and relax while they snacked and drank Coca Cola.

The kids had worn themselves out kicking the balls all over the room, ducking and laughing as they narrowly avoided, or didn't move fast enough, to prevent themselves from being conked on the head with mad balls bouncing off of walls and ceiling. Mr. Rossi had thoughtfully covered the windows and light bulbs with mesh to avoid accidents.

Ethel, having admitted that she would feel strange being the only girl in a party full of boys had been happy to find that Amadeo had also invited several girls from school, including Sharon.

Whatever her problems socializing at her own school, she had none with the girls from 'Deo's school and she was soon one of the group of giggling, laughing girls who had taken residence in the much quieter and genteel living room.

Beth Ann and Dante had gotten their days mixed up and had come on the twentieth. Beth Ann blushed bright red and apologized over and over while Dante smirked, 'I told you so,' written all over his face until his mother gave him a swat across the backside, turning the smirk into a scowl.

"Don't worry, sweetie, we love to see you any time, so we get to see you twice this week instead of once. What's so bad about that?" Natie had said with a smile for her daughter in law and a stern look for her oldest son.

The girls, seeing the triplets, converged on them, oohing and aahhing and tickling, causing the babies to giggle and wiggle, which the girls all thought was the cutest thing they’d ever seen. Beth Ann and Dante were actually able to sit at the kitchen table and have coffee, as they had more than enough willing baby sitters.
The babies, who had reached the stage of pulling themselves up into a standing position, never had a chance of hitting the floor when their little legs gave out since there were eleven pairs of hands ready and willing to catch them if they started to fall. The little ones were perfectly happy sitting on the floor or on the laps of the teenagers.

Nathan however, seemed to have explorer blood in his veins and first started by crawling all over the floor, occasionally bumping into things and bouncing right back until one of the girls began to follow him around and use her hand as a bumper shield so he didn't keep hitting his head.

They were amazed by the little boy, who not only pulled himself up into a standing position but also managed to pull himself onto the couch, and then once again into a standing position by pulling himself up again with the help of willing girls. The girls thought it was such a great stunt that they immediately began to try to teach the girls how to do it.

A couple of the girls decided to have baby races and put toys on the opposite side of the room for the girls to race to. They crawled rapidly, their little bottoms swaying back and forth causing the teens to laugh, and cheer as one or the other of the girls would reach their toy first.

The babies would test the toy out, feeling it, looking at it, and tasting it before crawling back over to present it to their brother, who while growing at an admirable rate, was still a little smaller than they were.

He would put the toy through the same tests, put it down, give his sisters a wide, wet kiss and continue with his exploring.

Amadeo came up from the basement and went into the kitchen to get more drinks, kissing Beth Ann heartily on the cheek and clapping his older brother on the shoulder in greeting.

"Get over here, brat!" Dante bellowed, pulling 'Deo into a hug and then tugging him over his knee.

"Daaaaannnnnnnnn!" 'Deo protested, trying to twist away

"One! Two! Three! Oh now wait, where was I? Oh yeah, one! Two! Three! Four!"
"Le'go you big ape!" 'Deo complained, kicking his legs and trying to pull himself off of his brother's lap.

"Oh now look what you did! I lost count! I'll have to start again!"

"Don't you dare!" Deo said, slapping at his brother's legs, half laughing, half exasperated, and very worried that his friends were going to hear his brother's booming voice and walk in and see him getting birthday spanks, because sure as the sun rose his friends would want to get in on the action.

"Put that child down before I get the spoon," His mother said with a smile that did not bode well for Dante's backside.

"I was just having some fun with him, mamma," Dante grumbled, setting his little brother, who had gotten more than the eighteen and one to grow on than the occasion called for.

"Forget the spoon, mamma, get the oar from the canoe for his birthday," Amadeo groused, rubbing his backside.

"That can be arranged," Natie said with a grin. "Did you boys need anything? And aren't you missing something?"

"Missing something? Like what?" Deo asked, confused.

"The girls?! They're all in the living room having their own party with the babies."

"Oh! The babies! I gotta go see them!" Amadeo said, rushing out to see his nieces and nephew, the fact that half of his party wasn't in the basement with him eluding him.

Mara and Olivia both saw 'Deo and yelled "Unday!" Nathan stopped his explorations to look around to ask, "Day?"

Amadeo went to each little girl and gave them hugs and 'a hundred' kisses ending with a zerbert on
their necks, which the girls, teen and infant, loved. 'Deo then went to his nephew who had apparently been waiting patiently for his turn.

'Deo announced himself to Nathan before picking him up, waiting for Nathan to put his arms up to indicate that he wanted to be picked up. He was delighted when the little arms came up, accompanied by the wide smile with the few pearly white teeth peeping between little pink lips.

Amadeo picked the child up and hugged and snuggled, talking the whole time, holding the child close to that he could see his uncle's face better. The doctor had said that while Nathan had sight it was still very limited and that things had to be held close to him for him to see them clearly enough to make out what they were.

"What do you say, munchkins?" 'Deo asked his nieces and nephew, "Want to sing to these lovely ladies and show off our incredible talent?" he asked "Sing?"

"Ing!" the babies replied.

"All right then my lovelies, what are we going to sing?" he asked, sitting down on the couch between Melissa Marcone and Ethel, settling Nathan on his lap.

"I know!" he said, "Here we go all right?"

"My old hen's a good old hen" he sang slowly.

The babies sang "Hen!"

"She lay eggs for railroad men," he sang.

He paused while the babies sang "Men!"

"Sometimes eight, sometimes ten."

"Then!" the babies echoed.
"She lay eggs for railroad men."

"Men!" the babies sang.

"Oh, that's so cute! Do it again!" Michelle Warner cried happily.

"Cluck old hen, cluck and squall, ain't laid an egg since late last fall."

"Waasfaw!" sang the babies.

"Cluck old hen, cluck and sing, ain't laid an egg since late last spring."

"Ping!" sang the babies.

"Oh how cute!" said some of the girls quietly so as not to disturb the singers.

"My old hen she's a good old hen," he sang.

"Hen!" said the babies again.

"She lay eggs for railroad men." Something that sounded like 'waywoemen' came from the babies which had the girls marveling.

"Sometimes one, sometimes two, she lays eggs for whole dang crew."

"Dancoo." sang the babies.

"What are you teaching these poor little babies!" Ethel protested with a smile.
"Hush!" 'Deo smiled back, before continuing the song

"Cluck old hen cluck and squall, ain't laid an egg since late last fall."

"Waasfaw."

"Cluck old hen cluck and sing. Ain't laid an egg since late last spring."

"Wassing!"

The girls all applauded. The babies grinned, giggled and clapped. The adults in the doorway between the kitchen and living room smiled and clapped as well. The boys, who had come up in search of their missing colas and friend stood by, grinning.

"That sounded wonderful!" Beth Ann said, happily, a stray tear rolling down her cheek. She never sang herself, but she had the radio playing all the time at the house, though the babies never seemed inclined to sing to it, they did 'chair dance' and wave their arms about. They did love to sing with their uncle Amadeo.

"That hen sounded like Sunday dinner." Jim quipped, as that was his father's usual response to hens that stopped laying.

"Well, we hate to call a halt to the fun here, but the kids have got to go down for their naps so we're just gonna head home." Dante said to the moans and groans of the girls who all quickly offered babysitting services if they were ever needed and who kissed and snuggled the babies, who reveled in the attention but couldn't help the stray yawn.

Even the boys chucked the babies under their chins and tickled their bellies, causing the infants to giggle and yawn again.

Mr. and Mrs. Rossi helped Dante and Beth swaddle the little ones against the chill, and then get all of their things into the station wagon. Three of the girls, including Ethel, offered to hold the babies for the ride home, which was only a twenty minute drive, otherwise Beth Ann would have had to juggle the two girls who were growing at an amazing rate, on her lap, and Nathan would have been
perched on Dante's lap, causing the drive to turn into a thirty five minute trip instead.

Beth Ann promised to deliver the teens back within the hour after getting the babies down for their naps. The girls who were left behind waved and smiled and grumbled under their breath that they hadn't been the ones chosen to hold the babies for the ride home, then went back in, determined to rejoin the boys and tell the three lucky girls about all the fun they'd missed while they'd been gone.

As expected, some of the girls and most of the boys arrived the following weekend for the family celebration, again offering to baby sit the little ones which now included the five year old twins, Kevin and 'Sketch', no nicknamed for his penchant for sketching, luckily in chalk, on any wall; Giovana and Daniel's children, Michael; Rene and Alejandro's three year old, and three month old Holly Joy Rossi, who had decided to be born on December 26th instead of waiting for January 12th, which had been her due date.

Her husband Alejandro still insisted that the little girl would have waited patiently until January 12th when she was due if it hadn't been for all of the pepperoni her mother had eaten the day before. Rene, whose real name was Santa but who preferred to go by a version of her middle name, Renata, proudly and patiently allowed people to caress the little baby bump which held their second, while everyone took turns holding three month old Holly.

Giovanas, Amadeo's oldest sister, insisted that everyone please call her Gia. Her husband Daniel seemed happy with Danny so it was easy to distinguish between him and Dante.

The older twins had at first avoided the three new little intruders but were soon won over by the sweet little triplets.

Little Michael sat by and thought to himself that it had taken his 'big cousins' long enough, before going back to his game of peek a boo with Mara.

The adults sat in the living room, watching the children while the teenagers once again took up residence in the basement, which had been cleaned of bouncy balls, watching reel to reel home movies, laughing at the little Rossi's as they scampered and capered across the screen.

Amadeo had put on a record which, while not in sync with the movie was in the right spirit, the Beach Boys playing, 'I Get Around'. The teens laughed at various Rossi children skipping and
tripping, swimming and sinking, they especially loved the video of a little Amadeo, apparently trying to sit on a ball in a pool of water and being astounded when it would pop back up to the surface.

He did that for quite a while before his father gave him a new toy to play with at which time little 'Deo had had a tantrum until the ball was returned, after which, he once again tried to sink ball only to watch it pop up, with a combined look of confusion, wonder and irritation.

That clip was followed by a girl that 'Deo insisted was Gia swinging up as high as she could get before she let go of the chains and 'flew' toward the camera.

Another reel consisted of the results of Carmie and Terri getting into their mother's make up and making each other look 'beautiful', piled under thick layers of make up and wearing the most outlandish collection of clothing.

Another featured what looked like a five year old Amadeo wrestling down Con who, despite being older and all of his twisting and kicking and, though the film was silent, everyone knew that Con was yelling, and could not get out of 'Deo's grasp. The event was abruptly brought to a halt when Mrs. Rossi came in, picked up 'Deo, smacked his behind, picked up Con, did the same to him, and then took a hold of whoever was running the camera to apparently give him or her a dose of the same before the camera was shut off.

"Oh, come on, that can't be it!" protested Milo, laughing.

"Nah, that's just the end of this reel." 'Deo replied, smiling.

"Ladies and Gents!" came the klaxon, also known as the voice of Rene, "Lunch!" Raucous laughter and loud voices could be heard behind her.

"Let's see if we can sneak back down here with our food," 'Deo said, "With all that noise we'll never get a word in," he laughed.

The noise level rose abruptly as soon as they were upstairs. Johnny Rossi was, as always, the life of the party, telling jokes and anecdotes which had his guests roaring with laughter.

Felix said something.
"What?!" shouted 'Deo to be heard over the din.

"I said your dad is a hoot! Mine just sits there!" he shouted back.

Amadeo went over to his mother and leaned down to talk to her, but everyone could tell that he had to raise his voice to be heard. She shook her head and pointed to the floor. Amadeo looked petulant for a moment until she said something else at which his face brightened up.

"We're gonna do lunch, then cake, then presents." 'Deo told his friends. "I have to stay up here and talk to the guests since it's my party."

"And I'll cry if I want to," Milo sang.

"Speaking of crying, when're the birthday whacks? We didn't get to do them last time." Jim said, grinning.

"You didn't and no one does!" Amadeo protested, grinning.

"We can if we can catch you!" Milo threatened.

"Ah, ah, ah! Etiquette now, gentlemen. Etiquette. Can't be caught running around the house like we're sixteen year olds now, can we? Maturity and decorum, at all times."

"That's for eighteen years old. Get 'im guys!" Jim yelled as they gave chase.

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NOTES

Eighth Month Baby Milestones: Web MD

When safety seats hit the market in the mid-1960s, they bombed. The only people who bought them were a strict minority of only the most safety-conscious parents. The problem was that people just didn’t know enough about them, and it seemed like a useless expense. (Wikipedia)

I Get Around
Artist: The Beach Boys
Album: Little Deuce Coupe
Released: 1963

As always... NO copyright infringement is intended!
Angelo and Amadeo

Everyone was excited and running around with last minute preparations, phone calls back and forth, exuberant voices, so close to adult timbres, suddenly becoming those of children once again.

They were going. They were finally going. They were all going! It had taken months of planning and saving, the kids using their earnings from the summer before, as well as Christmas and birthday money to fund their trips.

Amadeo was glad now that his father had convinced him to only donate half the money he'd earned last summer to the Veteran's Home. So now between holiday and birthday money, plus what he'd saved, he was on his way to the July 4th celebrations at the New York World Fair.

Angelo was especially excited not only to be going back to his old stomping grounds, but his new friends were finally going to see where he came from, and meet his old friends whom he'd kept in touch with as best as he could through letters and occasional phone calls.

Fifteen teenagers and eight adults, minus Mr. Di Marco who stayed behind to see to the animals and farm, were going. At Angelo's suggestion, Mr. Di Marco had hired interested members of the wrestling team to work the farm over the summer so he wouldn't be overwhelmed with the work.

Paul and John, who couldn't say no to the chance of getting back to New York even for a few days with the prospect of seeing the fireworks, went as well. New York, in their opinion, had yet to be outdone by anyone, anywhere, in their displays.

It had been a close call with Ethel's parents who took an extreme interest in their oldest daughter going on a long trip with a bunch of boys, only a few of whom they actually knew in person. The only reason she was allowed to 'hang out' with the other boys, they explained, was because her older brother was with her at all times. They were very concerned when they were told that Jim, her mother said in an exaggeratedly dreamy voice, would be going as well.

Mrs. Di Marco, Carmie, and Terri met with them in person and assured them that they would all be there, so their daughter would be well chaperoned and sharing a room with Mrs. Di Marco who, having raised six boys, had hearing like a fox.
They left on July first, boarded the train that morning and headed out, excited and happy, giggling and chatting among themselves about the wonder that was New York, which Angelo and his mother and brothers had promised to introduce them to.

New York was everything that Angelo had promised and more. They finally, after several train changes, disembarked in the Grand Central Station, tired but awed at the size and noise. The other teenagers, who had grown up in a small town all of their lives, thought about their own little hometown train station and grinned sheepishly at each other.

Once outside, Jim nearly toppled over trying to see the top of one of the buildings. Everyone had a good laugh. Jim blushed and smiled. He knew he looked exactly like what he was, a hayseed in the big city, but right now he didn't care. He just wanted to take everything in.

Ethel and several of the others were snapping pictures left and right. Mrs. Di Marco had to remind them to save some film for the fireworks on the fourth or be prepared to spend some of their money on more film. They tried very hard to take fewer pictures, but the city was fascinating. There seemed to be something new and exciting around every corner.

Mrs. Di Marco, John, Paul, and Angelo, acted as tour guides, organizing taxi rides or walking expeditions to various places. That Saturday, the Georgia natives finally met Matthew, Mark and Luke, Angelo's older brothers, who had happily agreed to act as taxi drivers and extra tour guides.

Matt and Martina's children, Joshua and Dominic were adorable. Their skin a light coffee color and their hazel, mostly green eyes, fringed with dark lashes inherited from their mother. Angelo had explained in advance about his Moroccan heritage and his brother's brown skin so they were prepared, and no one said anything awkward, though to them he only looked deeply tanned.

Most evenings were spent at Matt's or Mark's houses, enjoying the hospitality of their homes and the antics of their children. The boys agreed that Matt's wife, Martina, was a goddess, making the woman blush and Ethel's eyes to turn a little green with envy.

Angelo's brother Marco, who preferred to be called by the diminutive of his middle name, Iggy; and his wife Natalia and their kids Peter and Matthew, treated them to a day at the beach.

The kids got into a sand sculpture competition among themselves and all agreed that Peter and Matthew's little house with pine trees in front was the winner, hands down.
The teens asked the Misters Di Marco to drive back and forth over the Brooklyn Bridge, 'Just once please?!' just so that they could go home and say they'd done it, snapping pictures out of the car windows as they did so.

When they visited the Di Marco's friends in Little Italy, Milo swore he'd never tasted food as good as what he experienced there. They'd not only visited a few of the restaurants but had also been fed by overzealous Italian mamas who thought the children were all too skinny.

"I'm not telling Mrs. Witt about this though," he said quietly to 'Deo. "If I tell her anything was as good as her chicken she might stop making it and then where will I be?"

Old friends and new got along as though they'd known each other all of their lives, and everyone laughed when Mrs. Rosetti, enamored by Milo's dimples, kept pinching his cheeks. Milo endured it stoically and good-naturedly, theatrically rubbing his cheeks after they left and asking his friends if there was anything left of his face.

After a trip to Central Park, Jim complained that he'd never look at their little park in their little town in Georgia the same way. Angelo laughed and admitted that he much preferred their little park, earning mock gasps.

The kids from Georgia, until now, had never traveled far from their homes and had never been to a large museum before. The town about twenty miles away had a small one that mostly dealt with local history, and they'd been there on field trips for school or day trips with their parents, but they'd never seen so many museums.

At the first mention of the words Museum of Natural History the boys had been convinced that they were going to be bored stiff. The adults actually had to start issuing ultimatums to get them to leave.

It was just as bad at the Guggenheim. The teens had giggled at the name at first, but when they went in the artworks fascinated them. They spent a lot of time admiring the sculptures and would have stood there staring at them, but the guards began to announce that the museum was closing and everyone had to leave.

Ethel decided to be cremated and scattered in the botanical gardens when she died. Until then she thought she'd be perfectly happy lying under the flowers and breathing in their scent. She'd been crushed when Mrs. Di Marco had told her that that wasn't allowed. She did wonder, however, if
weddings were allowed on the grounds.

They'd ridden the Staten Island Ferry, and gone to Ellis Island to see The Statue of Liberty close up.

As with the museums, the boys had not wanted to go and apologized profusely for being so rude once they were there and had seen the New York Skyline and the massive statue. At first, they were a little reticent about going to the zoos, their attitude being, if you've seen one animal you've seen them all. But once they'd seen them they once again didn't want to leave. Animals they'd only read about lived there. Animals they hadn't believed really existed were there in flesh and blood. The platypus habitat fascinated them no end.

All of them admitted that Coney Island was more fun than any of them had ever had in their lives to that point. They went back to the hotel, sweaty, sticky with cotton candy, sunburned, mildly sick to their stomachs from eating so many hot dogs, and happier than they could ever remember being.

Every evening they returned, loaded down with souvenirs, and all of them had already had to buy more film for their cameras. Especially after a night time trip to Times Square where the sheer number of brightly colored lights and signs dazzled them.

Many of them wondered if they could go back home to their dinky little town after seeing the wonders that existed outside of it, but most admitted after a couple of days that they missed home and that New York, while definitely beautiful, was also overwhelming and they missed their little town and their families.

"One thing for sure, I'm never goin' to Texas," Jim said.

"Why not?" was the group's question.

"Man, they say that everything is bigger in Texas. I don't think I can handle bigger than this." he'd said, to his friend's laughter.

The last day at the New York World Fair was hot, crowded, and amazing. Throughout the day Mrs. Di Marco would buy a little of every food available and split it among the children so that they could save some of their money.
The teens smiled and exclaimed over the Unisphere, an open sculpture of the world, surrounded by fountains which cooled off the air immediately next to them. The antique car ride was a huge success, and the boys loved the Ford Pavilion. Ethel was fascinated by the airplane exhibit, and they took picture after picture of the replicas of dinosaurs in Dinoland.

They went on the Swiss Sky Ride and the monorail, they watched the blacksmiths and tinkers create amazing pieces. They visited 'Korean', 'Chinese' and 'African' market places, buying lovely pieces of jewelry or scarves for their mothers and sculptures for their fathers. Brothers and sisters even got a few toys or souvenirs.

Evening came too soon. The fireworks and fountain display began at nine. They were astounding, and the teens watched, their expressions of wonder and amazement once again making them look more like children of five than teenagers. Mrs. Di Marco took pictures of their faces by the light of the display.

Ethel had also slyly taken pictures of the teen's reactions to various things and places which no one knew about until they got back home. She put together an album showing the animals, buildings, or artwork and their response to it. They'd all asked her for the negatives so that they could make albums of their own. She agreed, but only after removing the bulk of the pictures which appeared to be of Jim.

Amadeo had gone with Jim to pick up his pictures of New York the following Tuesday and found that more than three rolls were pictures of Ethel alone. Ethel looking at the tigers. Ethel in the gardens, an expression of rapture on her face as she inhaled the scent of the flowers. Ethel looking out over the harbor with her hair blowing in the wind and the skyline behind her.

Jim had tried to hide them, blushing furiously. Amadeo just smiled and patted his friend on the shoulder. They'd been an item for quite some time now, and 'Deo was sure something good was on the horizon for the two of them.

"'Dae? I think... I really think... no, I know... I'm crazy about her and I want to marry her." the other boy said with a look of earnestness combined with concern that his friend would object.

"Jim..."

"I've got a job," Jim continued as though pleading his case in court, "I can sell my bike and get a decent car, I think. Do... d'ya think she'd say yes?" he asked nervously.

"Jim..."

"D'ya think her parents would object?" the boy continued nervously, "d'ya think they'd refuse to let her marry me? How do I convince them that we're supposed to be together?"
"Jimbo, you're both only 17..."

"I'll be eighteen soon! And..."

"And you still have to finish senior year, then you'll go to college..."

"But I'm not, 'Dae. I decided that right after I got my last report card and got Cs and Ds. I'm just not cut out for school. I've always known it. My parents are just happy that I'm passing and don't have to repeat my senior year. I can always get another job," he said nervously.

Amadeo thought for a few moments and finally said, "What about her? Is she going to college?"

Jim shook his head, "Nah, she said she's just gonna keep her waitress job at the diner. Her boss said she could be promoted to assistant manager soon if she keeps up the great job she's been doin'."

'Deo bit his lower lip and replied quietly, "Jim, I don't want to rain on your parade, but there's a lot to being married. Your own place. Bills..."

"Well, I ain't gonna marry her tomorrow, 'Dae!" Jim replied with a slight frown, "well, I mean, I'd like to but I have to be realistic, we'd have to save up some money and all that... I have a couple hundred dollars saved already that I put aside just for this, and like I said, if I sell my bike... man I hate to do that but..."

Amadeo grinned in relief, "I'm really happy that you understand that, Jim... that's what I was getting worried about."

"Well, like my dad says, I ain't the sharpest tool in the shed but I learned enough watchin' my own folks, and I think me and Eth could make it." He looked at his friend with a silent plea.

"Just ask her," he said, patting his friend on the shoulder. "It's like you said, you won't be getting married tomorrow, and I think her folks'd respect you for your honesty."

"But what if they say no?" Jim asked worriedly.

"Only one way to find out, Jimmy Boy."

'Deo said bracingly, putting a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder.

"What about you and Ange?"

Amadeo was briefly caught off guard, "What?"

"Are you guys goin' to college?"

Amadeo managed a smile and replied, "Yeah, he's going to a school for the culinary arts, and I'm going to a business school." He didn't mention that he and Angelo had already arranged for an apartment and were going to room together.

Jim grinned and clapped Amadeo on the back, "Good for you. I'm happy for you. I always knew there was more for you than this little town."

Amadeo laughed, "I happen to love this little town, and I'm going to miss it when I'm gone."

"Are you gonna come back?"

'Deo looked thoughtful for a few moments, "Well," he finally replied, "as much as I love it here, there's not much call for what I'll be going to school for, so, probably not for good."
Jim looked downcast. "You ain't the only one, y'know. A lot of the others've decided to move after they graduate college too. A few of them talked about movin' to New York or California. Some of 'em can't afford college either but they're talkin' movin' too. It might just be me and Eth left here."

Amadeo smiled and put a friendly arm around his buddy. "You don't have to stay here, you know. There are a lot of jobs for auto mechanics, and if Eth really decides that she likes being a waitress, there are plenty of those kinds of jobs all over the place."

"Let me ask you a question... if you and Ethel do decide to move somewhere, where would you like to go?"

Jim smiled sadly, "We talked about movin' to Colorado at some point but between my salary and what she makes at the restaurant... I'm not sure when or if we'd ever really be able to go."

"Nothing is impossible, Jimbo." 'Deo said with a smile, "You and she might be here for a little bit while you save up some money, but it's a nice town, you grew up here, you're familiar with everyone and everything around you. I'd say all things considered that it's not such a bad place to live for a little while longer."

"Ya think?" Jim asked doubtfully, looking up at his friend.

"I think." 'Deo assured his friend.

Jim thought about that for a few moments before breaking into a wide smile. "You're right. It really ain't such a bad little place. I can always find another part-time job somewhere so that we can save up that money a little faster. Thanks, 'Dae."

"You're welcome, Jim." Amadeo grinned, clapping his friend on the shoulder.

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Information about the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair can be found at:

Reference to The American Museum of Natural History

The American Museum of Natural History was founded in 1869. Its mission is to discover, interpret, and share information about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe through a wide-ranging program of scientific research, education, and exhibition.

The museum is known for its exhibitions and scientific collections.

Information by:
http://www.amnh.org/about-the-museum
Solomon Robert Guggenheim (February 2, 1861 – November 3, 1949) was an American businessman, art collector, and philanthropist.

In his later years, he discovered an interest for abstract, contemporary art.

In the 1940s it became apparent that a larger building would be needed to house Guggenheim’s art collection, and in 1943 architect Frank Lloyd Wright was commissioned to design a museum in New York City.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum opened on October 21, 1959.

Information by:
https://www.guggenheim.org/history
The Friday night after school began, Jim called Ethel's house and asked to speak to her.

"Ettttttthhhhhheeeeeeelllll! Phhhhoooornnnnne!"

"Who is it?" came the voice from the distance.

"It's a boy," Came the wry reply.

"Hello?" she asked moments later, curious. None of the guys ever called to ask for her and she wondered which one it was and why they hadn't asked for Bruce as they usually did.

"Eth, it's Jim."

"Oh!" she said, putting the picture of him that she'd been looking at behind her back as though he might see it. "Hi... Jim. What's up?" she asked, trying to be casual while her heart beat rapidly.

"Ethel, I know we've been hanging out for a while... I really like you, and... I was wondering... if maybe... you and I could... maybe... hang out. I mean... If you and I could be like... friends. Dang! I had this all worked out in my head." He muttered. "My big brother is always telling me I'm a numbskull."

Then aloud and once again to Ethel who couldn't help but to smile at Jim's dilemma but hoping he'd get to the point soon, he said "A couple. Like me and you... together... like... dang!"

"Like a boyfriend and girlfriend?" Ethel asked breathlessly.

"Yeah! Like that!" Jim nearly yelled. "Do you? I mean... want to? You know?"
Ethel pulled the phone away and covered the mouth piece with her hand before giving out a barely restrained squeal of happiness before she put the phone back up to her ear. With a wide smile, and trying hard to sound natural, she said "Sure, why not?" She took the phone away from her ear again as Jim let out a whoop.

"Then, this weekend, all right? You and me? A movie maybe? Or Grammarcy's?"

"Sounds great, Jim. I'll see you then," she replied with a wide grin, somehow managing to keep her voice level.

"Great! This weekend... Baby." he said, testing the waters.

"This weekend... Bear," she replied before hanging up the phone. She gave out another little squeal of delight and laughed when she saw her mother leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, a wry smile on her face.

"I knew it was going to happen eventually, but just not so soon." her mother said, giving her daughter a little hug. "Just be careful sweetie... don't..." she hesitated.

"Ma? It's gonna be a burger. In public. Don't worry, OK?" Ethel said with a smile, hugging her mother. Then she whispered, "You raised your baby girl right. I won't do anything stupid."

Mrs. Barstow hugged her oldest daughter tightly and kissed the top of her head. "I love you," she whispered.

"Right back atcha," Ethel replied, returning the hug and kissing her mother's nose as she used to do when she was little.

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Summer was over. Their parents had bought them their school clothes and supplies, and they were back.

Jim sighed as he walked up the pathway toward the front doors with the guys. Only the first day of
school and he felt as though time were standing still. He had finally asked Ethel to go steady with him and he found it frustrating that he could only see her afternoons after he’d finished his homework and on weekends.

"How many more years of this guys? I don't know if I'm gonna make it. Sometimes I feel like I'm just gonna bust if I have to sit through one more science class."

"Cool, then we can study you as one of the few cases of spontaneous human combustion," Dennis said jokingly.

"Thanks, you're a pal," Jim said wryly.

"Any time," Dennis replied with a smile. Before anyone could remind Jim that this was their last year, they all bumped into Felix who had stopped suddenly.

"Whoa!" Felix whispered, "Wow, check that out! Who are they?" he said, gesturing with his chin toward two unfamiliar girls who stood by the brickwork leading to the front door.

"No idea," replied Charlie. "I never saw them before!"

"Let's go say hello," said Angelo immediately, remembering his first year there and hoping to make sure the girls didn't go through it as well. He had to admit, if only to himself, that the girls looked like the models he'd seen in the catalogues, and that was bound to make sure that they knew they had friends to lean on when needed.

"Don't you think a horde of people converging on them like this will scare them?" Charlie countered.

"I hardly think we're a horde," Aiden said somewhat breathlessly as he took in the shiny red hair on one of the girls. He wondered if it smelled like sunshine on fresh hay.

"Eight guys, two girls... two really amazing looking girls if my eyesight isn't going on me," Dennis said, awed, staring at the darker of the two.
"I agree," said Amadeo. "Eight guys, some with their tongues hanging out, could scare them rather than make them feel welcome. We have plenty of time to get to know them," he said rationally.

The two girls were worth staring at. Except for their coloring they were almost identical. The girl with the long straight dark hair had sparkling blue eyes, and the girl with the strawberry blonde hair had equally startling green eyes which almost seemed to disappear into their whites in the harsh sunlight, and which made her fascinating to look at.

While the guys were busy gawking, the girls had noticed them. They looked at each other, shrugged, then turned toward the front doors to the school and disappeared inside.

"OK, guys," Amadeo said, smiling. "Close your mouths and let's go inside. I'm sure we'll find out who they are."

"And I saw them first so they're mine," Felix said, forcefully.

"If they like shrimp," joked the up until now silent Milo. He was in love. Seriously in love. He just didn't know which one of them he loved the most just yet. The reddish hair on the first one would make some beautiful children mixed with his blonde hair, but the blue eyes on the other would be a perfect compliment to his.

"In your dreams," Jim said.

"You're spoken for, so hands off!" Charlie reminded him.

"Hey, no one said I couldn't look," Jim grinned.

"Yeah? Well let's see what Ethel has to say about that, then, shall we?" Dennis said slyly.

"Say a word and I'll turn you into a doughnut, midget," Jim said, half-jokingly.

"The kind with chocolate frosting on top? Go for it, big boy!" Charlie said.
"Ahhhh shuddup. First bell is gonna ring any minute and I don't wanna get in trouble the first day back," Jim groused.

After a few seconds of thought, he smiled. He loved Ethel's soft, dark brown eyes and her long dark hair that was naturally straight. He loved that she wasn't stick thin like some of those other girls out there. None of the other guys knew it but when she let her hair down it was almost to her waist. He knew though. Let them fight over the two new girls. He had the most beautiful one out there.

Between the first bell and during announcements the door to their homeroom opened quietly and three teens, escorted by Mr. Cobrane, entered the room, standing quietly by the door, waiting until announcements were over.

When the class saw the group at the door there was a collective gasp from males and females alike. The two girls were really very lovely, and their features were even more noticeable in the gentler florescent indoor lighting. The lone male had every girl daydreaming as soon as they laid eyes on him.

His hair was dark brown, almost black, and looked windswept, a lock of it falling over his smooth forehead. His eyes were as blue as the sky. His jawline was masculine but soft at the same time. His dark eyebrows were arched naturally, making him look slightly inquisitive and amused at the same time. His teeth were white and even.

The boy grinned even more widely, but the two girls seemed startled at the class' reaction. None of them said or did anything until announcements were over, at which point Mr. Cobrane brought the teens further into the room and stood them before the class.

"These are three of our new students this semester, this is..." he began, gesturing toward the auburn haired girl.

"Dora!" she said quickly and nervously, smiling widely, shooting an apologetic look at Mr. Cobrane. "Dora Gauthier. Pleased to meet you."

Mr. Cobrane's eyebrows rose at being interrupted but he didn't correct the girl for the moment.

"And this is her twin sister, Izabelle." He introduced the second girl who stood quietly with a gentle smile.
"Izzy for short." said the dark-haired girl with a little wave to the class in general, but which Felix liked to believe was aimed at him.

The boy spoke up and said, "And everyone can just call me Nick." he said with an unusual accent, sounding both Southern and something else. He smiled at the class with his even, white teeth. "Nick Bouchard."

"Children, this is your homeroom teacher Mr. Mason, who is also the geography teacher. Now, second bell is about to ring. There are three seats there in the third row, those will be yours for the rest of the semester."

"I wish you a good day, children. Mr. Mason." Cobrane said with a little bow in the other teacher's direction. He then turned gracefully and left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Milo watched admiringly as the vice principal left, and swore to himself that he was going to be just as suave as Mr. Cobrane when he got old, too.

"Everyone, I'd like you to say hello to your new classmates before the bell rings."

"Hi!" "Hellowo000!" came the enthusiastic greetings.

The girls, who had claimed their seats blushed a little and with self-conscious smiles, waved at their classmates. Nick dazzled them all with a grin.

"They may need help finding their classes, so if some of you would help them find their way around that would be very neighborly of you," hinted Mr. Mason, none too subtly.

Not unexpectedly, Angelo Di Marco and Amadeo Rossi were two of the first to lean over to compare schedules with the three newcomers.

Mr. Mason still felt guilty that Angelo had suffered for so long, unnoticed, but he admired the boy. He'd turned the school around where it came to bullying, and things had been a lot calmer since then.
He only wished it hadn't come at the price of the two boys being beaten to accomplish it. Gym... can't help you there," he laughed, "We all have lunch together, and after that, you have social studies with Jim, and then geography with Felix and Aiden. Your last class of the day is Latin... wow, that's impressive."

"Doesn't everyone take Latin?" Dora asked innocently, confused as to why it would be so impressive.

"Mrs. Ward only takes the honors students for Latin. To the rest of us, Mrs. Ward is like some supernatural being you only hear of but never see, like a will-o-the-wisp," Jim said in a hushed voice, looking very serious.

The girls looked at him like he was crazy and everyone laughed.

"All he means is that not everyone gets to take Latin, only the ones who show talent for it. Mrs. Ward refuses to teach anyone after first year who doesn't show the aptitude, so needless to say she doesn't have many students. I'd been told they were going to phase Latin out altogether, but she and Ms. Mastroiano are working together to teach the students Latin through singing. I heard they're going to put on a talent show this year.

"Angelo! You should..."

"Nooooo way! I don't do Latin. At... all. Mrs. Ward would listen to me butcher the language in one note and throw me out on my ear. I'll stick with Ms. Mastroiano." he said with a grin.

"Anyway, our last class, the boys I mean, is gym, so we won't be able to show you where Mrs. Ward's class is, but I'll betcha between now and then you'll meet some of the other kids and they can show you. OK?" Angelo said.

The girls nodded, looking relieved.

Amadeo had been looking at Nick's schedule and found that they had all but one class in common. "You have Mr. Janco for Spanish, and you're in honors too, so instead of study hall on Fridays you'll be in his room. We pass right by there so we can show you."
"Heh, this is such a tiny school compared to the one I came from," Nick said dismissively, "I'm sure I won't have any problems finding my way around."

"It can be a little confusing when you first get here," 'Deo said patiently. "It's no trouble."

"Nah, don't worry about me, dude, I'll be fine," he said dismissively, taking his schedule and putting it into a textbook just as the bell rang. He rose and gathered up his things. He looked at Izzy. "Can I escort you to our first class Ms. Izabelle?" he said, holding out an arm gallantly.

"Ummm, thank you, ah... Nick, but I think I'd like to stick with these guys until we get used to the school. Thank you though." she said as politely as she could. Frankly, she thought he was being a jerk but she had been raised to be polite even to people who didn't seem to deserve it.

Nick got a strange look in his eye and simply said "Fine," before he took his fleece-lined denim jacket, threw it over his shoulder, and walked casually out of the room.

"You don't think I offended him do you?" Izzy asked nervously, her flawless, pale skin going a shade paler.

"If anyone was offensive it was him." Dora chimed in. Felix didn't think an angry woman could look pretty but Dora proved the opposite. Her green eyes flashed and a pretty rose color flushed her cheeks.

"It just occurred to me. We don't even know your names!" Izzy remarked suddenly.

"Let's go before we're late for our first class. I don't think the teachers would give you detention on your first day but why take the chance," Amadeo said, getting his things together as an example for the others.

They made their introductions as they walked toward Mr. Webb's science class. "Don't worry if you can't remember everyone's names at first, no one will be offended. I'm Amadeo. Everyone calls me 'Deo or Dae," he introduced himself with a smile.

"I'm Angelo," was all Angelo said. Other than his mother and Ethel, his experiences with females was very limited and he was a little nervous.
Dennis, Charlie, Aiden, Felix, and Jim all introduced themselves.

"But Jim has a girlfriend so he's off limits," Felix said without thinking. Everyone did their best not to laugh as Felix's face turned beet red and he held his breath, making his face swell up a little. "I'll be right back." he puffed out. As they passed the men's room he ran in.

"First detention of the new semester goes to Felix Garruson." Jim remarked, sounding like a sportscaster, at which everyone laughed.

"Here we are. Mr. Webb's class. Just find a seat," 'Deo said quietly as the bell rang. The eight boys all sat in a box formation in the center of the room, four and four. Dora and Izzy sat to the right of them, closer to the doors. The rest of the class sat down. Only two seats were empty.

Mr. Webb was in the middle of his introduction when the door opened and Nick walked in, apologizing for being late without appearing the least apologetic.

"Sorry. I'm new here and I wasn't sure where the classroom was." He said, presenting his schedule.

"Very well then, Mr..."

"Bouchard, sir."

"Very well then, Mr. Bouchard, have a seat please."

"Thank you," Nick said, strutting down the aisle between seats as slowly as possible. At first he tried to strong arm Angelo out of his seat, but the smaller boy was having none of it. In as low a voice as he could manage he said, "Cut the crap now and I won't kill you," after which he retrained his eyes back on the teacher and whatever it was he'd been saying.

Nick looked hard at Angelo, wondering if the boy knew some martial art and decided to keep his distance for a bit and seeing what he was up against.

He tried a couple more times to 'accidentally knock' a couple of other boys out of their seats with much the same reaction. Finally, he took the last seat in the back corner of the room. He smiled and winked at Izzy and gave 'Deo a smug look. Izzy and Dora looked at each other as though to say 'Was he serious?' before ignoring him and returning their attention to their notebooks.
A moment later Mr. Cobrane knocked quietly on the door. Mr. Webb answered it and a hushed and quick conversation took place. "Very well then, thank you, Mr. Cobrane." Mr. Webb said.

"It appears that Mr. Garruson is ill and won't be joining us this morning. So, shall we continue?" Mr. Webb asked, continuing even though the class hadn't said a word.

At lunchtime, Nick was nowhere to be found. The girls, however, were surrounded by students, male and female alike, who asked questions in rapid fire, giving the girls almost no time to answer.

"Where are you from?" asked Sharon.

"Quebec, Canada," Izzy said.

"Ohhhh how cool! A whole 'nother country!" Donna said in a hushed voice. 'How’d you learn to speak English so well?"

"What school did you go to?" asked Melissa.

"Did you live in a house?" Sarah asked. "We live right down the street from here."

"Do you have any pets?" Sharon inquired. "I have three rabbits and a goat."

"Are the classes the same here as there?" asked Howard.

"Can I show you around the school after classes let out?" Michael inquired.

Isabelle and Dora looked from one student to the other, trying to take a breath to answer at least one question before another was fired at them but unable to get a word in. Amadeo was about to remind the group that the girls were probably feeling overwhelmed when a familiar voice chimed in.

"Can I take you out this weekend, Ms. Izabelle?" came the familiar voice, accompanied by a confident smile. The kids at the table stopped for a moment and looked at the newcomer. It was
Nick. "Perhaps I can treat you to a shake after school?" Nick asked, leaning down and smiling brightly at Izzy. She recoiled slightly from his breath and wondered how he kept his teeth so white, before politely refusing.

He smelled strongly of cigarette smoke. Every year it was announced that smoking on school property was frowned upon, and every year a handful of students ignored the rule and found secluded places to indulge their habit.

"Actually, Nick," said Amadeo in a friendly voice, "A bunch of us wanted to take the three of you to Grammacy's after school, sort of a welcome to the neighborhood sort of thing. Do you have the time?"

"Miz Izabella, will you be there?" he asked in what he hoped was a casual tone, leaning in close to the girl to give her the full impact of his smile.

Izabella wrinkled her nose but didn't answer. She tried to back away a bit more from Nick's breath.

Amadeo didn't know the girls well yet, having just met them, but he was pretty sure that Nick was, to put it mildly, barking up the wrong tree. Izabella didn't seem the least bit impressed with the handsome boy. He was, however, very impressed with the two girls who either apparently had no clue how very beautiful they were, or who just didn't care. He'd noticed that the 'pretty' and 'popular' girls hadn't approached the twins yet.

"Izabella? Will you be there?" Nick asked again, a little angrily, tired of whatever game the girl was playing with him.

Izzy compressed her lips, opened her pocketbook and began rummaging around. Once she found what she was looking for she smiled at Nick and gestured him away from the rest of the group at the table.

She fought her natural desire to hold her nose and leaned in toward the boy, pressing the stick of gum she'd taken out into his hand, holding it for a moment. "I find the smell of cigarette reprehensible and you reek of it," she whispered in his ear, to avoid embarrassing him. "We'll be at Grammacy's, but if you don't lay off the cigarettes and stop acting like a jackass, stay away from me. Please, and thank you," she said, remembering her manners.

She leaned away from him with a radiant smile, shook his hand and rejoined the others at the table.
Some of them looked at Izzy inquiringly and some came right out and asked her what she said but she only smiled and told them it had been nothing important. She then switched the conversation to the impending trip to Grammarcy's.

Nick stood there for a few moments, angry and insulted, before turning away, dropping the gum, and storming out of the cafeteria.

The group at the table and several more students from surrounding tables watched as he left, all dying to know the story but not knowing the girls well enough to approach and ask. More than one made plans to go to the kids they did know and get the story from them at some point during the afternoon.

For the rest of the day, Nick appeared in classes on time. He didn't flash his very white smile or acknowledge any of his classmates, appearing fascinated by the teachers and all they had to say, and taking notes feverishly.

After school, he was nowhere to be found, so the considerably larger group went without him.

"I feel really bad," said Izzy to her friends when they'd pushed several tables together and sat down. "I was really rude. My parents would not have been the least bit happy about how I handled that, but he was just being so obnoxious!" she said, hoping that they would understand.

"Give him some time to calm down," Amadeo said gently. "The choice is entirely his. If he prefers to smoke and hang out with the kids who smoke, there's nothing we can do. There's a chance that what Izzy said reached him. If so then we'll be seeing him."

"Do you think he likes me enough to stop that nasty habit?" Izzy asked. "I mean, he is a good looking guy..."

"He's one of those good looking guys who knows he's good looking and gets by on his looks rather than personality." Melissa, who had accepted the open invitation, said dismissively. Sharon and several of the other girls who had tagged along nodded agreement.

"He might just be scared," Dennis said. "You know," he continued, blushing a little at the looks sent his way, "I mean, he wanted to fit in and he didn't care who he fit in with as long as it was someone." he finished, biting into his burger to avoid having to say anything else.
"Or," Charlie conjectured, "He was just trying too hard to fit in with everyone. It's just not possible." he said.

"It's like my father says, you're not going to like everyone, and everyone isn't going to like you. Be yourself, and stick with the people who accept you for who you are, otherwise, you'll drive yourself crazy trying to be everything for everyone." Milo chipped in.

"Do you think that's it?" Izzy asked, "He's trying to be everything for everyone, rather than who he is? And then here's big mouthed Izabelle making him feel like a fool," she berated herself, pushing her fries aside.

"The only one who made him look like a fool was him." Dora objected, taking a sip of her cherry Coke. "If he's part of the smoking crowd then he's fine. He has friends. Or potential friends, anyway. I mean, he wasn't out there smoking by himself."

"Or maybe he was," said Amadeo thoughtfully. "What if he went out there hoping to be part of the smoking crowd and they didn't accept him? What if he was out there smoking by himself? I mean, he came in alone, and he didn't go to the table that the smokers hang out at when he left."

Dora looked uncertain, the pretty rose blush rising to her cheeks again. "Izzy?" she asked, looking at her sister.

"I feel horrible now," Izzy said, sadly. "I hurt him. I embarrassed him."

"Maybe you hurt him," Angelo said quietly, "But you didn't do anything to embarrass him. If he was embarrassed it was at his own behavior, not anything you said or did. If he was embarrassed it was because he knew you were right. You didn't do a thing, outwardly, to embarrass him. We were all watching, and all it looked like was you leaning in to whisper to him and then shaking his hand."

"You even smiled at him," Melissa said.

"Yeah," agreed Milo. "It was him stomping out that was a cause of any embarrassment, not anything you did, OK?"

"Do you suppose I should find him and talk to him?" Izzy asked, "Explain things a little?"
"Let him calm down and think things through. He's the one who has to make the decision, you can't do it for him," Aiden maintained.

"He could do like dad," Dora said quietly.

"Do you think so, A-Dor?" Izzy said hopefully, wondering if this boy liked her enough to give up smoking, just as their father had done for their mother.

"We'll find out," Dora replied, hoping that no one caught her sister's slip of the tongue. "We'll find out."
Angelo and Amadeo

Milo gave Izzy, who was obviously distressed, a sympathetic look, then did a double take. Her eyes were no longer blue but more of a moss green. He didn't say anything to her for fear of embarrassing either her or himself but he made a mental note to ask 'Deo and Angelo about it on the way home. He wondered if it had been a trick of the light that had made her eyes look blue.

While Izabella was very pretty, there was something about her sister that kept drawing his eye and he caught himself staring more than once.

"Keep staring," Dora said with a little acid in her voice, staring back at Milo pointedly, "I might do tricks."

Milo blushed but didn't back down. "I'm sorry Dora, I don't mean to stare but your eyes are amazing. I apologize if I'm staring but I've never seen that shade of green before." he said softly, looking into her eyes as he spoke.

Taken off guard, Dora blushed, that pretty pink suffusing her cheeks again. Her mouth worked slightly as she struggled to find a retort.

"Bold." she replied. She'd been trying for an affronted tone but only managed to sound pleased.

Milo smiled at her. Her eyes widened as she saw the dimples in his cheeks. She'd thought he was a good looking guy... but his dimples... she was sure that if she touched them with a finger the tip would disappear. She smiled back shyly.

The other guys exchanged quick glances, hiding smiles behind their hands. Izzy gave her sister an affectionate look. The girl drove her to distraction sometimes but it was moments like these where the sweet, vulnerable Dora shone through. She couldn't help but be a little jealous though, that Dora had made such a quick conquest.

Izzy's thoughts strayed back to Nick. If anyone had been looking right at her they'd have seen her eyes turning hazel with concern. She worried about him. She didn't know him and wondered if he would end up being like one of the boys in her old school who had taken criticism very badly and
had been caught by one of the teachers, punching himself in the head in the boy's room. He'd been transferred out eventually, but he'd been charming and fun to talk to, and Izzy had liked the boy. She hoped once again that he was doing better in whatever school he'd gone to.

The next day went rather quickly. As Amadeo had predicted the twins had no problem making friends, although the 'popular' crowd still hadn't approached them. Izzy thought that was just as well. She liked the group of people who had seemed to adopt her and her sister from the beginning. They hadn't had to pass any 'tests' or behave in any way other than the way they always did to be accepted.

Sharon, Michele and Sarah, some of the girls who had been part of the crowd at Grammarcy's the day before, met the two girls at the front door of the school, smiling and filling them in on the latest news.

Felix, who had tried to convince his parents that he could never go to school again, walked up to the group with Aiden, who kept a grip on his friend's sleeve to keep him from running in the other direction. Michele glanced up and said "Hi Aiden. Then she turned shyly toward Felix, looking at him from beneath her dark lashes and said, "Heya, Felix."

Taken off guard by the brown eyed girl's attention, Felix replied, "Ah... ah... ummm, heya... 'Chele." he murmured. He could feel a flush starting up his neck and burning his ears. The girl ducked her head to hide her own blush and turned her attention back to the girls.

"We should probably head in, don'tcha think?" she said, leading them quickly into the school, leaving the boys to follow or stand as they chose.

Felix looked inquiringly at Aiden who raised an eyebrow, one corner of his mouth quirking up in response.

Squaring his shoulders, Felix smiled and lead Aiden into the school.

September was gone and it was two weeks into October. They saw Nick in classes and the cafeteria but he hadn't spoken to or acknowledged anyone in the group or even in the school, seeming content to sit by himself at a table, apparently doing homework between bites of his lunch. He reminded Amadeo of Angelo just months before. The only difference being that at first people had
tried to join him at his table and he'd glared at them until they left. He wasn't a large boy, but the way he carried himself was intimidating and people soon stopped trying to include him.

'Deo noticed how Izzy's sparkling blue eyes would lose their sheen and change color whenever she looked at the lone boy. He found the phenomenon fascinating but it also worried him that she still felt guilty over what she'd said and done weeks before. Halloween was coming up and he didn't want the image of the lone boy at a table to detract from her enjoyment of the holiday.

He rose from the very crowded table and made his way toward the other boy. He sat down across from Nick and began to talk quietly. Nick did not look up or acknowledge that anyone was at the table with him, but Amadeo could tell from the set of his shoulders and the increased grip on his pen that he heard every word.

"Nick, you're welcome to join us at the other table if you like. You always have been and you always will be. Izzy feels badly about what she said but she can't stand the smell of cigarette... none of us can. And forgive me for being blunt, but frankly, you were acting like an ass," he continued. The other boy's gaze finally shot up to focus angrily on Amadeo, who returned Nick's direct gaze placidly.

"You don't need to be a tough guy unless that's what you are, and from what I can see, that's not the real you. You don't need to be a smart ass unless that's what you are, and again, I get the feeling that that was just an act you were putting on."

"What do you know?" Nick replied, looking down at his notebook with his pen poised but not writing anything.

"I know what it's like to be new and scared, so does Angelo, but that's a story he can tell you himself someday if you ever want to hear it."

"When I first came here I was five years old. We moved from Italy. I left my grandparents who moved back when we did," he said. "I left my aunts and uncles and cousins, all of my friends, and everything I knew. The kids here at first were pretty cruel, making fun of me and my family, our accents, refusing to let me play with them, telling me to learn English and stop speaking as though I had rocks in my mouth."

Nick glanced up, understanding, as he'd worked long and hard to tone down his New Orleans accent for the same reasons.
The fact that the boy was looking at him and that the hostility seemed to be gone from his face, Amadeo continued.

"One neighbor lady, and her husband and kids, eventually came to our door about a week after we moved in. They were carrying plates and bowls full of food. My mother nearly cried at the gesture and set the table for a party. We all had a very nice time of it. Mrs. Witt and her family thought our accents were lovely and had no problem understanding our English as we'd been speaking that nearly as often as Italian as we grew up since mom and dad had been born and raised in Pennsylvania."

"A few days later a little boy and his mother came knocking at the door, explaining that Mrs. Witt had told her that a new family had just moved in. The woman apologized for just dropping in rather than sending a letter first but she said her son was very excited when he heard that there was a boy his age just down the street and he was eager to meet me. That was Milo, and we've been close as brothers ever since."

Amadeo paused to see if Nick were going to say something. The other boy remained silent but 'Deo knew he had his full attention.

"What I'm saying Nick, is that I'm here with that plate of fried chicken. I'm knocking on your door because we're eager to get to know you," he continued, still in that quiet tone. "It's up to you whether you want to open the door or not. Now, I only want to ask you a question, and please try not to get upset with me, all right?"

Nick gave Amadeo a distrustful look but gave a curt not of his head.

"Do you smoke because you like it, or because you were trying to be tough and fit in with what you hoped would be the cool crowd?"

Nick glanced guilty down at his notebook. The boy's lack of a verbal answer was all the answer Amadeo needed.

"We may not be the cool crowd but we want to be your friends, and you're welcome to join us. That's all I wanted to say. Thanks for hearing me out," Amadeo said as he stood to leave.

"Amadeo," Nick said quietly, eyes still on his notebook.
'Deo looked the other boy expectantly.

"Are you sure the others aren't going to hate me?" he asked in a shaky voice. "For being such a jackass?"

"No one is going to hate you. Just be yourself." Amadeo reassured him. "Look, we're right there whenever you want to come over, OK?" he said, turning to leave.

"Amadeo," Nick said again.

Once again Amadeo looked at the boy and waited patiently.

"Think I can go over there now? I mean, can I go over there now... with you? I'm a little..." he trailed off.

Amadeo reached across the table and helped Nick put his books and notebook back in this satchel. "Come on, Nicholas." he joked, "Let's get you out of the freezing Tundra."

"Ugh, just Nick, please? Nicholas makes me think I'm in trouble." he smiled self consciously.

They had just reached the other table when a fight of sorts broke out between the twin sisters.

"That's enough out of you, Adorabelle!"

"You said you wouldn't call me that!" Dora shouted back.

"Adorabelle Theophilia!" Izzy said with some heat.

"If you'd been born first that would have been your name! It's hardly my fault that our parents insisted on naming me after both of our grandmothers!" Dora said, tears welling up in her eyes.
"What is Izzy's middle name?" Sharon asked, curiously.

"Abrianna," Dora said petulantly. "Izabella Abrianna. Five minutes earlier and she'd have been stuck with my name!"

"I like your name," Milo said softly, once again catching and holding Dora's gaze. "I like unusual names, besides," he said, opening a notebook and grabbing a pen from his satchel, "How'd you like this as a middle name," he continued, writing something on the paper. He turned it so that everyone could see. The name Jedrzej was printed on the paper. "Try pronouncing that!" he said with a grin.

Several of the kids made attempts, making Milo grin wider and wider at each mispronunciation. "Believe it or not, it's pronounced Yenjay. Go figure right?" he laughed. "How about you, Nick? Got any juicy secrets for us?" Milo asked the other boy, effortlessly pulling him into the group and the conversation. "What's your middle name?" he asked as Nick took a seat between him and Izzy.

"Your name is Nicholas Nicholas? That's actually kind of cool." Sharon laughed. "Very unusual."

"No, my first name is... well I try to forget it, actually." He continued, blushing a little more.

"You can't possibly think that your name is worse than Theophilia!" Dora joked.

"Don't even get me started on my middle name," Angelo said with a grin. "It took years for me to grow into mine." he laughed. "Come on, Nick, fess up, it can't be that bad."

Nick took the paper that Milo had written on and wrote a name before turning it for the crowd to see.

"Xavier! That's a great name!" said Sharon.

Nick huffed a sigh. "If you all ever come to my house you'll hear it a lot, except my folks don't pronounce it Xavier."
"How do they pronounce it? Yenjay?" Milo joked.

Nick smiled appreciatively at his new friend. "It's pronounced Zah-vee-air." he said with a grimace.

"That's so exotic!" said Michele.

"What does it mean?" asked Sarah.

Nick shook his head. "It's not nearly as exotic as it might sound."

"Oh come on! Mine means "Adored beauty," said Dora with a grin. "Ugh!"

"Mine is Benedetto, it means blessed." Angelo offered.

"My middle name is Mavis, after my grandmother," Michelle said. "But I don't know what it means."

"Mine is Priscilla," said Sarah. "Makes me think of some lady in a long gown and a bustle carrying a parasol," she laughed.

Nick chuffed a laugh. "OK, OK fine." he said as though giving in, "Just don't laugh, all right?"

"We promise," came the rejoinder.

"Xavier, no matter how you pronounce it, means 'new house','" he admitted with a grin, waiting for the laughter.

"Yours still sounds exotic," said Dora. "No one needs to know what it means. Beats Adorabella by a mile." she continued wryly. "It fits me like a circus tent." she groused.
Milo looked at her with an odd expression. "I don't think that Dora fits you either," he said thoughtfully. Before she could become angry at him he said, "Dora is kind of a hard sounding name, know what I mean? Did you ever think of calling yourself Belle, or Bella? It's French, I think, which is pretty exotic. It's softer sounding. And it means beautiful. And you are," he said with a soft smile.

Adorabella stammered for a moment. She had no idea what it was about this boy that left her speechless. To her horror, rather than 'Thank you.', which is what she intended, she said, "Mom always says it's who you are on the inside that matters. Not what you look like on the outside."

Izzy put a hand to her forehead in frustration. "Just say thank you," she whispered to her sister from behind her hand.

"Thank you," 'Bella' said, blushing.

"You're pretty when you blush," Milo said with a little smile, enjoying the game he'd just made up, and her pretty pink complexion.

"So, what were you arguing about?" Amadeo asked.

"I don't remember," said Bella, smiling at Milo who smiled back.

Bella's cheeks grew pinker as her smile grew wider and she ducked her head, trying to hide both.

While Bella and Milo flirted, Nick leaned toward Izzy and whispered, "I'm sorry, Miz Isabella, for being such a cooyon. Can you forgive me?"

Izzy looked up at the dark-haired boy and held his gaze. She had no idea what cooyon meant but she knew he was apologizing and that he was sincere.

"It's OK, Nick. It's hard being new. Dora... Bella," she corrected herself with a smile, "And I, were petrified, and at first when we saw all those guys looking at us," she said, nodding toward 'Deo and the others, "It was a bit unnerving. But they turned out to be some of the best friends we've made. I... I'm glad you decided to forgive us and come back... to forgive me, for being so rude." she said
"It wasn't you, Miz Izzy, it was all my fault. I was thinking if I acted like that the other students'd respect me. Instead, I made a jack... um... well it didn't work is all."

"We missed you all these weeks," Izzy said quietly.

"I missed you... all," he replied with a tiny smile. "Thank you for lettin' me catch that second bus."

"I'm sorry, I think I sort of figured out what cooyon meant, but you lost me with the bus." she giggled.

"Just a sayin' in N'awlins," he said, his accent accidentally coming to the forefront, "It only means if you miss one opportunity you go on out and catch another. I thank you all for lettin' me catch that bus. My dad whopped me upside the head when I told him what happened, and every day when I came home in a bad mood all mama'd say was 'God don't like ugly.' When Amadeo came over to talk to me I realized I'd been bein' just about as ugly as I could'a been, and I wasn't hurtin' anyone but myself.

Izzy said something in response but he couldn't hear over the noise of the other kids. He smiled and leaned down to whisper in her ear, "It's a gumbo ya-ya here, wanna go where it's more quiet and talk?"

Izzy grinned at the term and was just about to say yes when the bell rang for classes to resume.

"After school then, Miz Izzy? That place... Grammarcy's?" he asked with a shy smile.

"Only if you stop calling me Miz Izzy. Deal?" she asked, holding out a hand to shake.

Nick took the hand between his two and gently kissed the back of it. "Deal," he said quietly. He'd said it very quietly, but the entire table heard it, stunned into silence at the sight of the two of them somehow speaking softly in the midst of all the ruckus.

Everyone gathered up their things and scurried to get to their next class on time. Nick stopped for a
moment, watching Izzy leave. "Cher, mo l'aime toi." he whispered. (Dear, I love you so.)

Izzy blushed a little and asked, a little uncertainly, "What does that mean?" It sounded familiar to her, but she couldn't place it.

Nick tentatively brushed a stray hair from her cheek and smiled, softly, "Nothin' bad, I assure you," he replied with a soft smile.

Milo, who had heard the entire exchange, took his eyes off of Bella for a moment to appreciate her sister's happiness. Her eyes were blue. He blinked and looked again. Still blue. He resolved once again to talk to Angelo and Amadeo about it later. He hated to think he was going crazy at the age of seventeen.

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NOTES
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Catch when catch can - take it while you can get it

Chéri, je t'aime tellement - Darling, I love you so. (I think is regular French. Please don't kill me, but please feel free to send me a message and I'll happily change it.)

If You Miss One Bus Catch Another - Opportunity can knock more than once.

"N'awlins" "New Orleans"--It's faster that way!

Cooyon - Foolish; silly

God don't like ugly - Stop your negative ways!

Slang from: Creole Slang
http://www.frenchcreoles.com/Language/creoleslang/creoleslangi.htm
This address may have to be copied and pasted to work. Or maybe you'll have better luck. :D

AND~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Special thanks to:
Darrlyn A. Smith, for posting the French Creole. She is the author of "The New Orleans 7th Ward Nostalgia Dictionary 1938-1965" from which most of the "French Creole" has been taken. (some were looked up on the search bar but I don't remember the IP addresses, so to them I also say thank you.)

Adorabelle Theophilia Gauthier - Adorable/beautiful, loved by God (Thanks to JL for the name Adorabelle. If she wants me to give more
information I'll be happy to, but won't at this time for privacy reasons.)
Izabella Abrianna Gauthier - God's promise, noble
Xavier Nicholas Bouchard - Bright (new house), victorious

No Copyright infringement is intended.
Hi Folks!

Angelo and Amadeo are still thinking about their futures and making plans. Once they've told me, I'll pass it on to you.

In the meantime, I have a new couple for you, Daniel and Jonah, whom I've been asked to post, so they'll be next and I hope you'll enjoy the story.

Thank you all for reading and following my guys. Frustratingly they don't have set endings... yet... but they will come through at some point. I might have to take out the wooden spoon to get them to loosen up their tongues. LOL

Hope to see you soon on the next story. Constructive criticism is always welcome, and if you'd rather send me suggestions or criticism (please be kind), I'd be appreciative of that as well.

I'll be back. XD

Izzy and Nick were already at Grammarcy's, tucked away in a small booth in the corner, when the rest of them arrived. Nick had both of his hands surrounding Izzy's and she was smiling and blushing a pretty pink at whatever it was he was saying to her. He thought that the pink was a perfect complement to her dark hair and pale skin, the blue blouse she wore accenting the color of her eyes.

Izzy loved Nick's accent, which he allowed to come through a little more as the two of them whispered in the corner booth. She found it charming if difficult to understand at first, but he was patient and explained everything that she had trouble with. She was almost disappointed when he began dropping the accent.

"Why do you do that, Nick? I think your accent is charming." she said earnestly.

"Ah, cher, not so many here or in other places I've lived, do. N'awlins is... like another world. A colorful, exotic world filled with all sorts of people, smells and places." He laughed deprecatingly, "Some of 'em not as nice as others of course." he sighed wistfully. "But I do miss it." he continued. "I've been thinking when I'm of age and after I've got some money saved, I'll go back. At least just to visit."
"It sounds like heaven, the way you describe it. Why did you and your parents leave?"

"I was pretty much living with my Maw Maw and Paw Paw til I was eight. Then they and some of their friends died in a boating accident on Lake Borgne. No one was ever able to find the bodies. The police looked and looked, they had hounds on the shores, and boats and everything looking for them. It was thought that the current brought them out into the Gulf of Mexico and, well, if that were so there wasn't much left of em but bones after the fish... Oh! I'm sorry Miz... Izzy! I didn't mean to upset you!"

He looked into her blue eyes to see that they had turned moss green and were turning to hazel as he watched.

"Don't be sad, Izzy. It happened a long time ago, and I went to live with my parents afterward. Ma mere and pere only stayed because of Maw Maw and Paw Paw, so when they were officially declared dead we sold a lot of stuff, gave more away and packed only what we needed. We rambled around and made money by doing odd jobs. Pere is a jack of all trades, Mere does laundry and sewing, and me, I do lawn work and such to earn a few dollars. Only just recently I talked to the manager at Aerophor and he has some grunt work he thinks I can do til I turn of age and graduate, and then I can be trained so that I can work the big machines. So all's not as dark as it seems."

"What about your brothers and sisters?"

"Only two of my brothers are still to home. The others are older and they got jobs and either stayed in N'awlins or moved with us til something likely presented itself. One dropped roots in Alabama. One went to Tennessee and one went out Jacksonville way."

"What do your brothers do?"

"One, Andy, works carpentry, an' he makes furniture. Goes out into the woods and takes likely pieces of wood to turn into knick-knacks and such. He only takes stuff that fall natural like, 'cause of storms and such," he reassured her, "He don't... doesn't... chop down healthy trees. Nice sturdy pieces. He sells 'em by the roadside on Saturdays."

"The other one, Cordell, is our mechanic. You got somethin' needs fixin' he kin do it. Don' madda if it's a truck engine or a toasta, if it's broke he kin fix it." Nick said with some pride, his accent ebbing and flowing.
"Nick, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Why were my grandparents raising me?" he countered with a grin.

Izzy smiled back. "Yes," she replied.

"I was the youngest of seven kids, and there was just no room for me. Mere and pere lived in a one bedroom apartment. They slept in a bed in the living room, and they put the other kids in bunk beds three deep in the larger room. There wasn't room for even a crib, so they asked my grandparents to take me. They came over a few times a week to visit me and brought my brothers and sisters, and I knew I'd sort of been fostered out and that it hadn't been anything personal. They just couldn't afford to rent a bigger apartment, and maw maw and paw paw lived in a small house that wouldn't fit all of us any better than the apartment had."

"So they made up the attic room for me and that's where I slept. It was really nice though!" he assured Izzy at the girl's wrinkled nose. "It was cool up there in the summer and warm enough in the winter. Plus gran was a rabid knitter and crocheter... are those real words?" He laughed, "Anyway, maw maw was always making something, blankets, sweaters, scarves, gloves. I coulda lived outside in Alaska in mid-winter and been snug as a bug in a rug with nothin' but her blankets."

The waitress arrived at the table and asked if they were ready to order yet, breaking Nick's spell on Izzy, who smiled and grinned again.

"Just a burger and fries... oh, and a cherry Coke, please? Thank you," said Izzy.

"I'll have the same but may I please have a little mynez on the side?" Nick asked politely with his charming smile.

"I'm sorry, a.. a l-little what?" the waitress stammered.

"Ah... a little plate or cup with a little mynez on it, separate from the rest of the order?" Nick smiled again as he explained.

"I'm sorry, man I don't know what mynez is," she admitted, blushing uncomfortably.
It was Nick's turn to look uncomfortable. "Mynez." he looked pleadingly at Izzy for her to understand but she was equally lost.

"Catsup, mustard, mynez..." he tried again. He really couldn't understand what the problem was.

"Mayonnaise!" Izzy said happily. "Is that it, Nick?"

Nick looked back and forth between Izzy and the waitress trying to contain his irritation. "Yes'm, that's what I'd like," he said. He was a little put out that these people couldn't understand plain English. He didn't hear any difference between the way he'd said it and the way Izzy had said it and wondered for a minute if they were putting him on.

Izzy could see that Nick was upset and she put a hand over his balled up one which rested on the table. "Don't feel bad, Nick." she said quietly after the waitress left to put in their order. "Why, when I'm with the others, they're always saying things that I have to have translated, just like there're going to be some words and such that are common in Canada that no one here is going to get until I explain them. It's all good, OK?" she asked, looking earnestly into his ever so blue eyes.

He looked up from beneath his lashes and looked into her now hazel eyes, and smiled.

A jolt of electricity seemed to go through her, from the nape of her neck down to... oh my goodness, she thought. She released his hand a little too quickly, making Nick wonder what was wrong.

"Static electricity," she explained hastily, her eyes turning from hazel back to that intriguing moss green.

Nick smiled again, putting her at ease. He loved looking at Izzy, to him she was like a book, a mystery novel, and each page was more fascinating than the one before.

He loved the way her hair fell across her shoulders, the stunning way her eyes would change color with her mood. Her sister, who was undeniably pretty, was what he considered to be paper thin. Izzy had curves. She wasn't overweight, but she had the perfect figure by his way of thinking and he found it hard to keep his eyes off of her. He'd missed her in those weeks that he'd cut himself off from them so stubbornly. What a fool he'd been. How lucky he was that she and the others were forgiving sorts.
The food came and went mostly untasted, as the two of them seemed to have eyes only for each other. Izzy shy. Nick amazed and enraptured.

"This is as big a gumbo ya-ya as the cafeteria was," he said, raising his voice to be heard above the general chaos that was the normal after-school rush.

"A what?" Izzy said, not knowing what it meant. He'd said it once before but they hadn't had time for him to explain what it meant.

"Noisy," Nick responded. "Is there... Is there a place we could go to talk where it's a little quieter?"

"I know just the place, come on," Izzy said with a mischievous smile. "It's the perfect place unless someone else is there, but I doubt it."

"Dor... Bella!" she called to her sister using the still unfamiliar nickname, "We're going to the gazebo." she said, once again grateful that the guys had shown her and her sister that quiet little retreat.

"Izzy..." Bella warned.

"Just for quiet conversation!" she said in her own defense. "It's just too crowded and noisy here is all."

"Make sure you're home on time or dad'll be on you like bees on honey, Honey."

Izzy grinned, stuck out her tongue at her sister and turned to leave with Nick.

Milo noticed Bella's concerned expression. "Don't worry, they'll be fine. If it'll make you feel better we can go there in a little while and check up on them. All right?"

"All right," Bella said, relaxing just a bit. "I know Izzy won't do anything wrong, but Nick is kind of a loose cannon. I mean, he wouldn't talk to us for weeks after... well, you know. I worry about his temper."
"I think a lot of his temper had to do with fear and uncertainty, rather than him being a bad sort." Amadeo conjectured thoughtfully. "Some people just don't handle tension or stress well. My family is naturally loud, but my brother Dan used to be worse when he got nervous. The more nervous he got the louder he'd get. That was until he met his wife. How much more tense can you get than being new in a school and thinking you've blown your chance to make friends?"

"And he didn't get loud or violent, or pick fights," Angelo reminded her softly in her ear, "He did just the opposite. I really believe that Izzy is safe with him. It's a gut feeling." he said with a smile. "If we have to worry about anything with Nick it's more him running off and disappearing than anything else."

He blushed as Amadeo arched an eyebrow at him. That sparkle was in his man's eyes and the corner of his mouth was quirked up slightly. If they'd been somewhere private he'd have shown his appreciation for that look in several ways.

"Well, Cordell came out nearly as bad as I did for names." Nick continued as they walked along the path toward the gazebo. Mere and Pere.... mom and pop..."

"Don't change what you call them for me. I love the way you talk when you're not worrying about it." Izzy smiled.

"Nah, it's best if I do as the Romans do. Makes it easier to blend in." he smiled back, "That's why maw maw and... I mean grandma and grandpop never learned us French. They knew that outside of N'aw... New Orleans we'd probably never run into anyone who spoke our partic'lar brand of French, or any French for that matter, and that would make things harder. I picked up as much of the language as I could just listening to the people around me on the streets. But I'm not... what's the word?"

"Fluent?"

"Yeah, that's it, thanks. Anyway, before I forget what I was saying, our parents insisted that all of us have one Americanized name and one French name." he continued as they reached the stone gazebo and sat on the narrow ledge.

"Cordell is French, isn't it?"
"I dunno, I seemed to meet a lotta Cordells so could be, but that was his American name. His French name is Chevalier."

"Those are both nice names," Izzy replied, confused.

"Yeah, they are, but I wish my parents had done for me what they did for him and made my middle name my first name. Cordell hates Chevalier as much as I hate Xavier, but when he was in school he was only ever introduced as Cordell. Whenever I end up in a new school, no matter how many times I asked teachers and such NOT to use my given first name, they always did it anyway and boy you could hear the kids laughin' all the way down the hallway." Nick said with a grimace.

"That used to happen with Dora... I mean, Bella... I'm never going to get used to that new nickname, I don't think. She's always been Dora, Adorabelle when I'm mad at her." she laughed. "She used to take a lot of ribbing over her name until she just pretended that it didn't bother her, even trying to come up with stuff that rhymed with it. Eventually, people not only got tired of making fun of her name, they got tired of her making fun of her own name and they'd tell her to cool it every time she did it."

"We all just called her Dora at home so that's how she started to introduce herself."

"And you outing her in front of ever'one at the diner 'cause you were mad at her." Nick stated with a grin.

That pretty blush rose to Izzy's cheeks again.

"Yeah," she replied ruefully, "I'm afraid I have a bit of a temper, and instead of using my hands I use my tongue. My mother and father have had the worst time getting me to think before I talk when I'm angry." she lowered her voice and grinned, her blush becoming deeper, "You'd think after the number of times they tried to get that lesson up to my head through my backside I'd have learned it by now." she giggled self consciously.

Nick chuckled. "Now I know what to do to you if you ever blurt out my first name." he joked.

Izzy grinned wickedly, stood up and went to the doorway of the gazebo. "Nick's real first name is Zaaaaavveeeeeeaaaaiiiirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" she shouted.
"You, my little praw-leen, are gonna regret that!" Nick said with a mischievous glint in his eye and a feral grin as he got up slowly and stalked the girl, who shrieked playfully and ran to the overgrown arbor. She gently pushed aside the curtain of overgrowth and slid in, trying to control both her breathing and her laughter as she heard Nick walking to and fro outside, looking for her and calling her name.

Suddenly he went quiet. She couldn't hear his movements and he'd stopped calling her. She wondered if he'd given up and was a little put out that he'd done it so quickly. After a few more minutes of waiting inside, she gently pushed aside some of the overgrowth. He was nowhere to be seen.

In a fit of pique and prepared to give him a piece of her mind when she caught up with him she left the arbor and began to head for the edge of the park and the sidewalk to make her way home.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Nick came on silent feet and grabbed the girl around the waist.

"Now I've got you!" he exclaimed, unnecessarily but evilly and with a matching grin.

He carried her back to the gazebo, sat down and put her on his lap. Instead of spanking her as she'd thought he was about to do, he began to tickle her. Strong arms surrounded her and she had very little wiggle room. She kicked her feet in an attempt to get loose but he captured hers under one of his and continued to tickle.

She was about to holler when he covered her mouth with his and kissed her, deeply and thoroughly.

She stopped squirming.

He released her with one arm and put a gentle, loving hand up to her cheek and kissed her again, fully expecting the girl to haul off and slap his face so hard his ears would ring for a week.

She tentatively kissed him back. She knew she should be outraged. She knew she should be angry. She knew she should be insulted and defend her modesty. She knew she should tell him off and insist that she wasn't that kind of girl. But she didn't feel like it just now.
She liked the feeling of his arm around her. She liked the feel of his warm hand on her cheek. She liked the feeling of his thighs under hers, a firm foundation. She liked the feeling of electricity that was running up and down her body from her head to her heels.

They broke the kiss.

"What was that?" she gasped softly.

"Just think of it as a lagniappe. Sugar for my sugar," he said softly. "You are mine, aren't you, Izzy?" he asked in that same soft voice, blue eyes looking into hers.

Somewhat breathlessly but firmly she replied, "I'm yours, Nick, and you're mine. But I want you to know right off that I'm a decent girl... I'm not..." she hesitated, unable to say the words.

"I know you are. We won't go any faster than you're comfortable with. All right?" he said, entranced by sparkling, ocean blue eyes. "As long as I can call you mine, that's all I need," he said gently, bending his head down to capture her soft lips in another kiss.

Milo and Bella turned quietly and left, grinning at each other and looking for their own quiet place 'to talk.'

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NOTE

N'awlins Slang from the Cajun Dictionary

"N'awlins" "New Orleans"--It's faster that way!

Creole - Descendents of French, Spanish, and Caribbean slaves and natives; has also come to mean any person whose ancestry derives from the Caribbean's mixed nationalities.

Gumbo Ya-Ya - Translated: everybody talking all at once; i.e., at a loud party.

"It don' madda" - Translated: "It doesn't matter."

Lagniappe (lan' yap) - Something extra that you didn't pay for--thrown in to sweeten the deal--like a baker's dozen.

MY-Nez - Translated: "mayonnaise"

Praline (praw-leen)
a candy patty made of sugar, cream, and pecans.

End Notes

I hope you enjoyed these characters as much as I've enjoyed creating them. Constructive criticism is welcome. Flames will be stomped out. My Italian is extremely rusty and was in dialect to begin with, which might have made it difficult to understand. All Italian words and phrases have been shamelessly taken from Google Translate, so if anyone who speaks Italian sees any glaring mistakes, please feel free to contact me and I'll fix them.

Thank you all.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!