

GINO FINDS A FRIEND



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Gino Finds a Friend

The tall, lacey Eucalyptus trees shaded the lunch area, which became a beehive of activity as the boys and girls stampeded out of the halls of Little Lake School. Spring baseball season was always an exciting time for the students, and the boys at lunch table three were anxious to choose their Captain for the day. Gino Fallatico had just moved to town a couple of weeks earlier, and table three elected him Captain of their team, the Champions.

Gino was nearly eleven years old, but his delicate build and soft features made him look younger. His brown wavy hair molded a fine shaped head, almost covering his ears, and framing his sensitive face. High cheek bones emphasized the dark brown eyes, heavily fringed with long lashes, which gave him a dreamy quality. His smile began in his eyes, then would work its way down to his generous mouth, showing two front teeth, rather large for his face. Deep dimples in each cheek would form just for a second, and then disappear as quickly as they had come. The few freckles sprinkling his upturned nose gave him a healthy, well scrubbed look.

Gino was just a little bit scared, after being named captain, but when the whistle blew for dismissal; he led the pack as they raced toward the ball diamond.

Big Moe, leader of table six and captain of the Angels team, towered above Gino as they chose their teams, and when Gino's team won the toss, said loudly enough for everyone to hear, "Just plain luck, Jeanie girl."

Gino bit his lip to keep from answering the smart aleck. The Champions were rarin' to go, and as the umpire hollered "Play ball," a cheer went up from the sidelines, where several fourth and fifth grade girls had suddenly developed an interest in baseball.

Henry was up to bat first, and struck out. Jeff hit a couple of foul balls, barely tipped one, and missed the next one. It was Gino's turn. His hands were sweaty, and his heart was pounding a little faster as he stooped over and grabbed a handful of dirt. After rubbing his hands together, he grabbed the bat, nervously pulled his cap down over his forehead and swung at the ball.

"Stree-rike one," yelled the umpire as Gino struck at a high bail.

"Stree-rike two." The sweat poured down over Gino's face as he heard the

umpire's call, but when the third pitch came across the plate, his bat connected, sending the ball flying toward second base. It was quickly retrieved by the shortstop, who threw it to first base just as Gino touched the bag on a long slide.

"You're out," shouted the first baseman.

"I am not," screamed Gino, his falsetto voice coming on strong.

Big Moe ran quickly over to first base. "Oh yes you are, you turkey, you're out fair and square," he yelled.

"Who are you callin' a turkey?"

Gino's voice quivered, but he marched right up to Big Moe. Within seconds, both teams were yellin' at each other, and suddenly Gino's fist landed on Moe. It was a short fight, lasting less than a minute, but when it was over, Gino's hair was really messed up, his shirt was torn, and blood oozed from his snubbed nose. He heard his teammates remark that it was time that someone called Moe's bluff. Fortunately for everyone, the warning bell rang, and as Gino made a dash for the washroom, he knew he hadn't licked Big Moe, but suddenly he felt ten feet tall.

Friend or Foe?

By the time that school was out, Gino was having second thoughts about the entire incident. "I always louse it up," he muttered to himself as he walked home. "My second week at a new school, fightin' with that clown." He kicked a soft drink can that was lying on the sidewalk, and then kicked it again, hard. "I just wish for once that I could do something right."

All the way home he felt sorry for himself. "My lip is swelled up, and I bet my nose is broken." He let himself in the front door of his home and headed for the kitchen. Gino moaned as he put ice cubes in a plastic bag, and held it to his mouth, hoping it would ease some of the pain. There was a note on the table. "Gino," he read, "there are cookies and milk for you. I'll be late, don't forget to practice. Love, Mom."

Gino winced. "Practice," he thought, "I can't even close my mouth, let alone blow my trumpet." He grabbed the bag of ice cubes and dragged himself up the stairs to his room.

"Move over, Cocoa," he said, gently pushing the old cat off his pillow. Cocoa had been a member of the family almost as long as Gino, and they had a certain understanding. Gino could talk to her and she wouldn't talk back. "You can't believe

what happened today. Dad said to stand up for what was right, and I guess that's what I did, but why did I have to chose Big Moe? He's twice my size . . . well almost twice. He would really flip if he saw me talking to you, Cocoa, and, Oh boy, wait until he finds out I take *music lessons*."

Cocoa stretched lazily, licked her paws and purred. Gino continued to stroke his cat. "Sometimes I think you really understand what I am talking about, and you always listen. He picked up a soft cloth and began polishing his shiny trumpet when he heard his mom drive in. She was talking to someone, and soon she called from the foot of the stairs, "Gino, you have company."

Seconds later, none other than Moe was standing in the doorway and without waiting for an invitation, entered the room.

"Gino, I came over to talk to you. I acted like a jerk and a poor sport today. I was surprised that your team chose you for their captain, and I guess I was jealous. Anyway, it wasn't cool for me to do what I did, and if you can accept the fact that I was a knothed, I'd like to be friends with you."

Gino could hardly believe what he was hearing, but he knew he would rather have Moe for a friend than an enemy. He hesitated only a moment, and said, "Well Moe, I acted like a jerk, too, and I guess we both kind of let things get out of hand. I'm glad that you came over. Won't you have a seat?"

Moe spied Gino's horn lying on the bed. "Hey man, do you play the trumpet? That's really cool. I've been taking trombone lessons for almost a year, and man, that's one hard instrument to play. My teacher throws up his hands sometimes when I hit a few sour notes, but I guess he was a kid once and had to start from scratch to learn how to play. Did you know that Mr. Smith, the band teacher, is going to have extra practice for anyone who wants to try to make the middle school band in the fall?"

Gino felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "I'm glad you told me, Moe, 'cause I sure want to be in the band." For the next half hour they talked about a lot of things. It was really crazy the way they both liked the same things, shared the same dreams, even wanting to be in a rock band. Gino forgot about his swollen lip, and after awhile he said, "I'm hungry. Let's go to the kitchen, Moe, maybe we can fmd something else we both like."

"Yeah,. Man," Moe grinned, "like chocolate chip cookies and milk, I hope."

Facing the Music

Gino finished his homework before dinner, dreading what his dad would do when he heard his story. He expected to hear from his dad before dinner, and he did. Mr. Falatico took one look at his son, and then asked, “What happened to your lip?”

“I got into a fight today, Dad, and I got the worst of it,” Gino replied.

His dad gave him a long hard look. “How could you, Gino? This is only your second week at this new school. You never got into trouble at Kennedy school. What happened?”

Briefly, Gino retold the story including the part about Moe paying him a visit.

“Well, son, I’m glad that you and Moe got your differences settled. You were lucky this time, but you need to consider the consequences. Don’t rush into something that you may not be able to finish.” Then he added, “I think your mother has dinner on the table, so let’s go in and eat.”

Gino helped himself to the mashed potatoes, and drank another glass of milk, then asked to be excused. . “Thanks, Dad, for not grounding me. I think I learned more than one thing today, and mom, Moe liked your cookies so well that he ate most of them.”

Gino got ready for bed, thinking of all the things that had happened. First, having his fight with Moe, and finding out that he wasn’t such a bad guy after all. Then, Dad was probably right, don’t start something that you can’t finish. Before he drifted off to sleep, he decided he would try not to punch anybody tomorrow. It just might save a cut lip and a bloody nose.

Hit and Run

The first of May was rapidly approaching .and the baseball season was coming to a close.

The kids had learned to play as a team, and Gino had made several new friends, but Moe was his best friend. Their early morning band practice required that they arrive at school by 7:30 A.M. for extra instruction. Mr. Smith, their leader, would help those who were serious about their music. The Spring Music Festival would be coming up soon, and with a lot of practice, some members of this band might be eligible to join the middle school band nest year. Moe and Gino both worked hard and hoped they would be chosen.

Today was Monday, early schedule, and Gino had overslept a few minutes, so he was not ready for the shrill whistle coming through his window that broke the stillness of the morning. Moe, giving his usual call brought his bike to a halt outside Gino's house.

"Be out in a minute," Gino yelled, as he grabbed a doughnut, his horn, and his helmet, all in rapid succession. After securing his trumpet case on his bike rack with a bungee cord, he jumped on his bike and soon he and Moe were riding down the tree-lined avenue, keeping to the bike path, skirting heavy morning traffic.

Suddenly there was a loud squeal of brakes, and the car just ahead swerved, and then drove away at top speed.

"I think that car hit a dog," Moe said anxiously. The boys rode quickly to the scene. As they came near, a stunned animal rose to its wobbly feet and ran across the street.

"That's no dog, Moe, that's a coyote," Gino replied in disbelief.

The boys waited until there was a break in traffic, then followed the injured animal, who had sought safety in an open garage. Moe closed the garage door as Gino found the astonished lady of the house and asked her to call the animal shelter. They explained the situation, then had to go on to school. It was hard for them to keep their minds on music, and before the morning was over, the boys were telling all the kids about their hair-raising experience. After school, the boys stopped by the animal shelter to inquire about the coyote.

Officer Malone invited them in, then sensing their shyness asked, "Are you the two boys that witnessed the accident on Euclid Avenue this morning?"

Both boys began talking at the same time, but finally Gino said they just wanted to find out how the animal was.

"Come with me," officer Malone said, kindly, as she led the boys down a ramp to a long row of cages. "She's a female, and a real sweetheart. She is frightened, and has a bruised leg and a cut over her eye," she continued, "but she can still eat. She has had three bowls of dry food today. I think hunger may have driven her to town."

"*Sweetheart* would be a perfect name for her as a pet," Moe said, as they came upon her lying on a cement floor, looking forlornly through the wire cage. She lifted her head toward them, and then slowly turned away. Gino and Moe both felt very sorry for the animal.

“Office Malone,” Moe said, “would there be any chance of adopting Sweetheart as a pet?”

Officer Malone was thoughtful for a moment, and then answered, “She is not ready to be released as yet, but perhaps you boys need to think about this for awhile. You know, coyotes are really wild animals, and although they resemble a dog, they are really a cousin to the wolf. You can come back tomorrow, and we will talk about it again.”

The boys were silent as they rode their bikes home, each one absorbed in their own thoughts.

“See you tomorrow,” Gino said, as he turned into his driveway. He was remembering what his dad had told him, ‘Don’t take on anything you can’t finish.’

Bad News

Before Gino walked in the door, he could smell the wonderful aroma of chocolate chip cookies, his favorite kind, and sure enough, his mom had just finished baking a batch and they were on the racks cooling. Usually, he would have picked up a handful, but somehow he didn’t really feel in the mood for cookies

Gino decided against telling his mom about wanting to keep Sweetheart for a pet, but he knew he would have to talk it out with his dad. Instead, he told her the entire story from the time they saw the coyote get hit. “That’s why I’m a little late this afternoon, Mom, because we stopped by the shelter to check on how the animal was doing.”

After some comforting words from his mother, Gino climbed the stairs to his room, hoping to sort out some of the thoughts that were crowding his brain. As usual, Cocoa was stretched out on his pillow, sleeping soundly. Gino scratched her behind her ears, then said, “Cocoa, we’ve got problems, and I’m not sure how it will turn out., but I think Moe and I are going to have to work together on this.” Cocoa yawned as Gino picked up his phone and dialed Moe’s number.

The boys decided that Moe would ask his folks if he could keep Sweetheart and Gino would ask if he could be a co-owner and furnish the feed and some of the care for her. Maybe together their folks would agree. He tried to get his mind on his homework, but all he could think about was what might happen.

When his dad got home, Gino said nervously, “Can we talk, Dad?”

“Sure, what’s up?” Mr. Falatico sat down in his recliner, and raising his feet up to a comfortable position, sat back and waited for Gino to continue.

Gino started his long story about the day’s happening, then finished by asking permission to be a co-owner, but he could see his dad’s reaction before he ever said a word.

Dad sat up straight in his chair, and was shaking his head in disbelief. Then, being as kind as he could be after hearing the story said in no uncertain terms, “Really, Gino, you should know the answer to that. Even if you could keep her for awhile, which you can’t, what in the name of conscience would you do with a real live coyote in the city. You are talking about an animal that is used to hunting its own food, and living in the wilds. The answer is no. End of conversation.”

After dinner, Gino went to bed early, and he heard the distant mournful cry of a coyote, and then a faint answer, from even farther away. “I wonder if . . .,” he thought, as he drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, instead of the usual whistle, Moe rang the doorbell and came in.

“Bad news, Gino,” said Moe, trying to hide his disappointment. “My dad said there was no way we could keep Sweetheart.”

“Same here Moe, I guess we were kind of dumb to even think we could keep her.” Turning to his Mom he asked, “Is it alright if we go by the shelter this afternoon, just to see how Sweetheart is getting along?”

“Of course,” Mom replied, “just don’t stay too long.”

After school, Gino and Moe stopped by the animal shelter.

Officer Malone sensed what the boys had come to tell her. “I am sure it was a difficult decision for you, but your dad’s judgment is probably correct,” she said. “How would you boys like to go along when Sweetheart finds her new home?” Check it out with your parents, and be here by eight o’clock and we will see where she will be let loose.”

They raced home, eager to make plans for the following day. It made them feel good to know that Sweetheart would have a good home in the country.

So Long, Sweetheart

Early Saturday morning, Mr. Falatico brought Gino and Moe to the animal shelter. When they arrived, Officer Malone introduced them to her partner, Officer Morgan. Soon he loaded the cage that held the frightened animal into the truck. Officer Malone and the two boys followed in the van. They left the city, and turned on to a bumpy dirt road, then into some hilly country, with sagebrush and a few trees and a small stream of water. This canyon, about twelve miles from the hustle and bustle of the city was ideal for coyote country.



Officer Morgan parked the truck and lifted the cage to the ground, facing it toward the hillside. He slowly opened the latch of the cage, then sensing that she was free, the frightened animal took a few uncertain steps away from the cage, and giving one last look, trotted off toward the canyon. Gino and Moe stood by silently and watched as she soon disappeared. Gino raised his hand in a halfhearted wave, then quietly said, “Goodbye, Sweetheart.”

On the way back to the city, they talked excitedly about all the events that had happened. Then Officer Malone said, “Boys, I want to congratulate you on your mature behavior. You faithfully did the right thing from the very beginning, and you can feel proud of yourselves. Incidentally, guess what happened at the shelter last night? A beautiful big black Labrador delivered four of the cutest puppies you’ve ever seen. Do you kids think you might find a home for them?” She laughed out loud as she looked at the two boys, who were already anticipating an entirely new adventure.

Gino answered, “I’ll bet we can, and this is one thing we can start and also finish, isn’t that right, Moe?”

“I’ve always wanted a dog,” said Moe, “but never dreamed I would get two. Officer Malone, can you drive a little faster? We have a lot of planning to do.”

