

When feelings run this deep, tragedy is waiting in the wings

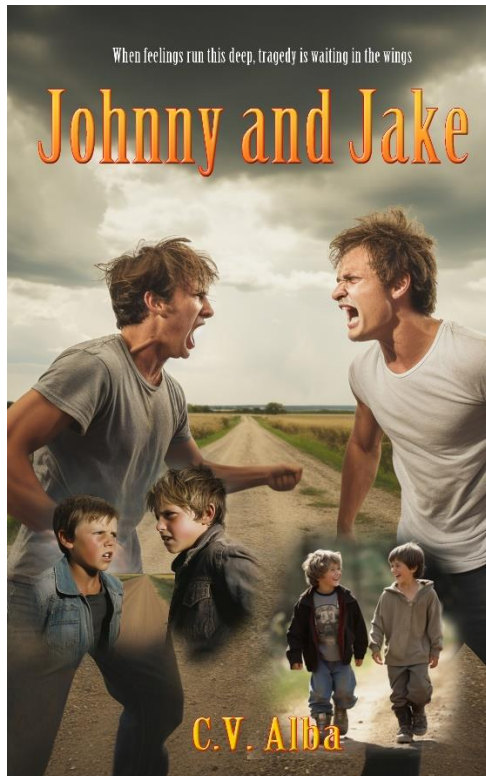
Johnny and Jake



C.V. Alba

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A chance encounter ramps up a long-standing feud between two brothers.

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When feelings run this deep, tragedy is waiting in the wings.

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Johnny and Jake

The sun threw diminutive shadows across the parking lot from overhead, casting light that seemed to merge with the white-blue sky. The hot August air, suffused with moisture, wrapped sticky fingers around Johnny. He leaned against a battered pick-up truck, arm on the roof of its cab, head lowered in an attempt at privacy. A cell phone nestled in the space between his head and shoulder. He held it close and hissed into the metallic case.

“You heard right, Jake. No one does that to my truck and gets away with it. I know you done it so stop saying you didn’t.” He straightened up and slapped the truck cab for emphasis. Across the tarmac, Johnny saw the young waitress emerge from the Diner on her break. He invited her over with a wave of his hand and disconnected the phone with the other.

“I swear, he’d drive me to Jesus if I was anywhere close,” Johnny said with a chuckle of bravado as she approached. It masked the anger that welled up in waves, battering his temples until they throbbed. The waitress, ash-blonde hair tugged into a black velvet ribbon, smiled at him from under long lashes heavy with mascara. Her name tag introduced her as Lucy.

“Who’re you so mad at, Johnny?” she asked, eyes on the Bic she was using to light her cigarette.

“Look what he done to my truck.” Johnny snarled. Lucy followed his eyes to the white streak running like a lightning bolt across the paint of the cab. “Since we was kids, it’s been like that, him trashin’ me, blamin’ me. . .” Johnny’s voice trailed off. Something about Lucy reminded him of Alice. Maybe it was the way she tilted her head when she listened, as if to ward off any passing distraction, making him the only being in her universe.

“I keep trying to make it up,” he continued, “but it don’t seem like he’s interested. Too bad ‘cause one day one of us is going to get hurt.” He shook his head to emphasize the words. “But it won’t be because of me.”

He drank the last of the warm soda and tossed it toward the open, battered waste can on the bottom step of the entrance to the Stop and Eat Diner. He noticed the puzzled look in Lucy’s eyes.

“It don’t matter,” he smiled at her, cutting off her question.

She shrugged. “Oh, well, better go,” she said, tilting her head in that way. He thought of Alice again. She looked up at him from under the long lashes and turned away, blue eyes going green in the changing light. The imprint of her gaze lingered as she drifted back to the restaurant on lean, tanned legs that ended at the hem of short white cut-offs.

He watched her slow climb up the steps to the Diner’s entrance. At the top, her head, then her back and hips slipped into the cool shade of the overhang ahead of the stunted shadow that had followed her since she left Johnny’s side. Johnny waited until he was calm and quiet as if she’d never been there.

Johnny and Jake still saw each other some. Everyone thought the rivalry and anger was forgotten, the way they greeted each other, slapped backs and traded jokes. But Johnny had never forgotten and he was sure Jake hadn’t either. Last thing he’d heard was Jake had got married again.

Johnny got into his truck, waved the flies off the empty drink cans littering the seat beside him and swore again to fix the air conditioning as he slammed the door and headed down the highway. Just off the interstate he pulled onto a patch of dirt and gravel that passed for a parking lot in front of the Drive-Bye, the local one-stop shop for camouflage, padded vests, ammunition, night vision goggles and everything else for hunting, fishing or just wanting. Outside the Drive-Bye the blue and white police car was parked like it often was on Friday afternoons, its interior empty, roasting like all the other metal roadrunners in the heat of an unshaded parking lot. The driver sat on the steps with a soda can in her hand, a visored hat beside her.

“Hey, Sarah,” he said, hiding the smile inside. From some tucked away memory came the image of one of Alice’s porcelain dolls. A doll with pale gold hair and deep blue eyes tucked in an adult’s dark blue police uniform. He thought of Lucy and wondered if Sarah wore cut-offs.

“Catch any bad guys today?” He put one booted foot on the step next to her and an elbow on its knee while he dangled sunglasses and slipped his keys in a hip pocket with the other hand.

“Nope,” she said, smiling up at him. “Quiet out there today. Must be the heat. How about you, Johnny? How’s that fella you been telling me about? Jake, isn’t it?”

“Same ol’,” he answered, unable to keep the anger from creeping into his voice. “Keyed my truck last night. Sonofabitch must have sneaked up, give the dog somethin’.”

“You sure? Did you see him do it?”

“Didn’t have to. But it’s Jake, it’s something he’d do.” The conviction in his voice was like a rock, flinty, hard and unshakable. Sarah raised an eyebrow and took a sip of soda.

“What are you going to do?” She asked.

“Get even,” he chuckled and smiled wider, “I got a plan.” He glanced up at the sun. “It’s something he’ll never expect.”

“You better not do anything too nasty,” she smiled back. “I’ll have to take you in.”

“Don’t worry little lady. I’m just having fun.”

“Why not file a police report? From what you’ve been telling me you’re not close like you once were. You don’t even see each other but once in a while. Why not let us take care of him?”

Johnny scratched behind one ear and thought about the question. After all these years it was so clear to him but so hard to explain. At last he said, “That’s not the way to settle this. See, it ain’t so much what he’s done to me but what he thinks I’ve done. To him.”

Sarah squinted up at him against the sun’s late afternoon glare, a puzzlement etching lines across her brow.

“What’s he think you’ve done to him?” she asked.

Johnny scratched behind the other ear and thought again. He considered who she was and how long they’d been talking off and on. Guess they’d known each other a while and he wouldn’t be telling her anything she couldn’t find out from someone else.

“He thinks I run off this girl he liked once.”

“If you did that, she couldn’t have liked him that much,” said Sarah.

“Well, I guess she was more than a girlfriend.”

“More than a girlfriend?”

“They’d got hitched a couple of weeks before.”

“They were married?” She shifted her weight to the other hip and stretched a long uniformed leg down the steps to work out the kinks. “And you ran her off?”

“I didn’t say that. I said he thinks I ran her off. Truth is, I don’t know what happened. She just left one day without saying anything to him and he blames me.”

“She just disappeared? Did Jake contact the police?”

“Yeah, eventually,” he answered. “They said she was an adult and could go anywhere, anytime she wanted. They looked for her for a while, but never found anything, at least nothing suspicious if you know what I mean. I never heard if anything came of it.”

Sarah stretched her back against the steps and lifted both elbows to the step at her shoulder blades. Johnny watched her feline maneuvers and felt a stirring in his groin. Her lips shone in the sunlight where she’d licked them. Alice’s had shone like that.

“Poor guy,” Sarah said. “Guess he’s stuck with a marriage and no wife.”

Johnny laughed a rough guffaw and looked to Sarah as to a fellow conspirator. The unexpected coldness in Sarah's blue eyes surprised him and he swallowed the rest of his laughter. She smiled at once in her warm, engaging way, confusing him.

"Not exactly," he said with a shrug of his shoulder. "Guess you can declare someone dead after a while or get a divorce or something. Anyway, he just got married again from what I hear."

"Really? Maybe he's a bigamist."

"A what?"

"Someone who marries again without getting a divorce first."

"Oh. Yeah. No. Jake'd never do that. He's funny that way."

Sarah raised both eyebrows and nodded her head in appreciation of Jake's apparent honorable treatment of the institution of marriage. The sun dropped lower in the sky and painted the trees a brilliant pattern of red and gold. Against the green foliage, the image of a forest on fire burned against the deepening dark blue sky. Sarah picked up her hat and tossed the soda can into a trash bin and a grin at Johnny.

"Guess I'll be going. Don't do anything I wouldn't." She winked.

"No, ma'am." Johnny tipped his baseball cap in her direction and watched her cross the gravel lot to the blue and white squad car. Small stones and dust rose in her wake as the car spun onto the highway and she was gone.

Johnny went into the Drive-Bye and bought a case of bullets for his favorite rifle and re-emerged into the fading sunlight. He slid into the seat of the pick-up, ignoring the rip in the upholstery that split a little more every time he sat on it. The brakes squealed and loose bolts rattled in the back as he maneuvered his way out of the Drive-Bye's lot. Time for a bite to eat and a visit to Aunt Connie's. The old lady was so grateful when he showed up. She believed in him, had done ever since he and Jake, abandoned by a mother too thirsty for alcohol to care for them, had moved in years before. Now that she couldn't get out he never forgot to come by once a week. He owed her that much.

By the time he reached Connie's the sun had set and the only light was cast by a three-quarter moon. He marveled once again at the all-encompassing, vibrant charcoal gray darkness, interrupted here and there by the black on black of tree trunks or the quick, bright dots of an animal's eyes. A half-mile

down the narrow country road Johnny watched the house emerge from the darkness, first spotlights of yellow here and there, then the more defined square shape of the parlor and dining room windows.

The old house, showing the strain of rising costs on a limited budget, stood decrepit and sagging at the end of the long, narrow lane. From his daylight visits, he knew the shutters, put up to decorate rather than to protect, were gray with age and more than one hung awry. Downspouts and gutters pulled away from their moorings, giving the old house a disheveled appearance as if it had been thrown together from leftover bits and pieces. The owner had turned the place into an extended care facility for his own mother at first, then for others. He put what profits there were into ramps, railings and bathroom renovations for the handicapped. A labor of love and perhaps obsession rather than a business venture. Johnny figured he couldn't make much charging what he did.

No lights were on upstairs although he knew that's where she would be. He tipped his cap to the night aide and climbed the winding staircase to the second floor. Pale roses drifted past him, vague reminders of the vibrant wallpaper that had once embellished the walls. Beneath his feet the faded runner shifted at each step. He made a mental note to mention it to the head nurse. Connie could fall. It occurred to him that that could be the best ending for them all, then pushed it to the back of his mind. He owed her too much and she was loyal. She believed in him.

"Aunt Connie?" He tapped lightly on her door and pushed it open.

"Johnny?" The query came from the other side of a high-backed armchair. "I didn't hear you, I must have been dozing."

"It's me," he said, "can I turn on the light?"

"Of course," she said, "I didn't realize it had gotten dark."

He crossed the room as she turned sightless eyes in his direction. Bending down, he kissed the forehead below snow-white hair then sat in the chair facing her. Dwarfed by the overstuffed armchair, Aunt Connie sat against a pillow with her tiny, slippered feet propped up on a small stool. The intricate embroidery on the stool's upholstery had been completed when she was a young girl. Johnny knew it was a prized possession, one she occasionally pointed out, proud to show off her skill.

"How are you?" He asked, crossing one foot over the other knee.

"Why just fine, Johnny. That new girl they been sending to read to me, Susan, is such a dear. She gets me to talking about the old days. I do love to remember."

Johnny felt a coldness creep under his skin and tiny dots of sweat dampened his T-shirt. He struggled to keep his tone of voice even. "Remember what, Aunt Connie?"

“Oh, the times when you and Jake were little and used to chase each other through the house. You were always together back then and I did so love to watch you. Almost twins, that’s what you were. Just a year apart, drove your momma crazy sometimes. Jake might have been older, but you were bigger. I never was sure which one of you looked after the other more.”

Johnny breathed easier. Her memory was unpredictable, but this was safe enough.

“I’m glad they found someone to read to you, Aunt Connie. You getting’ any better with the braille?”

“Some. I don’t guess I’ll ever be real good at it though. Just too old I reckon.”

“Well, you keep at it and you’ll be surprised at how good you can get.”

“Maybe.” She shifted in her chair and leaned toward his voice. “Johnny, you ever see Jake these days?”

“Not much, Aunt Connie. You know that.”

“I know. I was just hoping, before I pass on, that you two could make up. You shouldn’t let a woman like Alice come between you. Family’s what matters. It’s all you got in the end.”

“Yeah, I know.” Johnny took a deep breath and continued, “Aunt Connie, you shouldn’t wear it. You know that.”

She didn’t answer him at first but twisted the heavy gold band around her finger in that nervous gesture he’d come to know so well.

“I can’t see what it hurts, Johnny. No one here knows where it came from.”

“Jake knows.”

“He’s not coming here, Johnny”

“Maybe, maybe not. Anyhow, it’d be safer.”

“I’ll think about it. You just work on making up with Jake.”

“Well, could happen I guess.”

The old lady smiled in his direction and settled back in her chair. “That’s right, keep working on it Johnny. He’ll come around. Now tell me what you’ve been up to.”

They talked for half an hour but later Johnny couldn’t remember what they said. He didn’t tell her about the truck. Not that he couldn’t trust her, but lately she’d been trying to make it seem those things didn’t matter. It was well past 10:00 pm when Johnny left as the aide came to put Aunt Connie to bed. The deepening blackness of the night sheltered him from the memories stirred by the visit. What would she tell Susan next? From the back of his mind the fear that had settled there crept forward like a cold, rain-soaked fog until he shivered in the waning heat of the night air.

In the weeks that followed Johnny found the years rolling back in his dreams as though his childhood and ensuing years with Aunt Connie had happened just a few months ago. Jake had grown up alongside him, laughed with him, played jokes others didn't understand. In time they went separate ways. Then they met Alice. Beautiful Alice with hair that impossible shade between neon red and auburn, skin the color and texture of cream and a sparkle that drew them all into her world where everything was possible and nothing so bad it couldn't come right. That tilt of her head, the lilting laughter when he said something funny, those deep green eyes. What she saw in Jake he never understood. But Aunt Connie did. Meal ticket she said. But Johnny knew Alice could get any man she wanted, and she wanted Jake. At least she wanted Jake until he got that truck-driving job and wasn't around so much. He remembered the beer and the cigarettes and the late night card games with Alice and Aunt Connie waiting for Jake to roll in. When he rolled in that last night, it was too late. It was never the same between them after that night. He wondered if it ever would be again.

He was at the Drive Bye practicing in the gravel pit when the bleached blonde found him. It was urgent, she said, someone on the phone for him. He stared at her while sweat broke out under the wave of fear that rolled through him. On the counter the receiver lay off the hook, interrupted in relaying its message. Hands shaking, Johnny forced himself to pick it up and whisper, "Hello?"

"Come immediately," the nurse said. *No*, she couldn't tell him more over the telephone, *just come as quickly as possible*.

It seemed to take an eternity to cross the parking lot to his truck and longer for others to clear the lane leading to the entrance. Once out of the Drive-Bye, he stepped on the gas, heart racing as fast as the tires. The old house had never seemed so far away and rush hour had never started this early. Off the interstate he was swallowed by the quiet, tree-lined lane leading up to the old house. The dust rolled away in swells behind him and the only sound was the crunch of his tires on the partially paved road. He became convinced that he would find her safe and sound at the end of the drive.

At the front of the old house the illusion was shattered by the sight of the ambulance, its engine running, lights flashing and radio muttering in the empty cab. The steps felt heavy under his feet, as if

they were sucking him down with each upward step. Somehow he was sure there was no time to waste. At the top of the landing he saw the day nurse's aide, her back to the hall, a tissue touched her cheek.

"Carol," he half whispered. She turned, then reached out, taking his arm.

"Oh, Johnny, why is it always such a surprise?"

Past her, across the room, a uniformed ambulance attendant knelt at the edge of Aunt Connie's chair. The frothy cirrus cloud of her hair lay beyond the chair's fabric skirt. One translucent ringless hand rested on the carpet. The other lay on her chest near the ruffled collar of her gown. Tiny slipped feet emerged from the other side of the overstuffed chair. The room beyond the threshold seemed distant from his reality, somehow connected but not really part of it. And he knew what had happened. After all these years Jake had come for a visit.

"How did it happen?" he asked. "When did he come?"

"Who?" Carol looked puzzled. "The ambulance arrived just before you did," she said, trying to help him, to answer his questions. "But it was too late. Johnny, it was just too much for her."

"What was too much?"

"The dose. It was double strength. Johnny, didn't they tell you?"

"They don't have to. I know what happened." He turned and raced down the hall, ignoring Carol's pleas to listen, to hear the whole story. Later. He would listen later, after it was all over. For now, there was too much to do. It was ironic that Jake had provided him with the perfect set-up. He was well supplied from his trip to the Drive-Bye and Jake, predictable Jake, would walk into his cross hairs at just the right time. He stopped by the trailer to pick-up supplies, then grabbed a hamburger at the local Stop and Eat. Closer to his target he'd find a bar and a beer if there was time to spare, time to focus and get himself mentally prepared. The trip down Route 1 was uneventful. Everything was going according to plan.

A late night summer storm accompanied Johnny all the way in from the trailer park, echoing his fury in wild bursts of wind and rain. By the time he arrived, the storm had passed. Puddles of water on the street and parking lot reflected the light from a full moon whenever it appeared from behind the drifting clouds. Buildings and trees, wet with rain, shone an iridescent black. Across the parking lot, behind the transparent panes of a large picture window Jake sat hunched over papers at an old wooden desk. The overhead light illuminated the office as if it were a stage. Conscientious Jake, always worked late on Thursdays so he could take off early on Friday. He would have to work extra late tonight to make up for his visit to Aunt Connie.

Johnny was inside the enclosure he had installed over the back of his pick-up. The canopy had been pried off leaving an open truck bed surrounded by sides that, though ragged at the top, concealed all activity within. The streetlight shone from above, lighting the interior with a soft glow. The polished wood and metal of the gun's barrel and trigger reflected light that rollicked along the rifle as Johnny fit the pieces into place.

He paused and looked up to assess the angle of trajectory. The break in the tree branches was there. That made the plan possible, but the angle was not good, in fact it was barely adequate but it would get no better and he could not wait any longer. Jake moved, catching Johnny's eye across the expanse of parking lot. Time was growing short.

On the ledge inside the truck's enclosure Johnny loaded the rifle and rested it on an indentation in the truck's sidewall. The view through the scope focused on the head beyond the glass, now still against the back of the chair. The target wasn't as big as some four-legged creatures he'd hunted with hardware half the caliber. But this way it was a sure thing. He lined up the target, a round silhouette against a square against a bigger square.

In the truck the only movement was the imperceptible tightening of Johnny's finger against the trigger. The explosive crack rippled through the night, reverberating sharply against the darkened, empty buildings. Johnny lowered the gun and peered through the trees. A thin smile of satisfaction lit his face. It stayed there as he gathered the spent shell and extra bullets, stepped down from the truck bed, shut the back and started the engine. Before the echo of his shot had faded, it was obscured by the rattle of Johnny's pick-up truck as it disappeared around the corner and down the street.

The trailer park was quiet when Johnny pulled in. He slipped out of the cab and headed up the steps. He would have to clean his rifle before he went to bed. The thin smile appeared again.

At the top of the step, under the small aluminum canopy he paused, listening to the sound of footsteps coming his way. The crunch of gravel under foot grew more precise as they rounded the corner. They stopped as if considering which direction to take.

"Hello Johnny. You're out pretty late, aren't you?"

He was aware of standing under the glare of the bulb protruding from the top of the canopy while all else around him was steeped in blackness. The voice, but it couldn't be.

"Sarah?" He said as he started to step down.

"Stay where you are!" He heard the unmistakable cluck-cluck of the Glock's hammer being set and stayed where he was.

“Aw, you don’t mean that. Why are you doing this?” He asked, coaxing her forward with a playful tone in his voice.

“At least two good reasons.” She replied. He heard her plant her feet and knew the gun was pointed at him. “He’s dead. But you know that, don’t you, Johnny?”

“Who’s dead? Who are you talking about?” Fresh sweat rolled down his back and he could feel his stomach tie itself in knots.

“You mean you don’t know who that was working late? You just parked at 2130 Old Town Road around 12:30, perched that gun on the top wall of that pick-up and pulled the trigger because it was a kick to see if you could do it? Gotta admit, you’re a good shot, Johnny. Jake never had a chance, you son-of-a-bitch.”

“Wait. You got it all wrong. It wasn’t me.”

“Try that with your lawyer, Johnny. I was there, watching. I thought you might go there after leaving Aunt Connie’s, but I damn sure didn’t know *what* you’d do. I wish the hell I had.”

He heard the sob she choked back, filled with regret and bitterness. How did she know and why did she care what happened to Jake?

As if reading his mind, she continued, “Wondering how I knew that? Jake was my husband, Johnny. You should have come to the wedding.”

Johnny froze, his head reeling. “*You’re* Jake’s new wife? Nah, can’t be. No one told me she, you, was a cop.”

“Too bad. By the time we got married I’d heard enough of the family history to get curious. Being a cop gets you that way. Then I got that job reading to Aunt Connie and it all fell into place. Such a sweet old lady, your Aunt Connie.”

“Susan, you’re Susan too?”

“It’s funny how people get when they think their time is coming. She told me everything. Made me promise not to breathe a word to her Johnny. When I didn’t believe her, she showed me the ring. Remember the ring, Johnny? Belonged to her mother didn’t it? Jake gave it to his first wife. Aunt Connie couldn’t let it be buried with Alice so she kept it. She gave it to me to show Jake. She said he’ll confirm it. Then she told me where to look for the body.”

Johnny heard it all as if in a daze. Then it seemed to make sense.

“You killed her!” He screamed. “You, not Jake!” He raised the rifle and lunged forward down the steps. A shot rang out, piercing the metal skin of the trailer behind him and he scrambled to a stop.

“Next time I won’t miss,” Sarah said. “My backup will be here soon, Johnny. So stay where you are unless you want me to show you how good a shot I am. I didn’t kill Aunt Connie. She killed herself. One of those pills was pretty potent and she figured out how much it would take. Her doctor said she’d been asking questions about it for several months and he’d begun to get suspicious. But you didn’t stick around long enough to hear that, did you?”

Johnny stared at Sarah in confusion. Aunt Connie killed herself? Without telling him what she was planning to do? How could she betray him like that? All the years he had cared for her, covered up for her, confided in her, gone out to that rat-trap place to sit and listen to her stupid twaddle.

Johnny crumbled where he was. “How do I know you heard all that from Aunt Connie? You’re just making that up.”

“Want to see the ring, Johnny?”

Johnny’s head snapped up and he searched for her in the blackness.

“The inscription reads “John Lynwood to Ruby, My Love”. That’s a hard one to guess, wouldn’t you say.”

Johnny groaned and dropped his head.

“You and Aunt Connie never did like Alice, did you?”

“She was a cheap gold digger.” He spat it out. “Little slut who got Jake with those green eyes and sex. Wasn’t anything else to her.”

“The real catch is you wanted her, didn’t you? But Jake got her. And one night, when Jake was late getting back, you argued and one of you killed her. You buried her and told Jake she’d run off. That’s right, isn’t it Johnny?”

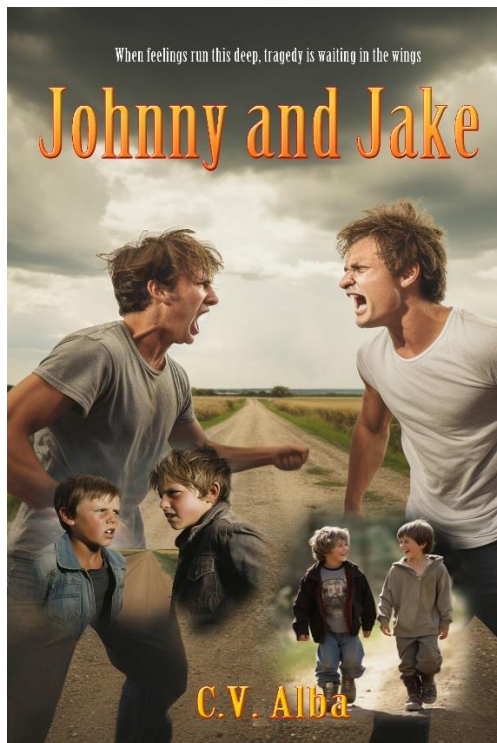
Johnny started to laugh. It was all so funny, so very, funny. All these years he worried that Aunt Connie would chicken out and spill the beans. And she had, she finally had.

“We both know convicting you of Alice’s murder is a long shot even if we find the body and forensics get enough to connect the two of you to her death. But Jake, well, that’s going to be easy.”

He could hear her talking beyond his laughter and tried to listen, his eyes watering as he searched for her beyond the pool of light. Her voice had become a high-pitched squeal that whined on and on until it turned into the wail of sirens and he was bathed in the glare of their headlights.

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