

70 times 7
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IF THAT little runt doesn't stay out of my stuff I'm going to —" Mark stopped short, not exactly sure what he would do but still mad enough to do it. "Joey!" he yelled. "Joey, get in here!"

Within seconds an eight-year-old with a shock of tousled brown hair and grass-stained jeans appeared ruefully in the doorway. Mark turned on him with a vengeance.

"Have you been listening to my tapes?" he yelled, holding out one of the empty cases.

Joey swallowed hard and his eyes widened. Finally he managed a weak nod, his eyes never leaving Mark's face.

"Well, where is it?" It's not in the case."

Joey seemed to turn gray. Desperately he searched Mark's room for the tape, finally finding it lodged between the speaker and the bed. He handed it back to Mark.

"I'm sorry, Mark," he said. "I won't use it again."

"You bet you won't," Mark agreed. "Now go on."

Later at dinner Joey ate in silence, eyeing Mark shyly. Mark ignored him but no one else seemed to notice. Karissa, their thirteen-year-old sister, was talking incessantly as usual.

Finally, Mr. McAlister broke in. "Mark, have you seen my electrician's tool kit?" he asked.

"Oh, it's in my room," Mark answered.

Mr. McAlister looked surprised. "What's it doing in there?"

"I was doing a little work on my stereo last night and forgot to put it back. Sorry." Then with concern he added, "Did you need it?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't," his father replied. He laid down his fork. "Mark, I don't mind you using my tools. Just remember to put them back, all right?"

"Sure, Dad. Sorry. I'll get them after dinner." Mark paused a moment and then continued, changing the subject. "Can you let me use the car Saturday? Some of the guys are getting together with the coach around nine for some extra practice. Then we're going over to watch the double-A game in Marion."

Mark's license was barely a week old. He saw doubt in his father's face so he hastened to explain. "I'd ride with the other guys, but it's a double header, and I don't want to stay for the night game."

The explanation seemed to help. "I guess so," Mr. McAlister said. "But you have to promise me two things."

Mark was ecstatic. "Anything," he promised.

"First, you'll drive carefully—"

"I will," he said, resentful of being treated like a child.

"And second, that you'll pick up some important documents for me at the accountant's office on the way to Marion. They're only open until one on Saturday and I need to complete some work Saturday night. Deal?"

"Deal!" Mark answered enthusiastically.

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Mark didn't wake up till after eight Saturday and had to hustle to be out at the field by nine. He ate a quick breakfast, grabbed his gear and the car keys, and yelled good-bye.

"Don't forget the accountant," his dad reminded him.

"I won't," he said and was out the door.

In the dugout he reached in his bag for his glove. He stopped short. He looked again.

"That little brat!" he fumed. "Can't he leave my stuff alone?"

"What's wrong?" the second baseman, Gary, asked.

Mark shook his head and his breath came in short hard spurts. "My little brother took my glove out," he said between clenched teeth. "And obviously he didn't put it back."

"Are you sure you just didn't forget it?" Gary asked.

Mark gave him a hard look and Gary threw up his hands in surrender. "OK. OK. But don't get so steamed. Coach has a few extra."

"Yeah, right," Mark mumbled and grabbed his bat. As he had expected, practice went terribly. Every time he made an error he would stare at the glove in disgust. When practice was over, he threw his stuff in the car and joined the caravan to Marion. The visiting team won the double-A game, and by the time Mark reached home, he was in a foul mood.

He slammed the door behind him. "Where is he?" he screamed as he stomped through the house.

Mark went to his room, and there was his glove lying innocently on his bed. He grabbed it and went back to the family room where his parents were sitting.

"That little thief has gone too far this time!" he blurted, his face red with fury. "Do you know what he did?"

Mr. McAlister folded his paper slowly and laid it next to his chair. "Yes, we know what he did," he said with control in his voice. "Joey told us."

Mark shook the glove. "I don't ever want him near my stuff, my room, or me for that matter, ever!"

His father clenched his jaw and raised his eyebrows. "Well, then. How about if you stay away from my tools, the car, and from me?"

Mark's mouth dropped open. "But, Dad—"

"You didn't stop at the accountant's," his father interrupted. "They called me."

The blood drained from Mark's face.

"Oh, Dad, I'm sorry," he stammered. "I was just so mad I forgot."

"So did your brother."

Mark swallowed hard.

"And what about my tools last week?"

Mark felt sick. "I—I said I was sorry, and I put them back."

"And Joey found your tape." He stared long and hard at Mark. "You'd like me to forgive you, assume you've learned your lesson, and give you a second chance. But it seems to me you're asking for more than you're willing to give."

Mark looked uncomfortably at the offending glove. A slight movement caught his eye and he glanced up in time to see the tousled brown hair pull back out of the doorway.

“Joey,” he said quietly. The small boy stepped through the door, poking some imaginary mark on the floor with the toe of his sneaker. He didn’t look up.

“I’m sorry, Joey,” Mark said quietly. “Will you forgive me?”

Joey looked up in surprise, first at Mark, and then at his father. He nodded quickly. “I’m sorry too, Mark,” he said, and then stood there as if he were wondering what to do.

“There’s still a little light left,” Mark began. “You want to throw a few? You can use my glove.”

Joey’s face lit up. “Sure!”

“Grab the ball and my old glove out of my room and I’ll meet you out back.”

Joey obediently hustled off to get the gear. Mark reached into his pocket and handed the car keys back to his father. “I feel terrible about forgetting your papers, Dad. How will you get your work done?”

“I won’t get it done,” Mr. McAlister answered. “I suppose I’ll ask for an extension on my deadline and work late at the office on Monday. For now, though, I have some unexpected free time. How about I join you guys in the back yard?”