



## Johnny Came Home

by Tony Breeden

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Excerpt: Chapter 3 – Casting Stones

Sitting on the still warm hood of the Plymouth, Weasel Hopkins stared at Johnny in the most rude expression of disgusted disbelief he could muster. His cigarette hung precariously from the corner of his mouth. Though the stinging smoke curled irreverently into his left eye, he maintained the posture for effect's sake.

Johnny held his gaze with those unshakably cool grey eyes. He waited until the cigarette smoke forced his friend to blink.

"Are you in? Or not?" Johnny asked finally, taking advantage of the others loss of face to push his point.

Weasel wasn't ready to concede a Fool's Mate. "No, no. Let's think this out a bit, shall we?" the other retorted. "You want to break into your old house - a house you burnt down, mind you! And, by the way, does anyone *else* know you're an arsonist?"

Johnny picked up a rock and casually turned toward the river, feigning nonchalance. "No," he lied. "Everybody thinks I'm dead." He attempted to skip the stone across the waters. Plunk! Too bulky. He cast about for something more suitable.

"Yeah, what's up with that exactly?" Weasel growled. "No offense, buddy, but... you just burn your house down and what? Let everyone think you went up with it? You let them live with that while you just went off-"

"Nobody cared, alright," Johnny snapped, rounding on his friend. He glared at Weasel, letting his anger and past resentment channel into a single moment. They never really cared about him. He knew that now. He was different and they hated him for it. He was their albatross. It wasn't until after the fire that he realized why they hated him. You hate what you fear. He blinked away the past, forcing himself to regain control. The ice shield slipped back over his eyes. "Just trust me on that one."

The other boy looked at him with a mixture of empathy and consternation. "Fine. I'm sure you had a perfectly good reason for burning down your house. Some of us would've liked to have had a big house to burn down. Burning down a real nice trailer home just doesn't have the same ring to it..."

Johnny snorted at the others sarcasm, trying to suppress a grin. He flicked a rock towards the river. It skipped twice and dove beneath the surface. Encouraged by his success, he looked around for a better stone to throw.

"But if nobody cared, why come back at all?" Weasel pressed. "And this better not have anything to do with that fortune teller you saw last night, dude," he threatened.

Johnny sighed, picked up a rock hastily and gave it a heave. Plunk! He answered without looking at his friend. "It's hard to explain. You didn't grow up here."

"Is this gonna be a poor little rich kid sob story?" the other groaned.

"What?! I wasn't rich!"

"Johnny. C'mon," Weasel scoffed. "Even burnt to a crisp, your house is ten times better than my family's trailer, dude. I mean, we just left your old 'hood, Johnny. I saw your rich, white bread street with your nice big houses and cute little picket fences. I just saw it with my own eyes."

"I wasn't rich," the other said quietly, firmly.

Weasel gauged his friend's mood, then sneeringly conceded. "Fine. Upper middle class then. That sound better to you?"

"You're impossible," Johnny snarled, picking up another stone. He chose more carefully this time.

"-says the man who burned down his house and left everyone thinking he was dead. And now here you are returning to the scene of the crime. On Halloween night," the other laughed. "But I'm impossible, right? OK. Freak."

His comment caught Johnny in mid-throw. Plunk! Johnny glared after a perfect skipping stone wasted.

"And you still haven't even told me what's so all-fired important that you - we! -need to break into your old house anyway!" Weasel protested.

"There's something I left. It might still be there."

"Or not," his friend pointed out.

"It has to be there. It might be the key to everything. I dunno. It's hard to explain," he brooded.

"So try me!" Weasel exclaimed, exasperated. "Use little words if you have to, but at least tell your best friend - your future accessory to breaking and entering, for crying out loud! - what the devil is going on."

"No. No," Johnny replied, shaking his head. "First, it's my house, so it's not breaking and entering. It's not even trespassing. Not really. Second, the less you know, the better."

"You suck! Why am I here?" Weasel snapped angrily. "Why am I doing this for somebody who won't even tell me why? Am I just stupid? That it? I'm stupid to you, Johnny? What? You need somebody to take the fall or something?"

"No, it's not like that," Johnny snapped back. "You're being an idiot."

"Oh! Even better! I'm not stupid ...I'm just being an idiot."

Johnny shot his friend a long, smoldering glare. Weasel held his gaze for as long as he could. When he could take it no longer, he flicked his cigarette into the river and hopped off the hood of the Plymouth. The K-car's hood buckled back into shape with a metallic snap. "Fine. Be that way. You wanna shut me out? You got it. I'll leave you alone with your thoughts," he growled coldly. He started walking down the river bank, out of the shadow of the bridge.

"Wait."

Weasel stopped, but didn't look back. "What?"

"You really wanna know what's going on?"

Weasel turned around. He nodded his head theatrically, his eyes full of scorn.

"You sure?"

Weasel's eyes bulged at the audacity of the question. "Yes," he managed through clenched teeth, making a sour face projecting the fact that he thought the answer should be fairly obvious.

"Because knowledge has consequences, you know. Once you know, you're in. There's no turning back. You can't un-learn it. You can't go back and change your mind. You can't pretend you don't know. My enemies become your enemies," he warned gravely. "And I know things that people will kill for. And once they find out I've told you-"

"Stop! I get it!" Weasel interrupted. "Just.. shut up already. Are you like a spy or something?" he scoffed. He immediately dismissed the idea. "A teen spy. This isn't a movie. What am I talking about?" He glared at Johnny. "Look, I'm in. Whatever. You didn't kill anybody, did you?" he asked suspiciously.

"No. Well, not on purpose," he waffled.

Weasel shot him a look of stunned horror. "Care to elaborate on that statement, Mr. Closet Serial Killer?" he prodded slowly, carefully taking a few steps backward.

"I'm not a killer. It was an accident. Self-defense. I didn't know what I was doing," he explained. He knew he was explaining badly and making himself look like a lying criminal in the process, but he honestly wasn't sure how much he should tell. His enemies had ways of getting information out of you. He'd evaded them for the last few years by being very careful. He'd never shared what he knew with anyone. He'd even been careful not to try to find out anything else about it. Internet searches, your library check-outs, purchases... they could track you down through any of that stuff.

But he needed Weasel's help. He needed someone he could trust to watch his back. Trust works both ways, he realized.

"Look, there's only one way to do this. Come back over here. I'll show you," Johnny promised.

"You're gonna kill me, aren't you?" his friend asked, his voice quivering a bit.

"No!" Johnny scoffed, nearly laughing out loud. "Dude, you're paranoid."

"Is there not a cause?" Weasel noted pointedly.

"Get over here, you coward," Johnny grinned with a wink. "I'm not gonna kill you."

"Why don't you just tell me right there where you are?" the other suggested, unconvinced.

"Because you won't believe me. You'll think I'm crazy."

"So it gets worse?" Weasel asked rhetorically.

"That's not what I mean. Look, just trust me for a second."

"Trust.. trust you? Um, OK. Let's see. Trying. Reaching down deep..." Weasel intoned mock seriously. "And surprise! I got nothing. Seriously? I need a good friggin' reason to trust you at this point, Johnny. Anybody would! You got something to tell me or... or show me... you do it from over there!" His fear and confusion were tangible, cracking his voice at the end of his protest.

Johnny realized that they'd reached an impasse.

"Fine. We'll do it like this," he sighed. "Pick up that rock. The big one right there," he offered, pointing.

"OK. And do what with it?" Weasel balked.

"You wanna know what's going on or not?"

"Honestly?" Weasel admitted, licking his lips. "I'm not so sure anymore." Noting Johnny's instant exasperation, he hastily added, "But since I'm pretty sure you'll hunt me down and kill me at this point anyway... *Accidentally*, mind you. Self-defense," he conceded mock seriously. Nonetheless, he bent down and picked up the stone. It was pretty heavy and as big as his head. He took some small comfort in the knowledge that he could bludgeon Johnny with it, if it came to that. "OK. Now what?"

"Skip it across the river," the other suggested impossibly.

"Are you kidding me with this?"

"Just try it."

"You seriously think I can skip this big chunk of rock... at all?"

"Trust me," Johnny reminded him. "What have you got to lose?"

Weasel hesitated, for in the back of his mind he could think of only one thing he would lose for the attempt: a potential weapon. Curiosity, for all it suffered the cat, got the best of him. "Fine. I gotta know how this ends," he agreed. Whirling around, he heaved the rock clumsily in his best imitation of a discus thrower. He let it fly, but he knew from the moment it left his hands that not only would it not skip across the river - his weak toss wasn't even gonna reach the water!

It landed with a slightly gross shunk on the muddy bank of the river. Weasel stared at it expectantly. Nothing happened. He realized in a panic that this would make the perfect opportunity for an ambush. He peered back at Johnny, fearing the worst.

Johnny was grinning at him wryly.

"OK," Weasel asked hotly, sure that he was somehow being made a fool of, "what exactly was that suppose to prove?"

"What did you think was going to happen?" Johnny snickered.

"I don't know. Nothing! Granted, I thought I would at least get it in the water... but did I think it was actually gonna skip across the river? Well, no! If that's what you're asking."

"Let me try," Johnny suggested confidently.

"Dude, you couldn't even skip some of the little ones," Weasel protested.

"Then there's no harm if I try," he pointed out. He began walking toward Weasel's rock, but stopped when his friend startled.

"Um, get your own friggin' rock, if you don't mind, buddy," Weasel demanded warily.

Johnny sighed heavily, but nodded assent and found a comparably-sized rock nearby. He glanced at his friend, asking, "Ready?" though he was sure he had his full attention. Then in his best imitation of Weasel as a discus thrower, he whirled about and let fly.

Weasel stared transfixed as the stone skipped perfectly and impossibly across the river. At the other bank, it bounded out of the water and crashed into some bushes. "I – I don't believe it!" he breathed, blinking furiously in an effort to assimilate what he'd just witnessed. "I mean, I saw it, but... That's impossible! How? I mean.."

He sputtered to a stop, turning to John Lazarus with a mixture of fear and curiosity, confusion and amazement. Johnny had this wickedly smug look spread across his whole face. Instead of answering Weasel, he pointed to the rock his friend had attempted to skip. The cabbage-sized stone levitated off the ground and hovered at eye level before them. While his friend gaped in awed disbelief, he sent it spinning, faster and faster, then let fly. This rock too skipped across the river to land on the far bank near the other one.

Weasel was rendered speechless. He finally managed a shuddering breathless "How?"

"Let's drive," Johnny grinned. "We have some shopping to do. I'll tell you on the way."

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