

SHADOWS OF YESTERDAY

CHAPTER ONE

Johnny began to wonder at the wisdom of trying to shortcut the route home from Carson City when he found himself in a strangely barren part of the Sierra Nevadas. He hadn't seen a ranch or road in sight since Jackson. By his calculations, this route would cut nearly two days off the trip but he was wondering if the speed was worth the loneliness. He'd about had enough of his own company, and although Barranca was a good ear to bend, his conversational skills were limited to snorting and the occasional whinny at feeding time.

Johnny Lancer was missing his family and he smiled to himself at that idea. "Ya know, Barranca, five years ago if someone had tol' me I'd be settled down with a family, I woulda laughed in their face!" A firm pat on the palomino's neck accented the thought. Barranca just shook his mane and kept walking.

The trail Johnny chose wasn't quite a trail, but more like a rabbit path. He figured out quickly that the loose, shale groundcover was deadly slippery and it was best to follow either a deer or rabbit path that was a bit worn. The hills were literally zigzagged with these narrow paths and they were quite easy to find due to the very sparse ground cover, which was what perplexed Johnny most about this area.

They had come from Carson City, thick with tall pines and healthy growth, and had slowly descended the Sierra Nevada mountains in a south west direction. Currently, Johnny put them somewhere just east of and in between Sacramento and Stockton in an area where he'd heard of a town called San Andreas. It was the strangest mountain area he'd ever seen outside the barren Sierra De Juarez range just south of the border. It was like all the trees suddenly disappeared with any semblance of friendliness gone along with them. It gave the rancher an eerie chill.

He shrugged his shoulders and hunkered deeper in the saddle, suddenly craving another human being. "I bet Scott could give me some sorta lecture about why this place looks like this," he mumbled out loud. The horse just twitched an ear.

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The rabbit run snaked around the hillside on a slow path downward. The pair found themselves in a rocky area where the boulders had been shoved from the earth by some unseen force. Varying in size, the large rocks erupted along the whole side of this particular mountain like some sort of geological plague. With a grunt of interest, Johnny raised his eyebrows at the sight and began to maneuver his mount between the rocks, a little uplifted at the slight change in scenery. "Well, at least it's different," he mused brightly.

The sun had been dropping from its apex for several hours now, and with these high ranges Johnny figured they had about three more hours of light. He had to find some water, and soon.

Just as he began to scan the nearby valleys for plant life, an odd roaring in the distance caught his attention. Barranca's ears shot forward, and the horse jolted to a stop, staring down the long valley below them with nervously flared nostrils.

The roar grew, rushing toward them like a flash flood or runaway train. Johnny couldn't see anything, but in an instant realized what it was.

"Quake," he said lowly as the gold horse began shifting his legs in worry. Johnny held on tight and tried to keep the frightened animal from spinning and running, a sure disaster in this terrain. He spoke lowly and caressed the tense, sweaty neck, trying to keep their heads facing down their trail and the rushing roar.

Suddenly, the earth around them sprang to life and Barranca danced in place, barely obeying the command to not bolt. When Johnny thought the worst was over, a sharp jar shook the earth around them and the shaking increased. Frantic, Johnny looked uphill for any sign of rockslide. His stomach lurched when he saw rocks bouncing like water on a hot skillet around the base of several larger boulders. He knew they were in trouble when the large, grounded boulders began to dance. Pebbles and stones flowed around Barranca's hooves with a torrent of dust.

He calmly asked Barranca to stay at a controlled pace as they moved onward. Drawing on his master's cool, and with a determined arch of his neck, the animal chomped nervously on the bit but moved carefully. Ever so slowly, they managed to clear most of the boulder field before the dangerous chunks began their downhill roll.

The ground settled. A glance up the valley showed a dust cloud rising from the face of the range that traced the path of the quake. If he wasn't concentrating on getting off the mountain, Johnny would have found it interesting. Right now he just wanted to be on flat ground and his traveling partner was more than happy to expedite that plan.

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

Almost clear of the boulder field, the ground shuddered again as an aftershock gripped the mountain. Thrown aside, the nearly panicked horse scrambled for footing, but lost the fight when a wolf-sized rock seized his hind legs and swept them out from under.

They fell hard. The blast of pain from Barranca's crushing weight was short lived when the initial wave of rocks and boulders overtook them and it became a battle to simply breathe. Instinctively falling back on ingrained gunfighter reactions, Johnny rolled himself into a ball and tried to go with the downward motion. Even though he was being pelted from all quarters with debris, but he managed to keep in a tight curl for what seemed like eternity. Then a nasty strike to his head took away the light and with it, the last sight of his beloved horse flailing on his side fighting to keep his head above the maelstrom.

CHAPTER TWO

Caesar Arroyo knew he should be hurrying to get home, but he knew what he'd find when he got there. The heavy grief and sorrow that hung in the air in his once happy home was finally bringing him to the point of decision: leave or stay? It had been almost three months since the tragic death of his son, and he'd managed to hang on and deal with his sorrow by keeping busy. The farm was more than enough to keep his mind off the boy; he had to do all the chores now, alone, since his wife seemed to have lost any desire to keep living.

She sat, day after day, by the small window that allowed her to see little Carlos' grave. Caesar wondered if Maria had lost her mind forever. He didn't ask his thick little horse to hurry. It was nearly dark, and if he timed it right she would be asleep when he got home. It was preferable to listening to her cry.

The muscular bay's neck suddenly jerked up and the oversized ears pricked forward. Caesar peered between the alert ears and saw a black form on the path in front of them.

"Dios, it is a man!" he whispered loudly, urging the stout horse into a ground pounding trot. When they reached the form, Caesar slipped from the saddle and knelt by the unconscious man.

The still form was dirty and partially buried under a collection of rocks. Caesar brushed away the smallest of them and pushed aside a pair of large one to check the man's neck for a pulse. His skin was warm and the blood rushed. When the concerned man pulled his hand away, it was sticky with blood. "Oh, *Señor*, we need to get you out of here."

Caesar pulled the limp form from the rock pile with a grunt and dragged him aside. He looked at his horse and saw that the animal was intent of something else in the growing darkness. He followed the horse's gaze and saw a glowing patch of white not far away. Slowly, he rose and stepped closer to the white form and saw that it was a golden horse standing with his head low and on shaky legs. One hind leg was lifted in pain, but when Caesar tried to approach, the horse shied

away into the darkness, limping pitifully with his head to one side to avoid the dragging reins. "Oh, *caballo hermoso*, you are easy on the eyes and quite scared. I cannot help you tonight. I am sorry." He saw that his soft words had an effect, as the trembling horse stopped his retreat but did not show any inclination to come closer. Accepting the small victory, Caesar turned back to the man . . . young man . . . and decided to tackle one injured soul at a time.

It was quite an effort, but Caesar managed to seat the limp form on the back of his patient horse.

"We have to work together, Conejo, to get this young man home," Caesar explained to the dark horse. "We will work like you are in harness. Listen, *caballo pequeño*, and you will lead us home. Hup, hup!"

The stout little bay ducked his head, and with a swish of his thick tail, started off with his master walking alongside holding the precious load steady. As they disappeared into the growing night, Caesar called softly into the darkness. "I will check on you when I can, *dorado uno!*"

A soft, sad whicker from somewhere in the shadows bade them farewell.

It had been dark for quite a while when Caesar walked into the small yard led by his obedient horse. There hadn't been any noise or motion from the unconscious passenger at any time during the trip. The worried Mexican checked often for breathing.

As expected, the tired man didn't smell any dinner cooking or see any lights in the windows except from the kitchen. That was where the prayer candles had been burning for months with the window framing their son's final resting place. Caesar sighed wearily and asked God in a short prayer to help them through this dark time – and soon. He was tired of his own bad cooking, and wondered again if bringing this new problem home was more than they could handle.

Caesar tied Conejo to the fence and stepped back alongside the motionless form hunched over in the saddle. He'd noticed the holster and gun on the stranger, and had been worrying about it during the entire trip. Knowing the fragile state of his grieving wife, Caesar had already hidden his shotgun and all the ammunition in the barn. They were Catholic, but Caesar knew that every person had their limits in handling grief. Decision made, he unbuckled and untied the holster and tugged it away from the body. After he was sure the unconscious man wouldn't fall from the saddle, he dashed into the barn and stashed the rig with the shotgun.

There is only so much one can tempt fate with, he thought, satisfied with his decision.

The stout farmer, strong from his hours of single-handedly tilling his small fields, returned to the quiet pair and managed to slide the limp form into his arms and carry him into the house.

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“Maria!” he called as he tried to keep from bumping furniture with the bulky load in the darkness of the house. “Maria, someone needs our help!” Caesar carefully lowered the young man onto their tiny, threadbare divan in the main room, maneuvering the legs to dangle over one arm of the too-short piece of furniture. “Maria!” Caesar called again as he checked for breathing. It was disturbing that the man hadn’t uttered a noise in hours, and the worried Mexican bit his lip as he wondered again if he’d done the right thing in bringing him here.

He heard a quiet rustle of material and turned to see his wife in the doorway of the main room. Backlit by glowing candles, he noticed how her frame had thinned in the past months. Even in the poor lighting he could see the dark bags under her eyes and the rumpled state of her clothing. Her eyes were wide, watery pools of shiny blackness. Maria stood, motionless, save the constant movement of her fingers as they twisted her rosary. Caesar was amazed the rope of beads hadn’t broken from the seemingly non-stop worrying.

“Come,” he said in the same soft voice he’d used on the injured horse. “The young man needs help.” Caesar felt for a fever. The woman didn’t move. “Maria,” he said softly. “Imagine if this was our boy needing help. Somewhere, his mother is worried. He is very young.”

The gentle words seemed to sink in and Maria shuffled to his side and knelt next to the unconscious form. Caesar busied himself with lighting lamps, and noticed that his wife’s shaky hand eventually reached out and brushed the dark hair away from the young man’s forehead. Her fingers traced his hairline across his brow as she studied his face, and then she lay her palm gently against his cheek. The rosary disappeared into her apron pocket and she began to unbutton his shirt.

“He has some blood on his neck,” she said, her voice wavering.

“Si, I know. I think he hit his head, but I have not checked closely. I’m sure there are other injuries, too.” Caesar’s comforting voice was like music as they spoke in their native language. Caesar and Maria spoke a little English, but had no reason to use it, as they lived on the outskirts of a Mexican community. In a soothing cadence, Caesar told of the earthquake, finding the injured man and the golden horse, and his suspicions about the pair being caught in a rockslide. As he spoke, Maria became more animated.

“We need to check him thoroughly, Caesar. I felt that quake here, and it was not small. He must have broken bones. I will heat some water to wash him, and make some bandages. Undress him, and I will get a nightshirt.” She stood and clicked her tongue as she shook her head. “And this will not do. He needs a proper bed.”

Caesar met her eyes meaningfully. “There is only Carlos’ room, unless you want him in our . . . “

“Carlos’ room will be fine. I know our boy wants us to help this man. I can feel it in my heart.” Maria hurried off to the kitchen, leaving a stunned Caesar to deal with moving their guest.

He had not seen his wife this animated in a long time and he hoped this was a turning point. After pulling off Johnny’s boots, noting significant swelling in one leg in particular, he gathered the young man up again and, with another small prayer of thanks to God, carried him to his dead son’s room.

Maria threw herself into caring for her patient. She chatted with him constantly as she carefully undressed and washed him with her husband’s help. They both determined his head had been struck many times, but the worst appeared to be the bloody knot buried under his thick hair on the left side of his skull. Caesar was sure there were some cracked ribs, but other than that and the numerous bruises, they were amazed he was mostly intact. Even the thick, swollen leg seemed to be only bruised. Maria deftly sewed several of the head wounds shut with a practiced hand and said quiet prayers for the young man.

“He is blessed,” Maria said, adjusting the nightshirt on his freshly washed and bandaged body. “He should not be walking this Earth. But he is, and he came to us.” She sat on the edge of the bed and combed Johnny’s long hair with her fingers, careful to not disturb the stitched areas. “I think we cleaned the wounds well enough, but he may get a fever during the night. Sit with him while I make some coffee.” She stood, and Caesar took her place. “I will start a broth pot. He will need food when he awakens.”

Caesar was pleased and surprised at the change in his wife, and thanked the quiet stranger and God. Soon, the smell of brewing coffee and beef broth wafted in the room and Caesar, with a growling stomach, knew his wife was on the road to recovery. He only hoped the young man walked the same road.

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CHAPTER THREE

The next week was a flurry of activity in the Arroyo's house. While Caesar worked in the fields, Maria clucked and chattered her way through cleaning and cooking. She was appalled that she'd let the small house get into such disarray. By the end of the week the house was in order and the larder restocked.

All the while, the stranger lay unconscious. Maria found that with careful cajoling and soft urging he would rouse enough that she could get thin broth and water down her patient's throat, but she worried about the way his bones were more prominent by week's end.

"We must pray that our boy wakes up soon," she began to say. Caesar wondered about her reference to the man as 'our boy', but who was he to question God's will?

By the middle of the second week, she had altered a few of Caesar's shirts to fit her charge when he woke up, and had redecorated the bedroom to look more like a young man's room. The few toys and items belonging to their dead son were carefully wrapped and placed in the chest at the foot of the bed. Soon, all mementos of the dead Carlos Arroyo were nestled in the chest, and the lid locked.

Maria hummed and rocked her chair contentedly next to the sick bed and mended clothes as she watched over her charge. A soft groan caught her attention. She dropped her work and moved to sit on the bed, taking his long fingers in her hands and stroking them gently; for the first time, she felt animation there, and her heart raced. He groaned again and rolled his head to one side.

"Careful, *mijo*, do not move so quickly," she said softly in soothing, rhythmic Spanish, her hand soft against his cheek. "I am sure your head hurts."

The dark head rolled to face the voice, and a grimace flickered over his features. Slowly, his eyes cracked open, revealing two blue crescents of half-open eyes that fuzzily tried to focus.

Maria knew his eyes were blue, but now, with the spark of life behind them, their hue made her catch her breath. He was so beautiful, even in this depleted

state! Her eyes swam with grateful tears as he gently brushed his unkempt hair from his forehead. "I am so happy you are with us again!"

"M-m-mama?" he sighed, barely above a whisper.

Tears flowed unabated down her cheeks as she took both of his hands in hers and squeezed them with affection. "Yes," she choked. "Yes! Thank God that word has touched my ears again!"



It had been almost three weeks since Johnny had wired home telling Murdoch that he was on his way back. He was overdue by four days now, and the family was worried.

"Johnny should have taken the train to Carson City," Scott grumbled again as he, Murdoch and Teresa sat at the dinner table and pretended to eat. Piercing a piece of steak with his fork, the older Lancer brother lifted the meat from his plate and twirled the utensil between his fingers, studying the beef but not really seeing it.

"Your brother wanted to ride. He considered it a vacation. Besides, it's been a long time since that area has been visited by any of us. Any information of town growth would be useful." Murdoch toyed with his water glass, spinning it slowly and leaving circular patterns on the table cloth until Teresa reached over and tapped his hand to make him stop. "Well, it made sense at the time when Johnny talked me into letting him go." The Lancer patriarch guiltily pulled his hand back with an apologetic glance at his young ward. Instead, he snagged his fork and started to poke at his baked potato.

"I can leave first thing in the morning to look for him," Scott stated more than asked.

"But we have no idea where he went," Teresa said as she smoothed her napkin in her lap for the seventh time. "Have you heard back from the sheriffs you wired?"

"Not all of them," Murdoch answered. "But most of them. He definitely hasn't been around Placerville, but I didn't expect him to go that way anyway. He mentioned heading more south."

"I can start from Placerville and go south from there." Scott's voice brightened with the possibility of finally doing something. "I just can't sit here, sir!"

Murdoch shook his head. "I know it's hard, Scott, but there's a lot of area between Placerville and here. We need more information. And with Cipriano gone for the next two days, you're needed here." The eldest Lancer raised his hand to stop the anticipated protest from his older son. Scott snapped his jaw shut and his

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eyes glowed in anger. "This is what we'll do: I'll get an updated map from the Cattlemen's Association of that area; new members, new ranches and the like. At least we'll have something to work with instead of wandering around blind. Someone must have seen him; he needs supplies and water."

"What about the towns? Haven't the sheriffs in those areas gone to the towns?"

"There are not many towns in the foothills, Scott. Everyone is spread around in that area. We need more information before we head up there."

Teresa brightened. "Maybe Barranca threw a shoe or something. If there are not many towns, he'd have a hard time finding a way to fix that."

"Yeah," Scott said, unconvinced. "Maybe that's it." He dropped his fork and wiped his mouth with his napkin, then pushed his chair back and stood. "Two more days, Murdoch, then we have to do something. Anything. I can't sit here and do nothing."

Murdoch nodded with a sigh and dropped his utensil. "I know, and I agree. I'll ask about that map tomorrow morning."

"How about tonight? There's enough daylight left to get to Cyrus' place, and I can bring it back in the morning."

Murdoch looked at the two hopeful faces waiting for an answer and couldn't disappoint them. "All right. I'm sure Cyrus won't mind an overnight visitor."

Both Scott and Teresa's faces shined with bright smiles. Scott grabbed his hat and immediately headed out the door as Teresa jumped up and began clearing the table of the uneaten food, hoping the time would pass faster if they kept busy.



Maria hummed happily as she worked in her small kitchen, appreciating the coolness of the late summer morning. Her patient was showing a little improvement; he was awake more often but still seemed confused and unable to speak clearly. She had been able to coax him to take broth and water fairly consistently for two days now, and the woman was sure the boy could handle some vegetable soup that night if she fed it to him. The poor soul was still too weak to hold a spoon, and any movement on his part brought severe headaches.

Caesar had asked her if she knew his name yet. Maria hadn't asked because she didn't think it was right to try and make him speak. When he did talk, he stuttered so badly he became frustrated and a headache would flare, then he would have to lie motionless for hours until it subsided.

As Caesar worked his fields, he thought about the man healing in the house and how he could help him. The gold horse was always in his mind, and he felt

guilty for leaving the animal out there, injured. He'd gone to find the animal twice, checking two of the three places in that area that had water and coming home without catching a glimpse. Caesar had the growing feeling that perhaps seeing the horse would help the young man, and resolved to find it. He would start out immediately the next morning by looking at the final watering place he knew.

The sound of the lunch bell made Caesar smile. He stopped Conejo with a soft order, and the big-eared horse sighed and chewed his bit. "Come, my friend, let's take a break." Quickly dropping the harness and bridle, the little horse followed his master to the house where he dipped his head into the water trough. "Have a nice roll in the sand while I eat!" With an affectionate pat on the sticky neck, Caesar went into the house, where he stopped inside the door and smiled hugely at what he saw. "Well! Look who is joining us for lunch!"

Seated at the table looking rather pale and shaky, was the young stranger. He had both hands splayed out in front of him, flat on the table for support, and smiled weakly. "*B-b-buenas d-d-dias*," he stuttered so softly that Caesar wasn't sure what he'd said. The grimace of pain that followed was quickly controlled as the young man tried valiantly to pretend it never happened.

Caesar decided to play along with the intent to make the man feel at ease, and never let his smile waver as he sat.

"Our boy seems to have little patience for lying around, *mi esposo*. He will be back in the fields very soon, I am sure!" Maria hustled around the table and served the men fresh tortillas and scrambled eggs.

Caesar knew the menu was geared toward what the boy could eat and made no comment as he dug in, thoughtfully mulling over what she had just said. He and Maria had discussed the fact that their visitor had said nothing about himself or even asked what had happened. Maria said she thought it was best if he brought things up; asking a lot of questions would force him to talk and endure the headaches. It appeared to Caesar that his wife had decided to speak for the young man and he didn't seem to mind.

Maybe it was best to let the boy initiate personal information after all, and the idea about bringing the palomino here suddenly didn't seem like a good one anymore.



The Cattlemen's Association maps were a good start. There were several new members in the foothills between Placerville and Sacramento and Murdoch and son headed out as soon as Cipriano returned to Lancer.

Johnny was now a week overdue. Consulting the map, the men decided to head to the town of Jackson, just north and east of Stockton. It would be the closer town to Placerville for supplies, and they figured to be there in four days.

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"You know, when we wire the ranch from Jackson, Johnny will have arrived here the day after we left," Scott mumbled. "It would be just like him."

"Well, that may be true, son, but look at it this way: We can welcome the three new Cattlemen's Association members while we're there and not waste the trip."

The fair haired son snorted a short laugh. "No sense in making Johnny think we were worried or anything, right?"

"That's not what I meant!" Murdoch objected. "Of course I'm worried! But if he's home and all right, we may as well do some good while we're up there."

Scott ducked his head. "Sorry, sir. I guess I'm just not in the mood to be glad handing strangers." He nudged Charlemagne to catch up to his father's sorrel.

"It's all right," Murdoch replied lowly. "We're both just a little tense. We'll find him."

With a silent nod from the younger man, both horses were urged into a slow lope.



As planned, Caesar headed toward the foothills to check the final watering hole in the area he'd last seen the palomino - a box canyon a little to the north. Caesar thought it was a pretty little canyon, ripe with vegetation, but very isolated. It took several hours to get there, and when they reached the mouth of the canyon, stout Conejo and the man were both hot and dusty.

Smelling water, the bay's oversized ears pricked forward eagerly and his step quickened. Caesar let him have his head, and soon the brown muzzle was dipped in a small pond created by an artesian spring which erupted from the canyon wall. The cold water ran back underground at one edge of a small collection of water the Mexican generously called a pond.

The man splashed the cool water on his face as his horse drank, and then stood back to survey the rest of the canyon carefully. A gathering of stunted scrub oak caught his eye; there was movement in the shadows there. He shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted into the reflected glare of the stark rock walls. Yes, something was coming. Conejo even jerked his head up from his drink and focused on the motion.

What the man saw broke his heart. The palomino, his head low and set in a bend to one side to avoid the dragging reins, was muddy and thin. The saddle, which Caesar could now see had an 'L' brand on the fender, was scratched, dirty and slightly askew. The saddle blankets hung down on one side, poised to fall off at any moment. Although the horse appeared to be moving better than the last time he saw it, there was still a prominent limp in the hind end. The white mane

and tail were now caked with dirt, and the bedroll and saddlebags the man recalled were gone.

Conejo rumbled quietly in his throat as he studied the visitor. The gold horse ambled closer, welcoming the company, but stopped a safe distance away with suspicious eyes. Caesar patted the bay's neck and calmly spoke to him in Spanish.

"Hold here, my friend. Let's see if I can win *el dorado uno* over." Carefully, he moved to the small pouch he'd tied to his saddle and untied it, then held it out in front of him, low and unthreatening. "Hey there, I brought a gift." He shook the bag, and the unmistakable sound of grain rattled from within. Conejo eagerly stuck his nose toward it. Caesar pushed him away and dropped the reins. The bay ground tied obediently, eyes locked on the bag. "No, this is for our new friend if he wants it. Come on."

Carefully Caesar offered the bag, but didn't look directly at the edgy horse. He knew staring would make him nervous, so instead he walked toward the palomino with his eyes directed at the ground next to the horse's feet. He held the grain out at chest level and to one side so the horse could see it clearly.

The gold horse was clearly interested and not quite suspicious enough to move away. Caesar got within six feet of the animal then stopped and shook the bag again. He spoke in a soft, singsong tone that was calming and unthreatening. After a few moments he was rewarded when the horse closed the last few feet hesitantly and nuzzled the bag.

Moving slowly, Caesar opened the bag. The hungry horse nudged his arm more forcefully and the man laughed. "I can only open it so fast, my pushy friend. Here." He offered some of it in his flat hand and the horse ate greedily. Caesar could see raw marks around the horse's mouth from the bit, and hairless spots from the leather headstall. "Oh, you are in sad shape, amigo. This is a good spot, but you need to be free of all that. Let me help you."

Barranca was too intent of the grain to care about the man who picked up the reins. When Caesar moved to his side, Barranca glanced back, but continued to eat, one ear cocked in the man's direction. The Mexican dumped a little more of the grain on the ground and quickly undid the cinch and pulled off the saddle, wincing at the raw sores that was the result of the horse wearing tack for so long. The horse shifted his weight and continued to eat. Caesar clicked his tongue in sympathy, only getting a slight glance from topaz eyes in response.

Anticipating such injuries, Caesar pulled a jar from his hip pocket, opened it, and applied the paste to the sores. He checked the horse's feet, and saw that one shoe was missing and one dangling. Picking up that leg, he pried the shoe off without much effort. The injured back leg looked to be healing and not broken, so

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Caesar smeared the paste on the scabbed wounds. Swelling still made the hock a little hotter than the man liked, but the animal appeared to be on the mend.

He picked out the major chunks of debris from the mane, and rubbed the horse down with his hands. "Next time I will bring proper tools to clean you up, Oro! Meanwhile, I think you are safe here. I don't think your master is ready to see you; I think it would bring him pain." He patted the thin neck. "Without this bridle you can graze better. There is a lot to eat here, but you have to share with the deer." With practiced hands he unbuckled the throatlatch and slipped the bridle from the scarred head. "I will check on you soon. Here." The rest of the grain was dumped on the ground. Caesar stepped back out of the horse's comfort zone and collected the tack.

A nearby stand of boulders made a good place to stash the equipment for now. He covered it with the tattered saddle blanket, satisfied it was as protected as it could get out here. After being on the horse for over two weeks, he was sure a little time in the boulders couldn't hurt it any more.

Caesar returned to Conejo and mounted up. They left the healing horse happily cleaning up the last of his present, his dainty ears perked in their direction as they rode away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maria was delighted that her charge seemed to be healing quickly. She noticed that he didn't like to stay still very long, even if it caused a headache. The secret, she found, was to keep him busy.

First, she gave him simple things to fix, like harness parts that needed stitching or braiding. Once he seemed to get his fingers under his control again, she moved him on to light chores like cleaning out the stove and small fireplace, sweeping the floors and eventually milking the cow and goat. The work helped his appetite and soon the gaunt look of his cheeks smoothed out.

When he wasn't busy, his fingers drummed his thigh or hip bone nonstop. One day she gave him her rosary beads, realizing she hadn't used them herself since the blue-eyed young man came to them. Maria was strangely comforted giving the gift, and realized her heart did not seem empty anymore.

At this moment, she studied his lean figure as he was standing at the front window, staring out and running the beads absently through his fingers in an automatic action. Maria wondered if he even realized he was doing the repetitive motion. As she looked at him, an amused grin on her lips, he turned his indigo eyes to her and smiled shyly. She instantly felt her heart melt.

"I-I-I c-c-can w-w-w- work outs-s-ide s-s-soon," he said softly, the ever present stammer making him duck his head and work the beads faster. She could tell he was hiding the wince and headache that came with talking.

His Spanish was otherwise flawless. Maria wondered where he had lived before; she knew most of the families near here and had heard nothing about a missing son or worker. The idea of him going away brought fear to her heart, and she was happy he showed no inclination to leave. In fact, he thought she was his mother and she did not say or do anything to change that thought. God have brought him here for her heart, she was sure. Maria stepped to his side and lifted his chin with her finger.

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"Miel," she said, getting him to focus his eyes on her own. "It is a little soon for heavy work. When the headaches stop, then you can start a little at a time, all right?"

"I-I d-d-don't re-re-remember what t-t-to do anyw-w-way." He grinned in a sad, self-conscious way and looked away, his eyes in a pained squint. Automatically, his fingertips touched the large bruise and lump on the left side of his head hidden under his thick hair. Maria laughed at the comment; the boy had a sense of humor that showed itself at the strangest times.

Maria pulled his hand down from his head and gently combed his hair back with her fingers. She smiled affectionately as the pain lines slowly melted from his face. "Don't rush it, *meil*." She turned to go, his eyes still on his toes, when he asked the long overdue question that part of her was dreading to answer.

"W-what is m-m-my n-n-name?"

Maria froze for a long second and then slowly turned back to him, her heart racing as she tried to control the rising panic. What should she tell him? Her mouth opened a bit, but nothing came out.

He immediately flushed, embarrassed, and pretended to study the beads as his fingers worked them nervously. Shifting his feet, he mumbled lowly as his forehead furrowed from the ever present torment that speech brought. "I-I-I-I'm s-s-sorry, m-m-mama. I d-d-don't r-r-r-rem-m-m-mber. *Es-s- stup-pido*." The stammering became worse with his embarrassment and self-disgust, and he consciously spat out the last word at the expense of a sharp stab to his temple.

Maria realized he didn't see her hesitation as fear, but as some kind of judgment on his condition. Guilt drained away, and she immediately came to a decision – one based on grief and fear, and yet directly from the heart.

"Your name is Carlos, *mijo*. Carlos Arroyo."

CHAPTER SIX

When Murdoch and Scott rode from the town of Jackson, Johnny had been gone for over a month. The worried Lancers had checked every ranch on the roads leading into Jackson, as well as all the mercantile stores and saloons in and near the small town. They spoke with the local sheriff, but he hadn't heard of any strangers in the area.

Murdoch thanked the lawman and wired Teresa about their lack of progress before they rode out.

"I figure it'll take about five days to get to San Andreas if we stop at all the ranches between here and there," Murdoch calculated out loud. He saw the grim look on his elder son and knew that it must mirror his own. "We'll find him," he said earnestly.

Scott just smiled sadly and nodded, lost in his feelings of helplessness and wandering thoughts. He was quiet most of the day, and when the time came to stop for the night he was ready to talk in an effort to stave off the growing feeling of loss. "You take care of the horses and I'll start some dinner."

"That'll be fine." Murdoch had noticed the subdued manner of his son, but didn't push. The older man wasn't too inclined to talk, either, but the idea of a silent dinner was too depressing. The eldest Lancer was glad when Scott began to chatter on his return from bedding down the horses.

"There's nothing like a summer night for star gazing. Look at that sky." Scott looked up as he stoked the fire, and his father followed his gaze.

"It is beautiful," Murdoch said quietly. "But for some reason it looks even better on Lancer land."

Scott laughed shortly and turned his attention on the coals. "Remember when Johnny and I stayed out at the north line shack for a couple of days last month?"

Murdoch settled down next to the fire and began to unroll his bedroll. "That was to fix that footbridge."

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“Yeah,” Scott said with a grin. “I tried to teach Johnny some astronomy. I pointed out the constellation of Taurus and he asked me if the flies had a name.”

A look of confusion crossed the older man’s face. “Flies?”

Scott glanced at his father with eyes sparkling with humor. “Yes, flies. He pointed out a cluster of stars right over what would be Taurus’ rump. Johnny said it looked like flies over the bull’s butt.”

Murdoch automatically looked to the sky and found the constellation in question. “The Seven Sisters? He called the Seven Sisters ‘flies over the bull’s butt?’”

Chuckling, Scott nodded vigorously and grinned. “Leave it to my brother to see things in a different way!” They both laughed a bit, and then the younger man fell silent. “I miss his point of view, Murdoch.”

Serious once again, the elder found his son’s worried eyes and said softly. “Me too.” Then he repeated the mantra that kept their hopes alive. “We’ll find him.”



Every time Carlos Arroyo stepped outside he felt completely different; free, energized and ready to work. It didn’t take long for frustration to invade the free feeling as his body failed him within minutes, time after time.

“You were very sick, *mijo*,” Maria said sympathetically. “You need to have patience. Your body will catch up.”

Carlos always nodded at his mother’s response, grateful she was there to help him and at the same time annoyed that he needed the help. His emotions rose and fell at the drop of a hat and that rankled him, too. It seemed like he was always in some inner, personal war with himself. Talking hurt, so he avoided that. More and more he found himself in the barn caring for the lone cow, the pair of goats, and his favorite, the stocky, big-eared horse.

The young man was plagued by a dark void in his mind that made up a lot of his past. He remembered his childhood in small flashes of memory – a dark haired mother with fuzzy features, busy, dirty towns and . . . and something that was always on the edge of the darkness. Carlos felt most at ease when he groomed Conejo; those were the times when his mind seemed to calm. The work was not physically taxing, and he felt a connection with the small horse that had accepted him without question and never asked anything of him except a friendly word or petting.

At first, Caesar was completely shocked when he’d found out that Maria had told the boy his name was Carlos. For days he juggled feelings of alarm for his wife’s sanity, guilt that the lie seemed to help her, and affection for the stranger who was quickly worming his way into his heart. He had noticed how good the

young man was with the animals, and how he treated his wife with love and respect, and knew he would be a good hand at the ranch as well as a wonderful son.

There, he'd said it: son. The possibility that this Carlos could take the place of his dead son both chilled and cheered him. For now, he would let it ride. No one had come looking for the boy, who could be easily described by the blue eyes and decidedly un-farmer like, flashy clothing he had been wearing when he first came here. The fancy silver studded pants and colorful shirt were cleaned and stashed away in the barn with the holster and gun, replaced by the simple clothing of man that worked the land with his hands.

Could gaining a son be that simple? Carlos wondered. He also wondered about the other half of the lost pair and knew he'd have to check on the palomino soon just to try and ease his mind completely. The opportunity came when Carlos had been with them for a month.

The trio was seated at the small breakfast table, the sun just rising over the foothill and the morning's light chores finished. Carlos played with his food, pushing it around with his fork in a manner the married couple had come to recognize as a sign that he wanted to say something, but was reluctant to speak.

"What is it, son?" Caesar said, tearing a tortilla in half. The endearing term slipped from his tongue easily, and he didn't even know he'd uttered it.

Troubled blue eyes looked up at him through dark bangs, and Carlos's hand dropped in his lap. "I-I w-w-was w-w-wonderin' if I c-c-could t-t-try w-w-workin' w-w-with C-Conejo." His left hand automatically touched the side of his head, but the pained expression that usually accompanied speech had lessened in the past few days.

"You mean in the field?" Maria asked with raised brows. Carlos glanced up, nodded, and looked shyly back at his plate, resuming the rearrangement of his food. Maria looked to her husband and nodded.

Caesar smiled. "I don't see why not. You're ready to work, aren't you?"

The statement caused the young man's head to tilt up, his eyes bright with hope.

"Y-yes, s-s-sir."

"I'll help you hitch him up, but you have to promise to stop and rest often, and stop completely if you get another headache. Agreed?" Caesar had to work hard to keep a concerned, fatherly expression directly in the face of the joyous response of the young man. Carlos nodded shortly, and then dug into his breakfast with zeal.

After breakfast, they went to the barn and hitched up the small horse together. Caesar stayed by Carlo's side the entire time, coaching him on the details of working a horse to plow. Carlos caught on quickly, but also tired just as

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quickly. Caesar could see his valiant efforts to hide his pain and fatigue, but just before noon it became too much to ignore. Caesar knew the boy had over extended himself when he went back to the house without argument and was asleep in his room before Conejo was unhitched. That's when Cesar decided to take the opportunity to check the golden horse in the hills.

Conejo seemed to know where they were going and reached the box canyon in good time. At first there was no sign of the horse but within minutes Conejo's substantial ears perked in one direction and a flash of white moved in the shade of the oaks. The plain bay rumbled a greeting as the palomino walked into the sun.

Caesar was pleased at what he saw. The golden coat had healed nicely, the only indication of the raw spots visible due to the shorter, darker hair growing in. Ribs were no longer as visible, and the limp was practically non-existent, but Caesar's practiced eye could see that one hock was still thicker than the other. Forced, extended rest was the best thing that could have happened to this animal, and for a moment the parallel between horse and owner was clear to the Mexican.

"*Muy bueno, caballo hermano!* You are almost healed. But what are we to do with you, eh? You cannot stay here through the winter and you cannot come to my home yet. Autumn is upon us, you know."

Barranca stopped about six feet away, a distance Caesar recognized as the horse's comfort zone. He slid from Conejo's back and dropped the reins in a ground tie, then moved to the saddle bags where he removed a bag of grain. The palomino's ears twitched in interest, but he did not come closer. Caesar walked to the side, two sets of eyes watching closely as he dumped the grain on the ground. The gold horse ambled over and began to eat, one ear toward his visitors. The man went to his saddle bag and pulled out a stiff brush.

"You need this, Oro, so stand still." He stepped up to the horse without hesitation and Barranca accepted it. Caesar brushed him firmly as he ate, and even managed to untangle a major part of the palomino's tail before the horse decided he'd had enough by moving just out of the man's reach. The horse seemed to crave his voice, however, and lingered just at the edge of his comfort zone, his ears twitching as Caesar spoke.

"I don't know what to do, Oro." Caesar looked down at his hands and fiddled with the brush. "The boy makes Maria happy, and Maria seems to calm the boy. He is like a son and I can't let him go. He . . . he makes us whole. A family." Gold ears faced him as the blond tail swished. "He is good for us. We need him just a little while longer. Do you understand?"

The palomino didn't give an opinion one way or the other. He simply enjoyed the cadence of speech with active ears and warm, topaz eyes. Caesar smiled. "I am sure you miss the boy. I can tell. He is doing well, and getting better every day. I'm sure you will be together again, someday." The words made him

choke, and he felt his eyes swim. Would he be able to let the boy go when the time came? If the time came?

Caesar swallowed hard and turned his back on his attentive audience, moving to the plain mount that was his. He gathered up the reins and swung up, urging the little bay out of the box canyon without another word.

Barranca followed the pair at a distance for a little while, then stopped at the mouth of the canyon and watched them until they were out of sight. The horse studied the horizon for a bit longer, seeming to make a decision, then turned on his hindquarters and walked slowly back into his canyon to wait.



Scott was physically tired and spiritually weary, and he could tell by the hard lines on his father's face that he wasn't alone.

Tomorrow would be one month since the missing Lancer was overdue, and it was like he'd fallen off the face of the Earth. They had been to at least two dozen ranches of various sizes between Jackson and San Andreas and no one had seen Johnny.

They were on the wagon worn road to San Andreas when they saw a lone rider in the distance along the edge of the foothills. The pair exchanged a silent look, and understood the unspoken question between them. They reined their horses toward the rider in unison.

When the man on the small bay realized the two riders were coming to him, he stopped and waited.

"*Hola!*" Murdoch called when he saw the typical Mexican clothing of their target. "*Cómo está usted?*" The two Lancers reined in a comfortable distance from the man.

"*Bueno, gracias.*" Scott noticed that the small, stout horse had absurdly large ears. "*Lata yo ayuda usted?*"

"Yes, you can help us," Murdoch said with a smile. "Do you have a farm near here?"

"Si, up this canyon a little way. Why?"

"Just wanted to know if you knew the area and the people around here. We're looking for someone."

"My brother," Scott interjected. "But he doesn't look like me. He's half Mexican, so he's dark, with blue eyes."

"Yes," the eldest Lancer added. "And he rides a palomino horse."

The man's face was impassive. He dropped his head and rubbed his chin with his rough hand, taking his time to answer. The long, brown ears of the horse relaxed sideways as the man thought. "I am sorry, *señors,*" the man said slowly.

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After another silent moment he raised his eyes to them, his expression no different than when he first greeted them. "I cannot help you."

Scott nodded tiredly and reined Charlemagne back toward the road. Murdoch managed a smile.

"*Gracias*. Can you tell us how far to town and a bed for the night?"

"Two hours," the man replied. "Go to Bonita's. Her cooking is excellent."

"Thanks. We'll be on our way, then." The big man reined his sorrel to follow the departing bay.

Caesar Arroyo, his heart racing in his chest, quickly crossed himself and looked to the heavens, feeling slightly sick. "Just a while longer. Please understand." His eyes teared as he spoke to God and asked forgiveness. "Just a little longer."



The travel weary men visited two more ranches before riding into the small town of San Andreas and directly to the small, but brightly painted sign of Bonita's Boarding House. Murdoch took their bedrolls and saddlebags while Scott led the horses to the livery, both men working silently in a well-practiced dance of duties.

Murdoch took a moment to stretch as he stood on the boardwalk in front of Bonita's. His body ached from head to toe, and he craved a hot bath. With a quick, practiced glance up and down the narrow street - hoping to see the familiar form of his younger son - he sighed and used his hat to slap some dust from his pants before stepping inside the establishment.

The older man knew time was running out. He'd been away from Lancer far too long, and the long summer days had shortened with the approach of autumn. The nights held that familiar seasonal crispness that signaled the end of one season and the start of another. He would have to go back to the ranch and prepare for the winter storms; it wasn't fair to expect Cipriano, Teresa and Jelly to shoulder the burden. Murdoch knew he would have to bring up the subject to Scott; San Andreas would be the elder Lancer's last stop.

He felt that quitting was accepting the fact that Johnny was not coming home and it was hard to swallow. Murdoch pushed those thoughts aside when he approached the small front desk and was greeted by a tiny Mexican woman he assumed was Bonita and got a room for the night.

The livery was small and as neat as a barn could be and it made Scott slightly homesick for the barn at Lancer. By the time he got the saddles pulled the proprietor hustled in with a yellow-toothed grin and a sack of oats over his shoulder.

"*Yo lata hacer aquel para tí, señor. Está usted quedando largo?*"

Scott again damned himself for not being any better at his Spanish now than he was a few months after his arrival in California. His moment of confusion was enough for the lanky stableman to put two and two together, and he continued to speak in broken English.

"I will do that, *señor*," he said slowly, indicating with a wave of his hand the action of brushing the horses. "How long?"

"Oh," Scott replied, both relieved and embarrassed. "A couple of nights. Two," he held up his fingers. "*Dos or tres?*"

The man nodded his head, dropped the grain in a corner with a smile and picked up a brush. "*Bueno. Dos o tres noches, yo comprender.*"

The bone tired Easterner stepped aside and produced some coins from his pocket. He patted Charlemagne on the neck and handed the money to the stableman. "*Gracias*," he said softly as he turned to go.

San Andreas was in the process of shutting down for the night. Scott saw a man dragging display items back into the tiny mercantile and the smithy hanging up his tools. Piano music, however, tinkled from a small place that glowed with lamplight in the failing daylight. Scott, realizing the hour, sped up his step to the mercantile and asked where he could send a wire. The aproned man frowned for a moment until the fair skinned man made his intention clear, then nodded vigorously and led Scott inside to the back of the store.

"Emilio!" The man called. "*Usted deber enviar un mensaje! Emilio?*"

A dusty teenager trotted in from the back door and appraised the customer with a quick up and down glance. "*Si, papa, le oigo*," he said breathlessly. Then to Scott, "You wish to send a wire, *señor?*"

Relieved, Scott nodded and smiled. "Yes, thank you." He dictated the message telling Teresa that they arrived, that they hadn't found any sign of Johnny, and they would probably be here for a few days.

The boy scratched the message down on a paper then glanced up at his customer with a bright expression. "You are looking for someone?"

Quickly, Scott told the story of his missing brother. Emilio nodded his head thoughtfully, and then made a suggestion. "*Señor*, we are having the annual *Festival de la Cosecha* . . . um, festival of harvest . . . next week. Everybody for miles around will be here in town for two days. It would be a good time to ask about your brother."

Scott brightened. "That sounds perfect, Emilio. Thank you." He clapped the boy on the shoulder and paid for the wire, including a tip.

Emilio smiled and nodded. "*Gracias*. I will get this message off right now." He disappeared into a small dark room which was softly lit by the time Scott stepped back outside.

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He couldn't remember the last time he had a full night's sleep; then again, that thought was a joke because he couldn't remember a whole lot of anything.

Sitting up in the small bed, Carlos let the blankets fall aside to allow the coolness of the night to surround him. The sharpness of the air on his skin forced him to focus and get his mind away from the disturbing dreams that plagued him night after night. Before, he didn't remember what he dreamed and just woke up with a headache. Now, he could recall snatches of visions, none of which he wanted to remember.

So much blood!

Mama kept assuring him it was a normal process of healing, a mantra that calmed his heart and steadied his breathing in the darkness of night. He'd hoped that the physical work would help him get dreamless sleep, but it didn't work today. He rubbed his temple in an attempt to hold the growing pain at bay.

With a smooth motion that was as silent as a shadow, Carlos slipped from the bed and into the kitchen. After a momentary pause by the brightly painted pitcher, he sat by the small window that overlooked the fields, a cool glass of water between his hands.

Moonlight robbed the night of total darkness, spilling silver light over the fences and fields of heavy crops. His heart filled with pride at what he saw, but he was painfully aware of the feeling that something was missing, and that's what plagued him day after day and night after night.

The black hole in his mind refused to be filled with color. The missing time made itself known obliquely through dreams and flashes of scenes during the day, and it was driving him to the edge of madness. He would be fine if the flashes would stop, but they persisted along with the feeling of . . . something. Something he craved to put his finger on and pin down.

A sharp sting in his hand brought him back from his mental search. He dumbly looked at his hand and saw that he'd broken the glass with his grip and he was bleeding from several small cuts. As he looked at his hand, fascinated by the small chunks of glass protruding from it, the remaining water ran to the table's edge and dripped onto his lap like chilly fingers tapping, tapping, tapping. Finally coming to his senses, Carlos leaped to his feet and stared at the drops. The gentle beat of the water dripping on the floor matched the pace of the blood dripping from the worst of his cuts to the table; the syncopation momentarily hypnotized him.

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

The tapping changed to the clopping of horses' hooves. In his mind's eye he saw a golden horse walking toward him with interested ears, warm, calm eyes, that glowed warmly with color.

"Carlos!"

His mother's voice made him jump, and the horse disappeared from his inner eye in a flash.

"M-m-mama ! I-I-I . ." he didn't get a chance to say anymore before the whirlwind of a woman snatched up his hand and plucked out the glass, then wrapped the hand with a dish cloth.

Carlos could only stare and quietly accept the ministrations, numbly silent in desperation as he tried to call back the horse in his mind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

That night, Scott and Murdoch indulged themselves with a hot bath and a barber's shave. The time on the trail had made them sore and tired, so they held off any conversation until they sat to dinner. Bonita proved to be the cook the man on the trail professed her to be, and they enjoyed the meal immensely.

Murdoch decided to voice his plan over coffee. "I need to return to Lancer, Scott. I . . . we have been gone too long."

"I'd like to keep looking, sir." Scott told his father about the Autumn Festival the liveryman had mentioned, and Murdoch agreed it was a good opportunity. "It starts next week, so that gives me time to check the area east of here a little more."

"This is what I'll do, then. I can be in Sonora in a day. They know Johnny there, so checking the town should be easy. I'll wire you from there with what I find out then I'll ride to Stockton and take the train south. That will get me home in three days, at the earliest." Murdoch traced the rim of his coffee cup with his finger as he watched the steam rise. Softly, he said, "I don't want you to think I'm giving up, son. I still want one of us to keep on looking."

Scott glanced up and smiled a sad smile at his father, knowing it had been a hard decision to make. "I understand. It's just that we don't have a lot of time until the first snow hits the foothills, and . . ." His voice trailed off. It was an unspoken thought that if they didn't find the missing Lancer before winter, they probably wouldn't find him at all.

"I know," Murdoch finished for him "There's still time. We'll figure out the next step after the Festival."

Scott nodded, and returned to watching the trembling surface of his coffee.



Maria was the one that brought up the Festival de la Cosecha to Carlos. The boy's sharp eyes had noticed the extra produce they had put aside, and how the

nicest of the harvest was being carefully tended. And there was Maria's extra time in the kitchen. Around the dinner table one night, Carlos finally asked what was going on.

"Oh, *mijo*, I am so sorry! You do not recall the *Festival de la Cosecha*; I did not think. It is a wonderful way to prepare for the winter. We may not see some of our neighbors for months when winter falls, so this is our way of saying goodbye for the season. I bet you were wondering what was going on!"

The young man nodded, again embarrassed at his ignorance. At first, the idea appealed to him, but as the dinner went on and he listened to his parents' excited chatter of past Festivals, he began to feel apprehensive. He didn't know why, but the idea of being around so many people made his heart clench in his chest.

Caesar picked up on his son's quietness. "It's all right if you don't go," he said softly. "It may be difficult."

"He will be fine," Maria said with conviction. "There will be a lot of pretty girls for you to look at, and *Señor Alvarado* offered us a place to stay for the night." She reached over and patted her son's hand. "You will like it. Will you go for me?"

Carlos glanced at her and smiled, then nodded in agreement before focusing on his fork. Caesar reached over in sympathy and patted his hand. "Just remember that you will not be alone." His son nodded an acknowledgement.

Apprehension for the upcoming event grew stronger with each passing day. Torn, the young man was curious about seeing new and different things, but he was also well aware that his speaking difficulties and headaches would set him apart. Carlos wasn't sure he wanted to expose what he felt was a tremendous weakness to such a large crowd; the idea of staying home was becoming more and more preferable.

It didn't help that the nightmares seemed to be getting worse. There were so many flashes of so many different places it was dizzying, and all of them were washed in blood, red being the only color in his dreams.

Except one place – it was white and grand and set in a rolling valley surrounded in green. The gold horse had led him there one night after a particularly violent episode startled him awake, awash in sweat. With his heart hammering in his chest and needle-like pain searing his head, Carlos had thrown himself from his bed and managed to wobble outside in the middle of the night for the brisk coldness to slap him into some kind of focus.

As he stood just outside the doorway, facing the unmarked grave he'd never asked about, the horse had appeared. At first, he dismissed it as a crop-seeking deer, his sight somewhat blurred from the pain in his temple, but when a drifting cloud cleared the moon and the yard and field were splashed in silver, the animal seemed to glow.

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Pain forgotten, Carlos felt his breath catch in his throat as the white castle hovered like a fog around the horse that then turned and walked slowly under a white arch, away from the suffering man.

“No!” he whispered, wincing. “D-d-on’t g-go . . .” Pain came back in a jolt, and Carlos had to hold his head between his hands to keep it from exploding. The beautiful vision faded before his tearing eyes, and was gone so quickly it made him gasp.

With an anguished whimper, he sagged to his knees in the dirt and waited out the pain, wondering if he was awake or asleep, and what was real outside the agony. When it finally faded, he decided then and there to keep all this to himself; there was no reason for his family to know how much he was truly suffering.

Caesar, however, could not be fooled. He noticed the subtle change in his young charge the very next day. Once, a couple of days before they were to leave for the festival, he saw Carlos standing shakily behind the barn, one hand on his temple and the other reaching out like he was trying to touch something. It was then the worried father really looked at his son, and didn’t like what he saw.

The boy had stopped gaining weight, but the loose clothing covered that up. His face should have more color with the time he spent outside, and his speech had not improved. Caesar also suspected the headaches had returned with a vengeance, but the boy was a master at hiding his condition.

Caesar tried to speak to his wife about the matter, and that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea for Carlos to go to the Festival, but she would not hear him.

“He is just excited. You just wait and see, *mi esposo*, he will make us proud.”

Maria brushed his concerns aside like sand with a broom. Caesar, then, wondered about her frame of mind. How could she not see how their boy was suffering? Was she living in a world of her own hopes and dreams and not in this one? He quickly said a prayer for help, and left the happily humming woman to her chores. The east field needed attention, and it was a good opportunity to keep Carlos close by his side and try to keep his own rising concerns in check.



Scott decided to visit one more ranch before the day was over. The Festival was to start in two days, so he decided to spend the next day in town and watch the preparations. He understood that most everyone in the tight knit Mexican community for miles around would be there. Since Johnny hadn’t been seen in Sonora, this was a great opportunity to cover most of the territory between here and Sonora at one time.

Not able to sit and wait for the farmers to come to town, the fair haired Lancer decided to give some of the farms further out from San Andreas a visit. This

one, the last on his list, wasn't on the Cattleman's Association map and he heard about it by word of mouth, which is how he found out about most of these small farms.

The fields were ripe with produce and well cared for. A lone cow watched him from a snug looking barn and a pair of goats wandered around a neat pile of grassy hay. The small lane that led to the house was well worn and lined with native flowering plants that were fading with the summer. A small Mexican woman stepped out from the house to greet him, wiping her hands on a white apron as he approached.

"*Buenas dias*," Scott called, pulling Charlemagne to a stop near her.

"*Buenas dias*," she replied with a smile.

"Do you speak English?" the tired Lancer asked hopefully.

"Si, a little," the woman replied with a heavy accent, nodding her head.

"My name is Scott Lancer," he started, the speech well-rehearsed. "I am looking for my brother. My *hermano*."

"I have not seen any strangers for months, señor Lancer," the woman said hesitatingly, struggling with the words.

Scott's shoulders sagged and he smiled tiredly. "Thank you. If you see a dark haired man with blue eyes riding a palomino, please let the sheriff or marshal in town know?"

The woman smiled and nodded. "*Yo comprender*, um, yes. I am sorry you have . . . lost . . . *su hermano*. My son has blue eyes, also. I will watch for you."

"Thank you, ma'm. *Adios*."

"*Adios!*"

The woman returned to her house as Scott reined around to leave. As he turned, he noticed a grave not far from the house and figured that the woman knew what it felt like to lose someone you loved.

CHAPTER NINE

Scott moved through the crowd feeling the infectious joy. For the first time in a long while he felt like smiling – the music in the streets, the bright clothing and happy people and the running, laughing children – he let it surround him and absorbed the good feelings. Recognizing many of the people from both his time in town and his trips to the ranches, the visiting Lancer felt welcome even though he still struggled with the language.

The celebration was in full swing by late afternoon with the anticipation of the town wide barbeque set to start at dusk. Even with the thick atmosphere of good will, Scott could not shake the niggling that this was a wasted stop and he was wasting his time. Weaving between the happy people and trading greetings, the thought weighed heavy on his mind all the way to the stairs that lead to Bonita's front door. Once he climbed them and he was on the boardwalk Scott paused and pulled his hat from his head as he gave the throng one last look, a wistful smile on his lips.

As he turned to Bonita's door, the flash of a profile across the crowded street stopped him cold. His eyes quickly found the face for a second before the milling crowd and joyous dancers closed around it, and the familiar forehead with the unruly lock of hair was undeniable. He held his breath and kept his eyes locked on the spot; the dancers swayed aside and he saw the face again, now ducked in what Scott recognized as a posture of shyness.

"Johnny!" The whisper was hoarse as Scott's throat went dry, and instantly he was in motion.

Scott jumped from the boardwalk and fought his way through the crowd. What was once a friendly gathering became a teeming mass keeping him away from his quest. Deaf to the protests he received as he pushed his way through the press of celebrating bodies, Scott found it impossible to keep his long lost brother in sight. AS he worked his way through the weaving, flowing crowd Scott saw flashes like individual photographs of Johnny's actions- he looked up, he glanced

aside, a hand brushed the hair from his forehead, then he turned and began to move away.

“No! Johnny!” The frantic brother barely noticed the woman at Johnny’s side as he tried to close the gap between him and the retreating form. He’d almost broken free of the crowd when a strong hand closed on his arm and pulled him off balance.

“*Señor!*”

Scott tried to break free, impeded by the press of bodies, but the man’s grip was like iron. “Let me go!” he snapped, his eyes glued on his brother’s back. With an unsuccessful jerk to release his arm, Scott finally focused his angry eyes on the source. “Let me go! My brother . . .”

“*Señor*, hear me! He does not know you!”

Scott jerked his arm roughly. “Let me go!” he yelled.

“Please!” The man was not particularly tall, but very strong and powerfully built. His sorrowful, pleading eyes and quavering voice were what stopped Scott in his tracks. “*Señor*, please hear me. Your brother does not know you!”

“What?” Scott demanded as his struggle to get free ceased. “What are you saying? Who are you?”

The small man’s eyes swam with pooled tears as he spoke. “Your brother, *señor*. He does not know who he is. He thinks he is that woman’s son . . .”

Astonished, Scott’s jaw dropped and he glanced at the pair just now departing from his line of sight. He’d barely noticed the woman at Johnny’s side before, but he could see that she was guiding his brother by his elbow. Scott turned his wide eyes on the small man who then released his arm.

“. . . and my son,” the man finished sadly.

“What?”

Wringing his hands, the small man nodded to a side street. “It is more quiet over there, *señor*. Can we talk?”

Scott grabbed his arm and practically dragged him to the alley. “Tell me what is going on or I will get the Sheriff. Now!”

“Some friends told me you were looking for a man, so I was looking for you. Your brother thinks his name is Carlos Arroyo,” the man started.

“And why would he think that, mister?” Scott demanded.

“Caesar. My name is Caesar Arroyo, and he thinks that because that is what we told him,” Caesar replied sadly, dropping his eyes as he fiddled with the hem of his shirt. The story came out in a rushed mix of Spanish and English, and Scott had to concentrate to understand. “I found him badly injured in a rock slide over a month ago. I got him to our hacienda but he did not wake up for many days. When he finally did, he did not know who he was. My wife and I did not know that for a long time because he did not talk much. For some reason talking makes his head

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hurt.” He tapped the left side of his head. “And he talks with much difficulty, even now.”

A look of alarm crossed Scott’s features. “So why didn’t you tell him you didn’t know who he was? That he was an injured stranger?”

The man dropped the frayed hem and began to wring his hands instead. “My wife . . . we . . . lost our son four months ago. He got hurt and died. Maria . . . she could not accept it. When your brother came, she came alive again.” A tear now trickled down the man’s face, the inner conflict of the decisions quite clear. “Now I am worried, *señor*, for your brother and my wife. She truly believes the boy is hers. She believes he is our dead Carlos.”

Scott’s mouth was in a tight line before he spoke. He met the man’s eyes when he thought his anger was under control. “What about your neighbors and friends? What about your family? Didn’t anyone notice?”

“This is our first time away from the farm with Car . . . your brother. I told anyone who asked that he was my cousin from Mexico, here to help us. They know he is not our son and have simply overlooked some of the things she says. They feel sorry for her.” Caesar’s voice became soft and husky. “They are good people. And they believe he is my nephew.”

Blue eyes began to burn. “This can’t continue, Caesar. Johnny needs to come home with me.”

Caesar’s head bobbed. “I know, I know. I have known for a while, since I first saw you on the trail.” A flash of surprise crossed the Anglo face. “We met on the trail and I said I could not help you. I am sorry.” He paused, Scott’s silence telling him to continue. “Something is wrong now, *señor*, and I fear for my wife and your brother. I fear for their . . .” At a loss for words, he tapped his head.

“Their minds? Why?” Scott fought down the surge of alarm rising in his gut.

“Carlos . . . I mean, Johnny, is having nightmares. And he sees things when he is awake. The headaches are coming back again. And I know I should never have let Maria call him our son, but she was so happy and he seemed to be so content.” Caesar’s voice cracked and wavered with emotion. “I am afraid what she will do to herself if we let the boy go. I am afraid the boy is going mad. I do not know what to do!”

A parade of emotions rolled through Scott’s mind, but he kept himself in check as he sorted them out. At first he didn’t care about what happened to these two people that had simply hijacked his brother. Then he saw that Caesar and Maria were not malicious people, but ones put in the devastating position of losing a son, and the people that had ultimately saved Johnny’s life.

He’d seen lots of physical and mental injuries as a result of the war, and knew that the idea of treating mental illness, whether from injuries or from birth,

was a vague, barely acceptable practice in these parts. What he didn't know were the risks involved in any kind of treatment.

Where should he start?

The look of hope on Carlos's face could not be ignored. Scott could tell that the soft spoken farmer wanted to do the right thing, and that Caesar saw himself right now where Scott, too, saw himself: What can they do and not do more damage?

"Has Johnny been seen by a doctor?"

Caesar shook his head. "There is no doctor here, *señor*."

"Scott," the Lancer said. "My name is Scott Lancer."

A weak smile lessened the worry lines around Caesar's face a little. "*Señor* Lancer. There is a doctor that comes through about four times a year, but we usually take care of our own here."

Scott nodded in understanding as he chewed his lower lip. He needed help. "I'm going to wire some people. Are you staying in town tonight?" Caesar nodded. "Tell me where. After I get some instructions, I will meet you at the barbeque or leave a note where you're staying. I can see Johnny is being taken care of, and that alone eases my mind. Thank you for that."

Caesar had the decency to blush at the compliment, knowing it was all that was good about this whole affair.

"Where is your farm?" Scott asked softly. Caesar quickly sketched in the dirt where his farm was. "I've been there!" Scott said, realizing where it was.

"*Si*. You spoke with my wife. Car . . . Johnny was with me that day, working in the east field. She told me that you had come by, and what she said to you." The Mexican sounded embarrassed. "And she truly believed what she told you. That is what makes me so afraid."

Scott understood now how the man must feel. 'My son has blue eyes, also.' Maria Arroyo had no idea that the man living with them was a stranger and not her son. He only hoped Sam could help him deal with this, but for now all he wanted was to see his brother up close.

Caesar read his face easily, and put a comforting hand on Scott's arm. "You want to see him, don't you?" Scott nodded. "This way. Maria was taking him to the stockyard to see the horses. He has a way with them. Oh," he stopped Scott. "I know where his horse is. The palomino?"

Scott brightened. "You have Barranca?"

"No, I do not have him, but I know where he is. I could not bring him home at first because he was hurt, but later because . . ." a guilty look crossed his face.

"Because you didn't want the connection to Johnny."

"*Si*," he said lowly, but then brightened. "But I don't think the horse would let me catch him, anyway. He is very . . . *sospechoso*."

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“Suspicious? Yes, he is. He only trusts Johnny. He’s fine now?”

Caesar directed Scott into the crowded street. “Yes, he is doing well.”

They moved through the dancers and revelers, the barbeque smell heavy in the air. The stockyards were on the outside edge of the town, behind the meager collection of buildings that made up central San Andreas. The corrals were full of cattle and the horses on display were tied around the outside of the corrals. People milled around the animals, trying to get a last look before it was too dark to see.

Scott and Caesar walked side by side for a few minutes then the smaller man pointed at a far corral. Scott could just barely see the figure in the plain white shirt, but recognized the frame of his missing brother. He started forward, but Caesar’s hand restrained him again.

“Señor Scott, please. I am afraid if you startle him he will get one of his headaches and he will have to rest for hours.”

“They’re that bad?”

Caesar nodded. “Si. We wondered about bringing him here, but he was very persuasive.”

The older Lancer brother couldn’t help but smile, but he felt his throat choke up. “Yes,” he said quietly. “He can be that.”

“I also do not know how my Maria will react.”

They quickly devised a plan where Caesar would get Maria to face him while Scott bumped his brother on the opposite side and issued an apology. Neither man voiced their concern as to what would happen after that. Scott mentally prepared for anything, knowing his brother’s somewhat explosive personality.

Scott walked around where he could watch his brother’s profile while Caesar positioned himself to approach Maria. Johnny was standing by a good looking chestnut stallion, but his entire attention was on his toes at the moment. Two young girls about Teresa’s age were giggling and talking to him but Johnny appeared to be doing his best to disappear. Scott could see an embarrassed flush on his brother’s unusually pale cheek as he watched his brother dig at the dirt with the toe of his shoe and remain speechless.

The lack of confidence does not suit him, the worried brother observed. ‘*And I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in anything but boots!*’ Scott realized when he saw the simple shoes on his brother’s feet.

Scott’s gaze traced up his brother’s legs as he studied him. The clothes he wore were so different; the plain white shirt was loose and untucked over plain, loose pants were a far cry from the snug, low slung outfit he usually wore.

When Maria turned to speak to Caesar, Scott made his move. He walked forward and bumped his brother’s arm from the back then stopped immediately, his every nerve alive with anticipation.

“Excuse me,” he said as he turned, barely hearing his own voice through his pounding heart. He found his brother’s eyes and smiled; the eyes that met his dropped almost immediately.

“I -i-it’s-s-s alr-r-right,” Johnny said so softly in Spanish that Scott had to strain to hear him.

“Are you all right?” Scott continued, his heart breaking inside as he took his brother’s elbow in an effort to get him to look up again. He wondered if Johnny could feel the racing pulse in his fingertips where he touched his arm.

It took a moment for Johnny to raise his eyes again to meet Scott’s. What was in the dark blue Scott could not discern, but it wasn’t recognition. There was a measure of sadness edged in pain as his eyes squinted slightly - and a touch of fear. His long fingers rose to the left side of his head and the usually handsome face grimaced horribly as he spoke. “*E-e-st-st-stoy m-m-m-multa, p-por favor. I -I’m f-f-fine!*” he stuttered through gritted teeth, pulling his arm free and obviously embarrassed. The girls giggled again and one reached for his other arm with a quiet word, but Johnny quickly backed away from the three of them rubbing his temple. Then he spun on his heel and brushed against Maria in his haste to escape.

“Carlos!” Maria fell in behind the hurting young man, and with an apologetic glance in Scott’s direction, Caesar followed.

Scott was too shocked to move. He watched his brother fade away in the darkness like a ghost, the happy celebration now merely an obscene background to his sorrow.



Getting the wire off to Lancer was both difficult and unsettling. Scott wished he could speak with Murdoch and Sam face to face; he needed the reassurance of friends and family that Johnny would be all right. As it stood the unconfident, fearful man he’d seen earlier was a far cry from the Johnny Lancer he’d come to know.

With a hand still shaking from the encounter an hour ago, Scott went over the telegraph again in his head to make sure it was clear enough as he lifted a shot of whiskey to his lips:

Located Johnny in San Andreas <Stop> He is well and being cared for. <Stop> Head injury caused amnesia. <Stop> Does not recognize me. <Stop> Have Sam advise. <Stop> Scott.

He tried to imagine the reception that particular message would bring, and had to force himself to push the unsettling thoughts aside. Smells of barbeque wafted into the packed saloon, upsetting Scott’s stomach. He tried to ignore it, but the desire to see his brother again was too strong. With a toss of his head, he

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downed the last of the whiskey and made his way through the crowded bar to the barbeque area outside.

Knowing his brother's inherent dislike for crowds and sharply remembering his behavior this afternoon, Scott knew the Arroyos - and Johnny - would be on the outskirts of the crowd in a quiet location. After getting a small plate of food, which he didn't think he could eat, he moved to the edge of the smiling, laughing crowd and began look around. He checked several bonfires away from the area and finally found the trio seated on a blanket. Maria was chatting gaily, Caesar was eating and listening, but Johnny was pushing his food around with his fork, his head bowed. Scott began to wonder if he ever looked up anymore.

The flames from the flickering fire highlighted Johnny's gaunt cheeks with inky shadow and Scott realized how thin he must be under the loose clothing. After a few moments, Johnny lifted his chin and glanced around as if he felt Scott's stare. Before Scott could turn away, two dark and shiny orbs found him and they both froze.

The Johnny Scott knew could not only hold a stare but return it in spades, but this Johnny soon became visibly edgy. His glances toward Caesar told Scott his brother was becoming upset with the scrutiny, so he turned his back and walked back to his room without eating a bite.



It was dark when the sounds of hooves caught the ears of those in the hacienda. Teresa was finishing up from dinner and Murdoch had just sat down with a brandy. They both made it to the French doors in time to see a young man jump from a horse and jog to them.

"Billy! It's rather late, isn't it? Everything all right?" Murdoch called.

"Yes, Mr. Lancer, but I thought you'd want this right away." Billy held out an envelope just as Jelly puffed up to the gathering.

"What's goin' on here?" The whiskered man huffed. "Don't anyone sleep no more?"

"It's a wire, Jelly," Teresa explained excitedly.

"Thanks, Billy. Go check the kitchen. I'm sure Maria still has some pie left over." Murdoch began to tear the envelope as young Billy thanked him breathily and headed to the kitchen. The patriarch unfolded the message with trembling fingers. After a quick scan, he dropped his hand.

"What?" Unable to read his face, Teresa's heart fluttered anxiously. She felt Jelly's hand on her elbow and appreciated the support. "Murdoch?"

"He found Johnny. He's alive, but . . . sick."

Teresa's face exploded into a smile and she turned to Jelly, expecting to see the same. Instead, she saw that the old man's forehead was furrowed with thought.

"Whatcha mean, sick?" Jelly asked bluntly.

That's when Teresa saw the odd look on Murdoch's face, and her own smiled faded.

"It seems Johnny doesn't remember Scott." The worried father turned the message in his fingers as he spoke, his eyes not focused on anything in particular.

"Doesn't remember Scott? How . . ." Words failed her as the idea sank in.

"Does he remember us?"

"I don't know, honey. Scott wants some advice from Sam."

"Well, if Scott doesn't know what to do, then I'd say they're in quite a fix up there, Murdoch! We need to get up there! Where is he?" Jelly looked like he would leave that instant if given the word.

"He's in San Andreas." Murdoch finally found Jelly's eyes as his mind began to form a plan of action. "I'll go. You and Cip need to hold the fort here."

Jelly snorted in disgust. "You just got back yerself."

Murdoch nodded, "I know, but I've been able to put together a list of what needs to be done, and the three of you have done a good job." He put his big hand on the older man's shoulder. "I need to go, Jelly. He was lost once before, and I found him. Now I have to help him find himself."

Whiskers twitched in disappointment, but he understood. "I'll tell the hands. They'll want to know Johnny's okay. I think." Grumbling dire predictions to himself, Jelly left the house.

"What about me?" Teresa pushed. "Without you, Scott or Johnny here Maria can handle this place easily! I need to see if he's all right, Murdoch!" She put both hands firmly on his forearm and forced him to meet her smoldering eyes.

"Teresa, it's a long trip. We'd have to take the stage to Stockton then rent a carriage to get to San Andreas."

"I don't care. I need to go. Please!"

Murdoch thought for a few moments then nodded his head in agreement.

"All right. We need to leave in the morning. We'll stop and talk to Sam then catch the first stage out." Teresa pecked her surrogate father on the cheek, and hurried to her room to pack. Murdoch called Billy from the kitchen.

"Sir?" the messenger boy replied as he trotted into the room with his mouth full and crumbs on his lips.

"Give this note to Sam." The ranchman scrawled out a short note, and folded it with the wire and some coins. "I hope he's in town."

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"He was when I left, sir," Billy replied, swallowing hard. He took the items with an eager grin. "I'll make sure he gets it." The young man dashed out of the door, and soon the sound of hooves retreated up the road.



Sleep at home had become problematic, but away from home in this small storage room turned guest room, it was impossible. The headache that had driven Carlos to bed also robbed him of sleep, and now that the pain had faded exhaustion tugged his eyelids down.

He stared at the ceiling, trying to settle his mind by making figures out of black shapes in the cracked plaster. Soon, the squiggly lines seemed to move, and the tired man found himself in yet another bloody scene on another dirty street. Victim after victim was blasted from their feet in a red explosion before his eyes, and a particularly spattered gentleman's screams as he flew back jerked Carlos to a rude awakening.

He found himself sitting sideways on the small cot, breathing heavily, wet with sweat and head throbbing. A small whimper escaped his lips - he wasn't sure he could take this too much longer.

Tonight's episodes included the blond stranger he saw at the barbeque; for some reason, he never seemed to be touched with the blood, a point he tried to focus on to forget the rest. Soon, the goose bumps receded and the sweat dried and he launched himself out of bed and stumbled to a small window to look at the stars. He pulled up a rickety chair, sat on it backwards, and hitched his elbows on the sill to gaze outside.

He missed home. The small farm was away from the busyness of the town that made him nervous; too much talk and too much action to keep track of. And the girls - they were very nice to look at, but he had no idea how to talk to them and a lot of them seemed to want to talk to him. Mama just laughed at the attention and said he'd better get used to it.

He didn't want to get used to it. He didn't want to be here in this strange house. He wanted home and Conejo and his own bed. He wanted to remember the details of his life that evaded him in a dark fog in his mind. He wanted to be able to say what he meant and not have to fight for words. He wanted the headaches to be gone.

With the flat of one palm pressed against the glass, Carlos felt the coldness of the outside and smiled. Slowly, he leaned his forehead against the glass and enjoyed the sensation, allowing his eyes to close in exhaustion. The chill of the glass kept him focused and seemed to help the headache. As he relaxed, a gold horse eased into his mind and he slept.

It was just before dawn when he jerked awake, confused by his strange surroundings. His heart raced instantly, and then he recalled where he was and realized he'd actually gotten some restful sleep. Arching his back, he stretched his arms out and enjoyed the pull on his muscles. 'Maybe sleeping in a chair wasn't too smart', he thought.

Muscles stiff from his awkward position, Carlos rose slowly and searched for his shirt and shoes. When he pulled them on, he realized he felt trapped in this strange house so he quietly made his way to the door and let himself out.

The predawn air was cold and refreshing on his face. Empty, the streets felt much more comfortable to him as he shuffled his way to the livery. *Señor* Alvarado, the liveryman whose house they stayed in, had saved a spot for Conejo in the barn. When Carlos pushed open the squeaky door, the small horse nickered a greeting.

Sunlight was trickling in just enough to save lamp oil. Finding a brush, the young man grabbed a handful of oats and stepped up to Conejo's stall door. Another nose bumped him from behind and Carlos turned to find himself eye to eye with the neighboring bay.

"*B-buenos d-dias,*" he said with a smile. The horse nudged him again like an old friend, so Carlos petted his face and gave him part of the oats. Conejo murmured a protest, and with a smile, Carlos gave the small horse the rest of the oats. Curious, he put the brush down and peeked over the door at the bigger horse and nodded appreciatively.

This bay was leggy and strong with a short, shiny coat and long, firm muscling. Without a second thought, the young man slipped in the stall and ran his hand over the glossy coat as the horse chewed contentedly. When he reached the rump, his eye caught the rough area of a brand low on the hip. His finger traced a circled L, and he frowned.

"Stealing my horse?" A voice asked softly. Still, it made him jump back and whirl around guiltily. Carlos found himself facing the blond stranger from the previous day - the one that suddenly showed up in his dreams.

"N-n-no," he said quickly, angry at how defensive he sounded. It took him a moment to realize the stranger was smiling at him, but his eyes were very sad. He, too, had bags under his eyes indicating he didn't sleep very well, either, and Carlos felt a little more at ease.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I was just kidding." Carlos did not respond and concentrated on keeping his expression impassive. "I was just going out for a short ride; I couldn't sleep." The stranger's blue eyes reflected the small smile on his mouth. His face, though, still radiated a sort of sadness that mystified the dark haired man. What did this *gringo* have to be sad about?

Carlos slipped his hand in his pocket and found the rosary beads. "D-d-didn't s-s-s-scare m-m-me," he said lowly as he broke eye connection and dropped

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his gaze. "N-n -nice h-h-horse," he mumbled. Anticipating the inevitable headache, he started to shift his feet nervously and fingered his left temple with the other hand.

"Thank you. His name's Charlemagne." The man looked like he wanted to say more, but didn't. After a few moments he asked, "Did you learn English around here?"

The question caught him off guard. Carlos cocked an eye in the man's direction and opened his mouth to answer, but realized he didn't know what to say; he had no idea where he'd learned English. Suddenly, the stall seemed to be very small and extremely confining, and he also realized that the only way out was through the door the blond man leaned against.

Something in his body language must have indicated his increasing distress because the stranger opened the stall door and held the handsome bay back by the halter.

"Need out?" he asked simply.

Carlos nodded briefly and quickly slipped out. He stood away from the man, working the rosary beads furiously between his fingers as he frowned in confusion. The stranger eyed the beads curiously and, embarrassed, Carlos slipped them away into his pocket. He glanced at the barn door, feeling a strong desire to flee along with the inkling of a new headache, but something held him back.

Nervously, Carlos risked another look at the stranger and saw that he was still looking at him with those sad, blue eyes. "W-w-who a-a-are y-y-you?" he finally ventured, surprising himself at his audacity.

The lean blond smiled and his eyes glistened, but the sadness persisted. "Scott. Call me Scott."

With a quick nod of acknowledgement that ended in a wince, Carlos edged along the wall, out the door and was gone.



Scott fingered the white porcelain coffee cup as he stared at the glistening surface, the food on the adjacent plate untouched. Had he handled the chance meeting with Johnny correctly? Should he have pushed more? The desire to call his long, lost brother by name and bluntly ask if he recognized him was nearly overwhelming, but something told him to tread carefully. Hopefully, Sam would have some advice for him.

Yawning hugely and wishing he'd slept better, Scott couldn't help but recall the dark circles he'd seen under his brother's eyes and figured his own eyes probably looked just as bad. He rubbed his lids with his fingers; they felt grainy and dry. 'How am I going to keep up this façade until Murdoch gets here? Then

what? Now that he knew where Johnny was, it was going to be tough to keep away. Today was the final day of the Festival, and the Arroyos would be leaving for their farm soon, taking Johnny with them. What should he do in the meanwhile?

'Barranca!' Scott smiled instantly. Why didn't he think of that before? He could take this time to get the horse and bring him in. Maybe that was the trigger Johnny needed for his memory! Now that he had a plan, Scott dug into his food, anxious to implement it.

After breakfast Scott went to the livery again and greeted *Señor* Alvarado, who told him where the Arroyos should be. He scouted around the morning revelers who were moving with a little more care due to the previous night's activities.

The small chapel was tucked behind the main street and was overflowing with worshippers. Scott had to cock a slight grin, wondering if this Johnny would look as uncomfortable in a church as Johnny Lancer was. Doubting the Arroyos were inside the small building, Scott stood on the edge of the crowd and scanned the area. He wasn't there long when he felt a tap on his arm and turned to face Caesar.

"I saw you arrive, *Señor* Lancer. You are hard to miss." The elder Arroyo smiled as Scott, embarrassed, pulled off his hat.

"Sorry," the tall blond said. "I came to get directions to Johnny's horse."

Caesar and Scott stepped aside, and Caesar gave him detailed directions with all applicable landmarks. He also told him about the two lost shoes and where the tack was stored. The grateful Lancer thanked him for the detailed account and turned to go.

As he slipped his hat back on, Scott glanced into the crowd and was surprised to find two dark eyes regarding him from across a sea of people. The intensity gave him a chill, yet he could see the discomfort his younger brother had at being part of this gathering; he looked lost.

"He has been very quiet since last evening," Caesar said softly at Scott's elbow. "I know he had nightmares again last night, but he won't admit it."

Scott replied in the same soft voice, holding the gaze. "I guess some things don't change." The look was finally broken when Maria spoke to her son and he turned to listen. Scott took the opportunity to depart, a little shaken at how the eyes looked like a stranger's.

He thanked the small man again and headed to the livery by way of the telegraph office He read Murdoch's reply as he walked.

Sam advises minimal contact until I arrive. <Stop> Taking noon stage.
<Stop> Should arrive Tuesday afternoon. <Stop> Murdoch

Scott loaded his saddlebag with the expectation of staying in the remote canyon for at least two nights, including some farrier equipment for a temporary

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shoeing. During his ride to the location described by Caesar, Scott also wondered if the feisty horse would let himself get caught.

"That horse is too much like his owner," the Lancer said to Charlemagne. "Stubborn. I hope you're able to talk some sense into him." He gave the leggy bay a reaffirming pat and urged him into a lope.

It was nearly noon when the pair reached the box canyon, easily recognizable by the unusually lush greenery for this late in autumn. The artesian spring Arroyo described was cold and refreshing as the blond man splashed his face.

While Charlemagne drank Scott turned and scanned the area looking for the familiar blond mane. A light, warm breeze brushed his face carrying smells of oak and mesquite. A hawk screamed in the distance, far above the range that surrounded them. The bay finished his drink and lifted his head, licking his lips and dribbling on his master's arm.

"Thanks a lot," Scott said, brushing his arm off. "Why don't you do something useful and help me find Barranca?"

Before the words were entirely out of his mouth, Charlemagne's ears shot forward and his head rose up, eyes focused on the stand of oak tucked deep in the canyon. Scott followed his stare and smiled when he saw a gold and silver head poke out from the trees. Charlemagne whinnied happily and Barranca replied as he emerged from the stand, walking quickly.

"Nothing wrong with his memory, I see," Scott mumbled, turning to free his rope from the saddle. By the time he shook out the loop and turned back around the palomino was not that far away and still approaching at a quick clip. Scott hesitated, loop in hand, and frowned; the horse was acting so . . . friendly. He also was pleased to see no sign of lameness. Barranca brushed right by the surprised man with barely a sideways glance, paused to bump noses with Charlie, and then went directly to the saddlebags where he attempted to nose open the side containing oats.

Scott puffed out a short laugh. "Well, that was easier than I expected. You tired of fending for yourself and realize how good you had it at Lancer?" The nosey horse barely acknowledged the loop as it was dropped over his head. "Hang on a minute! Lord, you're as pushy as Johnny when it comes to food!" Scott had to shove the hungry horse aside to get the saddlebag flap open and wrestle out the grain. By now, Charlemagne's neck had bent around so far to get his share that his rump had moved away from Scott and the young man found himself between two curious, hungry horses that wouldn't leave him alone.

After finally outmaneuvering the nosey beasts, Scott gained some measure of control and had the horses staked separately and happily munching their snack within minutes.

With a quick swipe to his forehead with his shirtsleeve, Scott sighed and dragged the shoeing tools from the saddlebag. Being occupied and apparently happy with company, Barranca was no problem for Scott to shoe.

"Not perfect, but it will get you to the blacksmith in town." The palomino's ear twitched in his direction as he continued to try and locate every last oat grain in the short grass. "Since you're being so cooperative, there's no sense in staying out here, now is there? I sure don't want to sleep on the ground if I could have a bed instead."

It didn't take long to locate the stashed tack. Scott winced when he saw the condition of the saddle blankets and the scratches on the leather. "Looks like new blankets for Christmas," he mumbled. Carefully, he dragged the items into the sun and looked for any hidden critters that may have decided to take up residence in the nooks and crannies.

Knocking off the worst of the dirt from the items he returned to the horses who watched him curiously. As Scott deftly brushed the golden coat with a stiff dandy brush, Barranca's neck stretched out euphorically and his upper lip twitched in delight. The horse's joy at being pampered again by a familiar person was clear and entertaining. Scott chuckled and tried to convince the animal that after this, maybe he wouldn't be so cranky and aloof back at Lancer.

That thought hung with the Lancer son as he saddled the horse. "Tell you what," he said as he worked. "You can act as unpleasant as before if you help get our Johnny back, and I'll even sneak oats to you once in a while. Deal?" Barranca gave no outward clue to his thoughts on that offer, but eagerly took his bit when offered.

Scott grabbed a bite of jerky before mounting up. He pulled Barranca to his right side and they moved off. The palomino hunched his back and crow-hopped a couple of times, then shook his mane and fell in line in an energetic jog.

Scott shook his head. "Showoff," he mumbled. The trio made it back to San Andreas by dark, and the tired rider was looking forward to a hot bath and a soft bed.

Señor Alvarado informed Scott that the Arroyos had left for their farm hours ago. That left Scott with his own thoughts on how to re-introduce the feisty horse to his lost owner. Playing on the side of caution, he decided to wait for Murdoch and any more information Sam had may have told him.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Caesar Arroyo had a big problem, and he knew it. He knew where the boy ultimately belonged, and set his mind to seeing the right thing be done. The problem was Maria; Caesar worried about how she would handle it. He was glad the rifle and the boy's gun were still hidden in the barn.

After church on Sunday, Caesar had spoken to the priest and told him everything. Caesar had decided to tell Maria with the priest and *Señora* Alvarado present. He figured Carlos . . . Juan . . . would prefer to be told alone. He arranged for the priest to bring Rose Alvarado to visit the farm on Tuesday. It would be the first time since their real son's death that the priest would have been to the farm.

Now that Tuesday had come, he arranged for chores that would keep the young man busy and away from the house. Things he'd seen at the Festival haunted him, the older man could tell, and either the boy was waiting for the right moment to talk about it, or would hold everything inside indefinitely. Carlos' time alone might help him settle his thoughts, Caesar thought hopefully, and make him more open for what he would be told later tonight.

When the priest and *Señora* Alvarado arrived just before noon, Caesar found it difficult to hide his nervousness. Maria had a slightly puzzled look as she greeted the holy man and her friend and politely offered them inside for tea.

The four of them sat at the small table in the kitchen area, Maria chatting gaily and the priest smiling patiently, waiting for Caesar to make the first move. Rose helped Maria with the tea service.

Finally, a break in Maria's chatter made an uncomfortable silence. Caesar took both of Maria's hands in his and cleared his throat. "*Mi esposa*, it is time to clear the air." He felt Maria's grip tighten. Rose sat on her friend's other side.

"Caesar, what are you talking about?" Maria's voice was sharp.

The priest picked up on her anger and gently placed a hand on her forearm. "*Señora* Arroyo, please calm yourself. Your husband has something to say."

Caesar started by telling his wife how much he loved her, and how the birth of their son added to their joy. Maria smiled lovingly at the words, but her hands began to tremble as Caesar moved on.

"But Carlos died, Maria, and he has been gone for almost six months now."

Tears began to slide down the woman's cheeks, and she shook her head in denial. "No, he is not dead, Caesar! He is better! You know that! He's outside right now, working . . ."

Caesar spoke soothingly but did not back down. Rose put her arm around Maria's shoulders when she tried to free her hands from her husband's. The priest offered consoling words. "No, no, no . . ." she wept bitterly as Caesar continued to speak.

"The young man's family is looking for him, *mijo*, and they know he is here. They want to take him home."

"No, it is not their boy! They are mistaken!" Her tears were becoming hysterical, and the priest murmured words of faith and doing the right thing, taking her hands away from Carlos. It was becoming difficult to hold her to the chair.

Carlos stood and stepped back, leaving his wife in the care of the priest and Rose. "Maria, the boy's name is John Lancer, and he needs to go home. I know you've seen that he is not getting better. He knows, deep inside, that something is wrong, and he will not get better until he is where he belongs."

"No!"

The priest picked up on Caesar's growing distress, and spoke in a strong, calm voice. "Maria, both God and the boy know how you took care of him. You are a loving and caring woman, but it is time to let the boy go to his rightful family."

"We are his rightful family! Caesar, he can't go!"

"Maria, he is not our son! Our son lies outside, where someday we will lie next to him. Carlos is dead, Maria. We cannot help him anymore. But we can help Juan find his way home. It's the only way he will heal inside. I know you love him, but he needs his true family to heal completely. Please, Maria. I know you see this. You do not want him to suffer, I know."

Patient coaxing and a forced visit to the grave in the yard finally took its toll, and Maria collapsed in the arms of her loving husband. He carried her into their room and let Rose take over her care. The priest said a short prayer for the dead son and the grieving mother and prepared to depart, promising a follow up visit the next day. When the holy man asked what Caesar planned to do next, the exhausted man said he would speak with the boy next.

"How are you going to tell him?" the priest asked curiously.

SHADOWS OF YESTERDAY

Caesar shook his head and chewed his lip. "I don't know, father. Pray that the Lord gives me the right words very soon. I plan on bringing him into town to meet his brother when he gets back from the fields."

Carlos walked Conejo in from the east field in midafternoon. As soon as he entered the barn, he knew something was going on, as the small wagon was loaded with a satchel and some boxes of produce. He took the small horse's harness off and brushed him down carefully, feeding him an extra measure of oats for the extra work he would be doing taking them into town.

It didn't surprise him when his father entered the barn, but what did surprise him was the picnic basket.

"We have to go to town, son. We'll eat on the way." Caesar saw the questioning look in the boy's eyes and he wondered if Carlos picked up his own nervousness.

After hitching the stout horse to the wagon, Carlos turned to the house. "I'll s-s-say g-g-goodbye . . ."

"No. Maria is sleeping," Caesar interrupted him. "It's best we go now. Rose is here for the night."

The older man saw the younger one pause in the barn doorway, looking nervously at the house, and knew the young man sensed the tension. Caesar saw the trip to town as the perfect place to tell the boy his history - there was no place he could run and plenty of privacy.

Carlos watched his pa climb aboard from his spot in the doorway as he thrummed his fingers on his hip.

"Let's go, son," the older man urged softly. He could see the apprehension coming off the boy in thick waves so he worked to appear calm. "Come on."

Finally, with a last glance to the house, the young man left the relative safety of the barn and climbed up next to Caesar. He immediately pulled out the rosary and concentrated on the beads, fingering them one by one.

When the house was out of sight, Caesar urged him to eat. All Carlos accepted was water. Caesar wondered if the boy's stomach was as jittery as his own.

Finally, Caesar began. "I have something to tell you, but I don't know where to start." His voice was sad.

Carlos, however, was so worked up by this point that he had little patience. "J-j-just g-get it s-s-s-said," he replied angrily. "I'm s-s-sick, aren't I? Am-m I g-g-gonna d-d-die?"

Caesar's jaw dropped and he turned to him in surprise. "That's what you think? I'm taking you somewhere to die?"

Miserably, Carlos nodded. "T-the h-h-head-a-a-aches. . ." He briefly touched his head with his fingertips, and then let his hand drop to his lap.

"Yes, I know the headaches are worse, but I don't know if you are going to die." He gave his surrogate son a calming pat on the thigh. "That is up to God." The man made sure his voice was soft and calm; he hadn't anticipated that train of thought. After a few moments and a bracing sigh, he started again. "I have something else to tell you." Caesar looked sideways at Carlos and was met with skeptical sapphire eyes. "I need to tell you about how you came to our house."

With the steady beat of Conejo's hooves as a background to the surrounding quiet, Caesar Arroyo told Johnny how they had come together. He stopped at the point where the injured Johnny woke up for the first time in their house.

Johnny didn't ask for details, he simply listened, occasionally touching his temple. After he was finished, Caesar fell silent and waited for a reaction. All he saw was Johnny rubbing his temple in short, jerky motions.

"Your real name is Johnny," he said quietly, trying to get a reaction.

"I f-f-feel . . ." Johnny didn't finish the sentence, but dropped from the wagon and fell to his knees, retching dry heaves instantly by the side of the road.

Caesar pulled up the small horse, alarmed, and jumped down. He ran to Johnny's side, dropped down to the dirt and threw his arms around his shaking shoulders. "I am so sorry I did not tell you sooner, son. You were so sick."

The number of questions that were flying around inside Johnny's head was innumerable and the frustration at trying to ask them was insurmountable. He felt like a rug had been pulled out from under his feet. This wasn't his family? A knot as big as Conejo formed in his stomach, and he nervously kneaded it with his fingers.

His dreams are what came to him first. Were they a vision of what he really was? What about the gold horse and the white castle? Were they things he had and lost? Or even killed or burned? Was that why his dreams were so violent? What about the blond man, Scott Lancer? Why did his face show up in his dreams? Why did he look so sad when they met briefly in the barn? But most of all, why did the two people he trusted the most lie to him?

The whirling questions made him dizzy, and it took a while to pull himself together enough to stand. This was accomplished by retreating to the place of the kind and loving woman who, in his mind, was still his mother. Maria is who made him strong; he wasn't sure he could face any of this without her.

Finally on his feet, he allowed himself to be helped in the wagon, and they continued on.

"I-I-I w-w-want t-t-to go h-h-home," he said miserably, hunched over and holding his stomach.

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"You will get there, my boy. Your brother will see to that." Caesar's voice cracked slightly when spoke, but he kept his resolve. He had to be strong for the suffering man next to him. "He's waiting for you in town."

Carlos didn't have to ask who his brother was. Those sad blue eyes in his dreams suddenly made sense.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Murdoch and Teresa were in San Andreas by early afternoon. Teresa noted how tired Scott looked. Her heart went out to him when she realized the toll all this was taking on him; she knew how she felt, and that was bad enough.

"Glad to see you, Sir, Teresa," he greeted them tiredly.

"Where's Johnny?" Murdoch asked immediately after shaking his son's hand.

"At a farm outside town. I've tried to stay away from him like the wire said, but it isn't easy." He relayed how he first saw his brother, the arranged meeting at the livestock yard and the chance meeting in the barn as he took their luggage into Bonita's. By the time he was done, Teresa had tears in her eyes and Murdoch looked positively grim. Scott apologized for hitting them with all this information as soon as they came to town, and suggested they relax in their rooms and go over what Sam had told them.

"Sam bent my ear for at least an hour while we waited for the stage," the Lancer patriarch started. "Basically he said to take things very slowly. Too much too fast may put him into shock."

"But he said he'd recover," Scott said hopefully. The sad droop to Teresa's head said everything. "What did he say, then?"

Murdoch took a breath, "He said to have no expectations. Have lots of hope and expect frustration. A lot of it."

Scott hung his head. "Well, I've had enough of that already. And by the way, I have Barranca."

Teresa and Murdoch both looked surprised. "How did you manage that?" The young woman asked with a huge smile. "That should help Johnny remember!"

Scott took the opportunity to fill them in on the Arroyos and how integral they had been in Johnny's survival. By the time he reached the end of all the information, both Teresa's and Murdoch's faces were filled with dismay.

Murdoch ran his hand tiredly over his face. "This just gets worse and worse," he mumbled.

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"No it doesn't, Murdoch," his young ward rebutted. "It's all good because Johnny's alive. And he'll come back to us, I just know it."

The trio made a pact to keep positive. Both Murdoch and Teresa were showing signs of weariness from their travels, so they all decided to have an early supper after checking on Barranca. Seeing the palomino was what the newest arrivals needed to boost their spirits and the horse seemed to sense that.

"I think he's friendlier," Teresa commented when the horse lipped a small offering of oats from her hand.

"I think he realizes how good he had it at Lancer," Scott laughed. "He'll probably resort back to his aloof self when we get there."

Murdoch patted the palomino's neck and commented on the roughness of his coat. "Must be that grass he's been living on. A few weeks of good feed will slick him right up again."

"Yeah, and make him too fat to run if he keeps eating like this," the girl giggled.

"Nah, he's too much like Johnny. Eats like a pig but stays lean and trim." Scott thoughtfully regarded the horse from across the barn aisle. "I hope Johnny gets his appetite back soon. He's thin."

"We just need to get him back to Maria's cooking," Murdoch said, then frowned. "Our Maria, that is. I wonder if the common name has any influence on all this?" he wondered out loud.

Scott shrugged tiredly and rubbed his eyes. "I think everything has an influence right now and that's the problem."

After Scott made sure his father and Teresa were settled in their rooms, he toyed with the idea of having a nightcap at the saloon. Instead, too weary on all levels, he decided to sit up and read for a little while and let his lids fall when they may.

It had been dark for a couple of hours when he heard a tapping on his door. Buttoning his shirt, he rose and padded to the door still clad in the day's pants. He cracked the door and was surprised to see Caesar standing in the hall nervously shifting on his feet.

Scott pulled the door open. "*Señor* Arroyo! What are you doing here?" Then a thought struck him. "Is Johnny okay?"

"*Señor* Lancer, I am sorry to surprise you. Your brother is fine for now. That is why I am here. It is time."

"Time?" Scott repeated dubiously. "You mean time to tell Johnny?"

"I've already told him. He is outside waiting to see you, that is, if he has not fled the wagon since I left him there." The surprised Lancer knew exactly what Caesar meant. "He was a little sick when I first told him, but now I think he is more curious."

"Take him to the diner hall across the street." Scott shoved some money in the man's hand. "Buy some dinner. Keep him there for a few minutes, I'll be right over." Caesar paused, looking like he was considering returning the money, but then nodded and hurried down the hall.

Scott closed the door and grabbed his boots. As he pulled them on, hopping on one foot at a time, he looked out the window to the street and saw a hunched form sitting dejectedly by himself in a wagon. He watched as Caesar approached and spoke to the form, and heard the subdued back and forth of what appeared to be an argument. Finally, Caesar tied the horse and waited expectantly for Johnny to get down from the seat.

Tears and a short laugh erupted at the same time from Scott. Johnny's body language was easily recognizable - his younger brother was not happy about being here.

Scott dashed from the room and tapped on Murdoch's door. It took a few rounds of knocking before the door cracked open. His father's blurry eyes regarded him with surprise.

"Mr. Arroyo brought Johnny in town and wants me to meet with them. They're waiting in the diner across the street. Why don't you and Teresa come over in a little while and take a table? That way, if things are going well, I can signal you to sit with us."

The big Scotsman was already buttoning his shirt. "Do you think it's wise? Sam said not to rush him."

"He's seen me already, so I'm hoping that may help. I can also tell by the headaches if it's too much. At least that's what Mr. Arroyo says."

Murdoch was pulling on his boots, still looking a little bleary with sleep - or lack of it. "I hope he's right. We'll see you in a few minutes."

Scott hurried from the boarding house and crossed the street. He paused before entering the diner to try and slow his racing heart. With a bracing breath, he turned the knob and stepped in. It was a small diner, a half-dozen tables or so, dimly lit and infused with a slight tinge of cooking oil. Two tables were occupied, and Scott focused on his brother immediately.

Johnny's slouched form was where his brother expected - in the furthest corner from the door, facing the entrance. Scott knew he was being watched by those familiar eyes and had to smile slightly at how some things were the same about his wary brother.

"Señor Lancer, please sit." Caesar indicated a chair across the table from Johnny.

Scott could clearly see stormy eyes regarding him now, and he sat, clearing his throat before speaking quietly. "Hi, Johnny. I've been looking for you a long time."

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The wary blue eyes lost some of their guardedness when they shifted momentarily to Caesar as if looking for some sort of direction.

“This is your brother,” the older man said softly in English.

Johnny’s eyes flicked back to Scott. “*Él h-h-hacia n-n-no p-p-p-arec-ce-ce-cerse a m-m-mí.*,” he replied in quietly. An uncomfortable silence followed. Johnny began to gently rub his left temple as he visually appraised the newcomer.

Caesar picked up on Scott’s non-understanding expression. “He’s wondering about your hair, I think. You do not look alike.”

The older brother did not break eye contact with his sibling. “Different mothers, Johnny. Murdoch married your mother after my mother passed away.” Scott searched his brother’s eyes for a sign of recognition. The suspicious edge seemed to be gone now, replaced with curiosity, but recognition wasn’t apparent. “We live on our ranch south of here near Morro Coyo. It’s called Lancer. You went to Carson City a little over two months ago on ranch business.”

The proprietor brought fresh tortillas and coffee. Johnny began to fidget with the heavy cup by spinning it slowly between his fingers, which made Scott smile. “You never could sit still, brother.” He nodded to the cup. The younger man stopped the motion, a look of embarrassment crossing his features for a moment, but then a familiar spark of mischief touched his eyes and he continued to spin the cup and fixed his gaze on the blond man again. Scott saw the Johnny-like spark as a positive sign.

“I kn-kn-know,” the younger man said softly with a slight wince.

“Does it still hurt to talk?” Scott asked curiously. Johnny nodded as his eyes softened. The cup, however, continued its endless circles. “Sam says it should lessen with time. Sam’s the doctor at home. He’s tended to you more than a few times, Johnny.”

That food for thought resulted in knitted brows of thought. “B-b-before. You s-said M-M-Murdoch.” A twitch of suppressed pain jerked the left corner of his eye for a fleeting second.

Still, nothing gets by you, brother, Scott thought. “Yes. Our father. He’s worried about you like I am. And Teresa.”

The change in the sapphire eyes was instantaneous. Bright curiosity was replaced with agony, and the spinning cup’s abrupt halt cause some of the dark liquid to slosh over the rim. A muffled hiss made it past Johnny’s tightened lips as he froze and ducked his head to wait out the wave of pain.

Scott made an initial movement to jump to his brother’s side, but a motion from Caesar stopped him. Reluctantly, Scott sank back into his seat and the two of them watched the third pull himself together.

The sound of the main doors opening caught Scott’s attention, and he glanced over and saw the looming form of Murdoch step in followed immediately

by Teresa, whose eyes found them in the poor light. Scott motioned for them to sit at another table. Johnny's head was bent down and his eyes squeezed shut in concentration, missing the entrance.

Scott, though, did not miss the tears spring instantly to Teresa's eyes and again he had to fight the urge to jump up and give comfort. Instead, he looked to Caesar with sorrowful eyes. Caesar, in response, bent down and quietly asked Johnny something in Spanish. The dark head shook 'no' in an immediate response.

"I asked if he wanted to leave. He said no." Caesar stood. "I will go ask *Señor Alvarado* if we may stay a night and leave you two to talk."

"Is that all right with you, Johnny?" Scott asked softly. His brother's face had just begun to release the lines of pain and he lifted his head slightly then nodded. Caesar looked sad when he left the table. The older brother watched the small Mexican leave then turned back to this brother. "He really cares for you. I'm glad he found you."

Johnny nodded, and rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Wh-wh-where's M-M-Murdoch?"

'You just won't let me make it easy for you, will you?' Scott thought, wondering how to answer that. "Murdoch is waiting until you're ready to see him. Sam has told us not to show you too much too fast, Johnny. It may slow your healing."

When the glaze of pain drained from the indigo pools, Scott saw a flash of anger before the eyes became curious again.

"I'm d-d-different n-n-now." It was more a statement than a question. Johnny rubbed his forehead a little harder.

"Well, yes." Scott started carefully. "Your speech, of course, is different." This brought a look of relief to the younger man's face. "And your clothes . . ." Johnny looked down at his shirt and pants as if seeing them for the first time. "You usually dress with a little more . . . color." Scott smiled. "When you first met me you said I looked like an Eastern dandy. Then you made me go get new clothes, but I refused to wear what you usually wear!" He was glad to see the ghost of a smile on his tormented brother's mouth. "I would be surprised if you remembered my plaid riding pants, Johnny. You continually told me you were trying to bar those from your memory."

"Black and green," Johnny said abruptly, without a trace of a stutter.

Scott broke into a huge grin. "Yes! I'm sorry, brother, I know how you wanted to forget those pants; Lord knows I wanted you to forget them!"

For a moment, the dazzling smile they all knew made Johnny's face glow, but then the smile was gone as quickly as it arrived, replaced by a painful grimace.

"I'm sorry," Scott apologized immediately, putting his hand on Johnny's shoulder. Johnny shrugged the hand away. While the dark haired Lancer was concentrating on getting under control again, Scott spared a glance to his father.

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Murdoch's face was etched with sadness as he studied his suffering son. He met Scott's eyes and shook his head – it wasn't the time to introduce the two of them yet. Johnny obviously needed rest.

“Let's go find Caesar and get some sleep.” Scott's chair scraped the floor as he stood. “I know I'm tired. How about you?”

Johnny nodded slightly and also stood, swaying slightly. Scott resisted the urge to grab his brother's elbow to steady him. Instead, he watched as his brother squared his shoulders and moved slowly and carefully toward the exit. The older brother had a quick *deja-vu* moment and saw his injured younger brother proudly trying to walk under his own power with Day Pardee's bullet in his back.

Scott positioned himself slightly behind to catch him if he fell, as he had that day Pardee had shot him, and gave Murdoch and Teresa a wan smile as they passed. Teresa was fighting tears and looking at her hands on the table; Murdoch sat glumly, spinning his coffee cup just as his younger son had done, cocking his head just enough to watch them leave the building.

Johnny had shown them absolutely no sign of recognition.



Johnny knew he was kidding himself and everyone else when they parted under the pretense of getting sleep. There was no way he would be able to do that at this point.

The black void in his mind that had plagued him was still as deep, but now there was more information. Surely one of these new pieces would close the void, and he would remember everything – but at what cost?

Again lying in the makeshift cot in the Alvarado's house, the weary young man studied the ceiling with his hands behind his head. Scott Lancer had an air of familiarity around him that felt comfortable, but the feelings he thought he should have toward a brother just weren't there. The only feelings he could pin down were those of affection toward Maria and Caesar – the things those two had done for him were fresh and solid in his memory, and he was sure of them.

His brother Scott and the other as yet unseen family members only had words to give. Some of the words made connections, like the absurd plaid pants Scott had mentioned, which made the confused younger man want to hear more and believe.

Then it struck him – maybe that was it. He wanted to believe. But why? If he believed the blond man, then that meant he'd have to leave the only thing that was absolutely real. He'd have to leave the only 'father' and 'mother' he really knew, and all that would do is hurt them.

It was a leap of faith he wasn't sure he was brave enough to take.

They don't deserve that, he thought, as he finally gave up the premise of sleep and again went to the window. They would be losing two sons. Johnny's stomach did a quick flip at the idea of inflicting that kind of pain on people who had shown him nothing but kindness.

Then again, it was Caesar that initiated this meeting. Instinctively, he knew his surrogate father did this because it was the right thing, not because he wanted to.

But there was Maria to consider. She would be devastated.

Johnny braced his forearms on the windowsill, and sat with his chin on his arms. The cool darkness outside was inviting and he let his mind wander. Johnny. Johnny Lancer he thought to himself, mentally rolling the name over until he became drowsy. That's when the white castle appeared in his mind's eye again, he knew this time that it was the Lancer Scott spoke about. To get there, he had to cross the black void in his mind, and it was fraught with violence; why else was there so much blood in his dreams? The emotions that should come with family weren't there until he saw the golden horse walking to him from under a graceful arch.

Warmth flowed through him, and he allowed his eyes to drift shut as he admired the horse from head to hoof. Soon the vision swam and blurred, and the magical creature spun away from him and disappeared in an explosion of red and pain filled cries.

Johnny awoke with a gasp and found himself on the floor with the chair on its side next to him. He sat up shakily and clutched at his galloping heart.

Johnny Lancer knew then that he wouldn't have any peace until he understood the dark void that was his past. Only then could he build new bridges back to what he should be, and, even then, there may be sorrow and grief.



After meeting up at Bonita's, Murdoch, Teresa and Scott were still too upset to sleep. Gathered in Murdoch's room, Teresa was morosely settled in a wing chair by the window staring into the darkness, Murdoch alternated between pacing the floor or sitting on the edge of the bed, and Scott was sitting backward on a desk chair, arms and chin resting on the high back.

"He looked so lost," Teresa said quietly. She had managed to stop the tears, but her eyes were still red rimmed. "And hurt. It was like looking at a wolf with his leg caught in a trap. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Scott replied tiredly. "I don't think he knows where to turn and he doesn't want any help. That's our Johnny."

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Murdoch stood from the bed and went to Teresa, placing a big hand on her shoulder. “Well, I’m sure once he knows he has family that loves him, he’ll come around. We just got here, honey. Let’s see what tomorrow brings.”

The young girl smiled up at her surrogate father. “I’m so tired, but I’m not sure I can sleep. If I look half as bad as you . . .”

The big man chuckled at the comment. “Go give it a try and I promise I will, too. We won’t do Johnny any good asleep on our feet.”

Scott stretched and stood. “So I guess we’re on for tomorrow? Murdoch gets introduced first?”

“I think that’s the way to go. One at a time.”

“How much are we going to tell him, Murdoch?” Teresa’s question was one Scott had wondered about himself. Now was the time to decide exactly how far they would go.

“Well, I asked Sam about that before we left,” Murdoch replied. “Basically, he said to see how Johnny did meeting us. His past might be too much for him right now.”

“So, it would probably be wise to have Johnny start that conversation then, wouldn’t it? If he’s wondering, he should know.” Scott rubbed his eyes wearily.

“Yes, that’s probably a good idea, but I think anything along Madrid lines is better explored when he’s back at Lancer. That way, he can see right away how he’s turned his life around. It would be . . . what did Sam call it . . . positive reinforcement.”

With all of them in agreement, they said their good nights and departed. Scott made sure Teresa was safe in her room before slipping into his own where he pulled off his boots and paused at the window.

“We’ll get you home, Johnny,” he whispered into the velvet darkness. “We’ll help you find your way.”



The next morning found Johnny both unrested and irritable. Caesar and *Señor Alvarado* respected his mood and the three of them ate in relative quiet. Johnny felt uncomfortable in their presence, knowing the both of them wanted to know what was on his mind, but he was disinclined to talk about something he wasn’t sure of himself.

“I would like to get back to the farm today, Juan,” Caesar said softly. “You can come with me, or we can arrange to have Mr. Lancer bring you. I will leave it up to you.”

“I-I’ll s-s-stay,” the young man said without much hesitation. His cheek twitched with the accompanying pain.

“Some of your things are still at the house,” the farmer added, resulting in Johnny’s immediate attention. “The clothes you were wearing when we found you. They are cleaned and repaired and put away.” The question in the blue eyes regarding him was clear, and Caesar answered it in a softly guilty voice. “We didn’t show you before because they were not appropriate at the time with you being bed ridden. Then, well, they just weren’t clothes a farmer would wear.”

When you decided to make me your son, Johnny thought, feeling his anger flare. He was about to demand answers about why they denied him the truth, but the deep sadness and true regret he saw in Caesar’s eyes softened his heart. Instead, he stood, and thanked his host for the meal and moved to the door, where he paused and avoided Caesar’s gaze.

“I’m g-going t-to f-find my b-brother,” he said softly, ignoring the sharp twinge in his temple. The family term felt odd on his tongue. “I w-will s-s-see y-you l-later.” There was more he wanted to add, things he wanted Maria to know, but with the way his emotions were seesawing he didn’t trust his voice. Instead he turned and pushed his way outside.

The morning was bright and the coming of winter foreshadowed by the crisp chill in the air. Johnny took a deep breath to get his conflicted feelings under control before heading to Bonita’s. The smell of bacon and eggs wafted through the air as he pushed the entry door open. A bell on the door announced his arrival and his stomach flipped nervously as he paused in the small foyer. He could feel hard tension between his shoulder blades.

Bonita’s was the closest thing to the hotel San Andreas had, but was actually just a large house. Bonita and her family lived there, and treated any boarders like an extension of her family. The dining room was one large table just off a parlor that may have been considered a lobby in a larger establishment. Bonita, upon hearing the bell, greeted Johnny while wiping her hands on her apron. She smiled, and chatted happily in Spanish.

“Oh! Hello, young man! You’re *Señor* Arroyo’s nephew. I saw you at the Festival and my daughter mentioned you many times.” She smiled warmly. “Can I help you?”

Johnny fingered the rosary in his pocket. “S-*Señor* L-L-Lancer?” he asked with a returning smile to hide the pain he felt.

“Si, they are having breakfast. Join us, won’t you?” The friendly woman took the fidgeting man’s elbow and led him into the dining room before he could react to the fact that she had said ‘they’.

When he entered the dining area, Johnny came to an abrupt halt. Bonita’s hand slipped from his elbow, so she indicated a seat and excused herself to get another cup of coffee. She gave the suddenly quiet group a questioning glance as she left.

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"Johnny!" Scott said, quickly standing and spilling his coffee. His younger brother's eyes met with his for a moment and then returned their surprised gaze to the big man and young girl seated to Scott's left.

The man and girl had both frozen with wide eyes as soon as Johnny entered the room, but now were attempting to cover their shock. They glanced at each other, then Scott, then back at Johnny.

Scott cleared his throat. "Well, you surprised us, brother. We weren't going to introduce you to the rest of the family until later, but now that you're here, this is Murdoch Lancer, our father."

Murdoch rose slowly and Johnny was taken aback by his size.

How could I not remember him? he thought, his heart beginning to race. Some inner voice told him to not show fear or weakness, so he fought to keep all the emotions he felt at bay.

"Hello, Johnny. We've missed you." Murdoch's voice was calm and deep, but something in his eyes told Johnny that there was more going on in the man's mind. The young Lancer felt a flash of admiration at how in control the big man appeared.

"*B-Buenos . . .*" Johnny caught himself from speaking Spanish. "H-h-hello," he said shortly as he dropped his eyes and hitched his thumbs on his hips. His feet shifted nervously.

"And this is Teresa," Murdoch continued.

"Johnny. I've missed you, too." The girl's voice was soft and sincere. Johnny looked up and smiled nervously.

"Hi," he said shortly. Suddenly, he didn't feel very well and pulled a chair out and sat down before his knees gave out. Bonita appeared with the additional cup of coffee and a plate of bacon, and scurried back to the kitchen. The distraction gave Johnny enough time to gather his strength and face them.

The awkward silence that followed was broken when Teresa reached across the table and placed her hand on top of Johnny's. "I think this is probably pretty confusing, isn't it?" Her voice was soothing to Johnny, as he was bursting with questions but embarrassed by how his voice made him sound weak.

"Like I said," Scott added, "We weren't planning on showing up all at once, but you seem to have taken the bull by the horns, brother," he smiled. "That's pretty much in character for you."

Johnny was pleased with that information. He'd hoped the person he was wasn't as unsure as he felt right now.

The big man that was his father spoke. "John, we'd like to take you home. We think you'd recover much faster in familiar surroundings."

Immediately, Johnny's palms prickled with sweat and his heart leaped. The thought of stepping into the unknown was like stepping directly into the black

hole in his mind. Strangely, he was drawn to the idea and repulsed at the same time - the unknowns were both frightening and exhilarating. With the conflicting feelings came a rising desire to flee; he was beginning to feel crowded.

A little quicker than he wanted, Johnny rose to his feet. A hand on his forearm kept him at the table, and his eyes followed the hand to his brother's face.

"Johnny," Scott said calmly. "I know this is a lot to deal with. We understand, really. The last thing we want to do is push too hard." After a short hesitation, the younger Lancer nodded and slowly sat back down. He studied his fingers on the table as his brother spoke. "This isn't your home. Lancer is your home. You have to trust us on this."

After a few moments, tormented sapphire eyes met with each of them at the table, one at a time, trying to find his answer. All he saw was true concern edged with sadness. It was hard to believe he was responsible for all that. They were strangers to him, but everything they said rang true. That made Johnny think of the lies that Caesar and Maria had told him and he frowned, returning his gaze to his fingers. He felt attachment to people he now knew had lied to him, yet felt nothing but a vague familiarity toward people who were his true family.

What was wrong with him? He scrubbed his temple with his hand, trying to stave off the pressure that was building again. It would be so easy to simply relinquish control and let someone else make the decision for him, but that idea made his stomach tighten. Losing control was not an option.

Johnny did not see the worried glances at the table as his body tensed with his thoughts.

"How about if I take you back to the Arroyo's to get your things first?" Scott suggested quietly. "We can have some time together. Murdoch and Teresa can come later with the carriage."

Relieved of having to make a decision, Johnny nodded gratefully and raised his eyes.

"Murdoch and I will get the horses," Scott said, standing. "I'll meet you out front in a few minutes. Would you mind keeping Teresa company while we're gone?"

Johnny looked at the pretty girl and swallowed hard, but nodded. "O-okay," he replied softly.

Teresa took his hand again and smiled warmly as the other two left. "I bet you're wondering about me, aren't you? Well, you just think of me as your sister," she began.

Outside, Scott verbalized his concerns. "I think it's too fast for him. The only thing that kept him at that table was determination."

"I noticed," Murdoch agreed. "But there wasn't the headache we saw last night. That must be a good sign."

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Scott rubbed the back of his neck, trying to loosen his stiff muscles. "We don't know what's a good sign. We're all in the dark here, and I don't like it. Leave it to Johnny to push faster than we planned."

"He's not one to let things lie, with or without his memory," Murdoch stated.

They reached the stable and were greeted by Charlemagne and Barranca. The men stopped in the doorway, the same thought crossing their mind at the same time. Scott was the first to voice it.

"I don't think Barranca is such a good idea right now, do you?" he asked.

Murdoch pursed his lips for a moment. "You may be right. Teresa and I can bring him along later."

Scott nodded in agreement. "I remember a barn at their place. It would be nice if you could sneak him in there so we can have a say in when Johnny sees him."

Murdoch smiled a sad smile and slapped his son on the back. "Trying to get the situation back in control, huh?" He rubbed his eyes as he spoke. "Always a difficult task where your brother's concerned."

Scott laughed shortly and nodded. "He is a challenge."

Murdoch left to rent a horse from *Señor* Alvarado while Scott saddled Charlie.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The flash of surprise on his face was short but noticed by the three observers. When Johnny took the reins of Charlemagne from Scott, a genuine smile relaxed the features of his face almost to the point where he looked like the Johnny they all knew.

"I thought you'd like to try him," Scott explained.

"Th-th-thanks," the young man said softly before he turned to the tall horse and stroked the sleek bay neck.

Scott mounted his rented piebald chestnut and waited patiently for his brother to climb aboard the Lancer horse. The small audience was pleased that the natural grace of Johnny Lancer was still apparent when he easily mounted the tall gelding. It took him a moment to adjust his feet in the stirrups with the soft shoes he wore.

"Caesar said he had your boots somewhere, too. That will make it easier next time."

Johnny threw him a happy glance and he nudged Charlie into a jog, leaving Scott scrambling to catch up. The younger man quickly brushed his temple as if pain was an afterthought.

Teresa took Murdoch's elbow. They watched with satisfied grins as the pair receded down the street.

"Looks like that was a good idea," Murdoch commented.

"Yes," Teresa agreed. "He squirmed so much while he sat with me that someone would think he was being tortured."

They turned to the stable to arrange for their own transportation to the Arroyo farm. "I guess that's what he needs - familiarity without the pressure of conversation."

"Seeing Lancer would certainly fill that bill," Murdoch's ward agreed. "But he hasn't agreed to go with us yet, you know."

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"He will," the patriarch murmured, patting her hand. "I think Johnny's curiosity will take care of that, don't you?"

Riding on the road home was exhilarating. Johnny felt free, strong and strangely in control with the powerful horse beneath him. These were feelings that he could not recall having before and he found himself relishing the idea.

Brother Scott's stories of Lancer and how they met were interesting, but none of it really struck an emotional chord. It simply seemed familiar, which in turn made him curious. When the Arroyo's farm appeared at the end of their road, a pang of homesickness surprised him; which home was the feeling directed toward?

Caesar Arroyo wiped his hand on his pants as he stepped from the barn, the look of surprise on his face clear from the distance. At the sight of his father, the easy smile on Johnny's face slowly disappeared along with the previous feeling of self-confidence.

By the time the two brothers arrived at the barn, the reality of what he was being asked to do struck the younger man deeply. Although no one had actually posed the question, he knew he was expected to choose a side. He didn't think he had the strength to do that right now and the self-confidence of just a few minutes ago was desperately missed.

"Hello Juan, *Señor* Scott. You are here earlier than I expected." Caesar sounded a little nervous.

Johnny was the first to dismount. He fiddled with Charlemagne's reins until Scott was on the ground, then took the piebald's reins without asking and fled to the barn with the horses in tow.

The two men watched him depart. Scott cleared his throat and pulled his hat from his head. "*Señor* Arroyo. I hope we aren't bothering you, but our father and Teresa are on their way here to get Johnny's things."

Caesar's eyes opened wide. "He is leaving already?"

"Well, we haven't decided exactly when, but . . ."

"Excuse me, *Señor*, but I must speak with my wife." Caesar's voice dropped to a near whisper. "She is having great difficulties with this." He wrung his hands as he chewed his lip. "I know Juan has to go, but Maria . . ."

"I understand, sir," Scott replied.

"Come with me, please." Caesar took the lanky *gringo's* elbow and turned him to the house. "I think she needs to meet you."

Stepping from the bright of day into the dark house caused Scott to try and blink the darkness away. Caesar had stepped away from him as soon as they entered and the sound of soft voices drew Scott's eyes to the far end of the room. After a few moments he was able to make out two forms huddled together, talking

in an animated fashion in Spanish. One broke away at their entrance and slipped out of sight. Caesar motioned him to come over to the remaining woman.

"This is Rosealind Alvarado. She is a friend of my Maria's. Her husband owns the livery."

"Oh, yes. I've met your husband." Scott bowed shortly. "It's nice to meet you."

"*Gracias, Señor Lancer.*" She turned to Caesar. "I will give you some privacy."

When the woman cut around them and eased out the door to the front porch, Caesar let out a bracing sigh. He glanced at his visitor and whispered, "Please, *Señor*. I fear that Maria may be . . . rude."

"I understand."

Hat in hand, Scott followed the man into a tiny kitchen where the small woman he remembered speaking with on the porch now sat in a chair by a dirty window. As Caesar moved to her side and knelt, Scott could hear his voice murmuring softly in the quietness of the kitchen.

It's so unlike the noisy, busy kitchen at Lancer, he thought immediately after a quick glance around. After his examination, his eyes went to the window and the sight beyond and the memory of the grave came to him in a rush. When the woman began to quietly weep, Scott's heart went out to her for her loss.

"*Señora Arroyo*," he said, taking a step toward her. "I'm sorry about your son. Caesar told me everything, and I am so sorry."

"You are going to take him away, aren't you?" she wept. "You're going to take him from me!"

"I am going to take Johnny where he belongs, *Señora*. If you look into your heart, you know it's the right thing to do. He has to go back now; don't you see?" Scott kept his voice level but firm. "Johnny can't heal without the truth. And I know you want him to heal."

Caesar took his wife into his arms and rocked her gently as she wept bitter tears. Feeling like an intruder, Scott backed out of the kitchen and turned on his heel with the intention to wait outside on the porch.

"*Señor*," Caesar called. Scott turned his head to listen. "I brought your brother's clothes into his room for him to see. Can you . . .?"

"Sure." Scott left the weeping woman and her husband and easily found the simply furnished room that Johnny had been using. The small bed was topped with a bright quilt and his brother's pants and shirt were neatly folded and topped with Johnny's familiar hat. He picked up the pile, smiling at the sight, and left the room.

When he opened the front door the first thing he saw was his brother standing at the bottom of the steps from the front porch. The wailing woman could be heard in the background and Johnny's posture was as tight as a

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bowstring. The loose limbed and happy man of less than an hour ago was gone. In his place was this one, whose bowed head kept his eyes locked on the ground while his thumbs, hooked in the waistband of his pants, were white knuckled with tension.

"Um," Scott started. "I know we really haven't given you much time to think, but we - Murdoch, Teresa and I - were hoping to take you back to town tonight and leave for Lancer in the morning."

The only response from the miserable soul was a slight tilt of the head that allowed one haunted blue eye to meet Scott's. After a moment, fine lines appeared at the eye's corner and the blue slowly reduced to a pain induced squint. Johnny rubbed his temple roughly, but held the sideways look. "I-I h-h-h-haven't s-s-said I'm g-g-goin'," he said in a low and gruff voice.

"Oh!" Surprised, Scott had to remind himself not to push. "Oh. Well, that's true, too."

Awkward silence followed as the darker man dropped his eyes again for a moment. The heartbreaking sounds inside drew Johnny's attention, and with a glance at the house, he brushed by Scott and mounted the stairs.

The fair haired Lancer watched the receding back and realized his hand was half-raised in an aborted attempt to physically stop his brother. He switched the direction of the hand and ran it through his hair with an explosive sigh. "You still don't like taking orders, do you, brother?" he said softly.

Looking at the clothes hugged close to his chest, Scott decided to try that tack another time. Carefully, he set the clothes on a rickety chair next to the door and retreated to the barn. It seemed that a strategy session with Murdoch was needed for the next step - if there was going to be a next step.

"He said what?" If they had been at Lancer, Murdoch's voice would have shaken the barn walls. Here, he had his wits about him enough to keep his voice to a dull roar.

"You have to admit, Murdoch, we never did ask him if he wanted to go." Scott stood firmly with arms crossed over his chest as he tried to determine how much of his response was out of anger or surprise.

Teresa looked stricken. "Oh, Scott, you don't think he'll want to stay, do you? He can't . . ."

"He belongs at Lancer." Murdoch said with finality. "And the sooner we make that clear, the better."

"Clean break, right?" Scott's voice had a sharp edge that caught the attention of both his father and Teresa. Before either of them had a chance to open their mouths, the elder Lancer brother continued. "You haven't heard the sound of someone getting their heart torn out lately, have you?" He looked pointedly at Murdoch, and was rewarded with a confused expression from his father. "It's not

going to be a clean break, Murdoch, I'm warning you right now. Mrs. Arroyo – Maria – is a more upset about this than I realized. And we're talking about a woman that has been a mother figure to Johnny. There must be reciprocal feelings."

"But Johnny knows where he really belongs. Caesar has even told him!"

"That's not the point, Murdoch!" Scott lowered his voice a notch when he saw Teresa wince. "Since when has knowing what's right and actually doing what's right been painlessly simple, one hundred percent of the time? Especially in a case like this where deep emotions are involved? You know Johnny doesn't like to hurt innocents. And they're all innocents here."

"I see what you're saying, but I don't agree that they are all innocents." It was clear that Lancer's patriarch was not convinced. "They stole my son and your brother, Scott. I intend to have him back."

"I don't think Scott means to leave Johnny here," Teresa interjected, taking Murdoch's arm in a calming gesture. "I think he's telling us to just be careful about how we get Johnny away. We can't exactly force him, so we have to understand why he would stay and deal with it."

They mulled that information over for a long minute.

"So, if *Señora* Arroyo told Johnny is would be alright for him to leave, that would solve the problem, wouldn't it?" Murdoch set his jaw after he spoke the words.

Scott bit his lip before he mused, "And there, methinks, lies the problem."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

An hour earlier, Johnny had entered the with apprehension and dread combining to make his stomach churn sickeningly. When he stepped through the doorway that separated his brother - standing in the light of day - from the people that had saved and nurtured him recently, the darkness of the interior matched exactly the feeling he got from the house.

Maria's anguished howls had finally reduced to a mere keening in the undercurrent of Caesar's soothing murmurs. Johnny sat in the kitchen with them without saying a word and fiddled with the rosary until his fingers cramped. The fact that he was the reason for her sorrow gave him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that was becoming intolerable. He rose to get some fresh air and hopefully clear his muddled mind.

As he turned to go, Maria raised her head and tried to meet his eyes.

"Don't go!" She struggled to her feet and Johnny froze, unable to run. Maria stumbled up to him and placed both of her shaking hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her. "Please don't go. I love you, son. You can't leave me!"

Her pleas were soft and hoarse, her eyes swimming with tears that streaked down her face. The woman's demeanor tore at Johnny's heart., and he felt himself start to tremble.

"I've done nothing but love you," she continued, "and these people want to take you away! You belong here, *mijo*, with us. God gave you to us!" Tears started anew as she wrapped her arms around his stiff and shaking torso. "Do not leave. Do not leave."

Johnny tentatively returned the embrace and looked over her head to Caesar, his eyes pleading. The older man was exhausted and distraught, rubbing his eyes in a tired fashion. Eventually, he moved to his wife and put his hands on her shoulders.

"It cannot be this way, Maria," he said softly. "He has to go."

Johnny tried to let her go, but couldn't. She started to cry softly again, her face in his chest. He let his eyes drift shut to keep his own tears back.

"I did this. I'm the cause of this." With a dry gulp, he laid his cheek on the top of her head and tried to think of something comforting to say.

Her voice was soft and muffled. "You won't leave me, will you? I need you, my son."

With his knees threatening to turn to water, Johnny led Maria to the small divan and they sat together. He held her hand until the tears stopped. Then, Maria began to chatter about the house and what she planned for the upcoming winter season, and how she needed her men to help her. Johnny just let her talk as Caesar tried to gather his strength.

After a bit Maria began to fret about the day's meals and stood, her attitude suddenly businesslike. It was as if the last hours had never happened.

Finally, Caesar spoke. "The Lancers are on their way here, Maria."

"Then it looks like we will be having company for dinner, won't we Carlos?" She patted Johnny's cheek then took his elbow and pulled him to his feet. "We must get started in the kitchen! I need you to bring in some wood and water for your mama."

As she led him from the room, Johnny gave Caesar a questioning glance over one shoulder. The surrogate father could only watch with a shocked expression; he'd accomplished nothing in the past day.

When Caesar entered the barn, his eyes wide, he went directly up to Murdock and apologized. "I am sorry I was not here to meet you," he said in his heavily accented English. "I am Caesar Arroyo."

"Senor Arroyo, Murdoch Lancer." The big man offered his hand and they shook briefly. "This is my ward, Teresa O'Brien. We think of her as Johnny and Scott's sister."

"Mr. Arroyo." Teresa gave him a smile and a little nod. "Thank you for taking care of Johnny."

Caesar wrung his hands and glanced nervously at Scott. "I only wish it was turning out better."

"What do you mean?" Scott felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise in alarm.

"My wife. She is taking this badly. Very badly."

A look passed between Murdoch and Teresa as Scott pressed for more details. "I heard her crying. Is there more?"

Caesar's frustration finally erupted, and he threw his hands in the air as he began to pace a short track, back and forth. "She is *demente*. Not behaving correctly. She has put the boy in an impossible position."

Murdock's face turned hard. "How has she done that, may I ask?"

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With a bracing breath, Caesar stopped his pacing and looked the much taller man in the eye. "Your son has been . . . um . . . *depende* on her. She will not let him stand on his own."

"You mean, she's not going to let him leave without a fight, is she?" Scott concluded. "And Johnny does not want to hurt her."

"That's what you were afraid of all along, wasn't it?" Teresa said quietly.

Scott nodded. "Think about it. He depended on his real mother right up until she died. Somewhere inside, maybe those emotional connections are still there."

"He's choosing her over me?" Murdoch asked sharply.

"He's choosing what he remembers over what he's forgotten. It's safer." Scott shrugged. "But what do I know, Murdoch? This is all speculation."

Mercifully, Murdoch took the information and turned it over instead of exploding. "Then he needs help remembering. Go get Barranca. It's our last card we can play here. We need to get him to Lancer - maybe the horse can tip the scale a little. Get him to come down under the pretense of a visit."

Caesar nodded. "If we can get him to the barn, alone, and leave from here, that may be the way to do it. You get him down here, and I will keep Maria in the house." He looked sad plotting against his own wife. "And I have a favor. Can you take Senora Alvarado back into town? Rose has done all she can. It's time to get her home."

"Sure, I'll hitch up the carriage. I'll get Barranca on my way back in about, what, two hours? Can you keep them in the house until I get the horse in the barn? We don't want Maria to get tipped off about what we're going to do."

"Yes," Caesar nodded. "My wife is preparing a large meal. She should be easy to keep inside. The boy . . ."

"We'll help there," Murdoch said.

Teresa hugged herself with a grim expression. "I feel like I'm plotting a kidnapping or something," she said. "It's like we're tricking him."

Scott patted her arm as he stepped by to get the horse hitched up. "It'll be alright, Teresa. I know what you mean, though."

With Murdoch's help the horse was hitched up in no time. Caesar got Senora Alvarado together, and thanked her for trying to help.

Rose clicked her tongue and shook her head sadly. "You know this will hurt Maria, Caesar. I know it has to be done, though. The boy needs to leave. Your wife, she needs to properly mourn." She smiled and laid her hand on Caesar's in a supporting manner. "I wish you luck, and you are in our prayers."

The remaining trio watched the departing carriage until it reached the end of the property, then Murdoch turned toward the house.

"I think it's time we met your wife, Senor Arroyo," Murdoch said with finality. Without waiting for a response, he began a long-strided walk to the house.

Caesar and Teresa exchanged the same huge-eyed look of surprise for a moment then hurried to catch up.

Meeting Maria Arroyo was an eerie experience. When she came into the tiny living area she was friendly and polite, talking constantly about the dinner and how nice it was to have visitors. She told Caesar to show Murdoch around the small farm, and invited Teresa to help her in the kitchen. In order to bide time until Scott's return, they did as she suggested. The Senora showed no sign of despair.

Caesar and Murdoch found Johnny bringing wood for the kitchen stove to the house.

"Hello, Johnny. It's good to see you looking so well." Inwardly, Murdoch was again saddened by his son's somewhat frail looking frame and pale complexion.

Johnny nodded a nervous greeting, obviously taken aback by the arrival of the man that was his real father. He glanced at the wood in his arms.

Caesar cleared his throat. "Put the logs by the door and come with us," he offered.

Johnny nodded again. After depositing the small load, he joined them in a tour of the farm that started with the barn. Caesar and Murdoch talked about crops, yields and farming in general while Johnny listened quietly. He answered questions when asked; it was not hard to tell that it still hurt to talk, and the inner turmoil he must have felt did not help much. Murdoch saw him kneading his abdomen whenever the young man felt he wasn't being watched.

After about two hours, they wound up back in the main room of the small house. Maria came and went from the kitchen, bringing lemon aid and small samplings from the fields. Teresa, well aware that Scott must have returned, joined them to see what would happen next. If things went well, they would be leaving this place very soon.

Teresa saw Johnny in the back of the room, shifting uncomfortably against a wall, and smiled at him. He smiled sadly in return, which made her feel sorry for him. When Scott entered the house, she knew the slight nod he gave Murdoch meant that Barranca was here, and it was time for the next step - get Johnny to the barn. Her heart began to beat faster.

Maria bustled into the room, wiping her hands on her apron. "Ah, everyone is here, I see!" she said happily.

Caesar moved to her side and took her arm. "Yes. It is time to pack Juan's things, my dear. They wish to take him home."

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The change in the small woman was instantaneous and terrifying. The smiling face was replaced with one of pure fury, barely under control. "No," she said firmly. "He is not going anywhere with you."

Caesar tried to get her to sit, but she jerked her arm from his grasp and locked eyes with the big man threatening to take her son.

"No!" she yelled. "You can't have him!"

Murdoch's voice rose, but he still managed to keep his temper at bay. "He's not yours to keep, madam. John is coming with us."

In an instant, she was toe-to-toe with the much taller man, her fists clenched at her side, her face tilted up to deliver the full force of her glare. "You will have to kill me first!" she yelled.

Alarmed, Scott managed to wedge himself between them in an attempt to keep the peace. "This is not the way to do this!" he said loudly.

"You're right," Murdoch stated sharply. He tore his eyes from the woman's glare and found his younger son in the back of the room. "John, will you come with us, please?"

Johnny was frozen against the wall, his eyes huge.

"Tell them, *mijo*!" Maria yelled. "Tell them you are staying!"

"John, let's go to the barn and talk." Murdoch took a step toward him, but Johnny put out a hand to stop him.

"N-no!" he said hoarsely, and Murdoch stopped. Johnny sidled further away. "I-I-I. . ." Frustrated, he raked a hand through his hair and fixed his narrowed eyes on the floor.

"Johnny," Murdoch said lowly.

"*Mijo*!" Maria interjected in a haunting tone.

"That's enough!" Scott barked at both of them. "Give him a chance, will you?" The two arguing adults glared at each other across the span of Scott's outstretched arms.

Caesar stood rooted in place with shock.

Teresa's eyes were locked on Johnny. She could see him trying to catch his breath.

"I-I," Johnny started again. "I C-C-CAN'T!" he finally exploded, slamming his palm against the wall behind him. Then, he raised his tormented eyes first to Murdoch and then Maria. The deep, troubled blues were swimming with emotion. "I c-c-can't," he whimpered in a barely audible choke as he slid along the wall and out of sight. When Johnny slammed his bedroom door, they all jumped. The air was thick with tension.

All during the explosive interchange, Teresa had kept her eyes on Johnny, trying to see him with an objective eye.

She did not like what she saw.

The Johnny she knew had eyes that were bright with interest, asked questions, demanded answers, sparkled with humor and dared challenge. The eyes she saw now were hooded with apprehension and generally overwhelmed. There was a tremor to his hands she hadn't noticed before. When he exploded, she wasn't really surprised.

Caesar had escorted his wife to the kitchen. Murdoch stared at the cold fireplace. Teresa quietly moved to Scott's side and kept her voice low.

"I don't think you should show him Barranca yet, Scott. I don't think Johnny can handle any more right now."

Scott slipped his arm around her shoulders. "I think he'll be fine, Teresa. His reaction was actually the most Johnny-like thing I've seen yet! I think he may be coming around."

"I think you're wrong. Something's not right. I can see it in his eyes. Look closer, will you?"

"Teresa -"

"Please, Scott? I have this horrible feeling something's going to go wrong."

Hearing the worried tone in her voice, her surrogate brother pulled her into a quick hug. "All right. I'll go talk to him."

She nodded in relief, fighting to keep her worried tears at bay. "Thanks."

He gave the troubled girl a quick peck on her forehead and a reassuring squeeze to her hand. He left her with a posture that was more confident than he felt, and he noticed that the hall to Johnny's bedroom seemed eerily long and dark.

Scott made some noise as he approached the open door, knocking on the door frame before stopping just short of entering the room. His brother was seated on the bed, fingering the silver Conchos on the black pants folded in his lap, apparently lost in thought. This Johnny was much slower in raising his head to see who had arrived. The older brother, smiling, was taken aback by the haunted look in the indigo eyes, but held his smile to cover his surprise.

"Just thought I'd see how you were doing." Scott crossed his arms across his chest and leaned his lanky frame against the door way, waiting for an invitation in. "This is a lot to think about."

"Yeah." Johnny's reply was a barely audible breath of air as he went back to fingering the shiny silver.

Scott noted his slumped, tired attitude, then took Teresa's request to heart and really looked at his brother. Beneath the deceptively relaxed posture he noticed the tenseness in Johnny's muscles, especially around the corners of his mouth, and the tremor in his fingers was unmistakable. Why hadn't he noticed it before?

"May I come in?"

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The dark head didn't even look up. One shoulder hitched in an indifferent shrug. Scott stepped in, taking the motion as a 'yes'. He moved to Johnny's side and sat next to him on the bed.

"You always barge into my room without asking," Scott said lightly, fighting the urge to say 'look at me, will you?' Instead, he mirrored the posture and rested his elbows on his thighs, interlacing his fingers together. When he didn't get a response to his comment, Scott continued in the same light tone. "I bet this is confusing. We don't want to push you into anything you aren't ready for, but we miss you."

Fingers worked the silver discs without interruption.

"Johnny, our goal is to get you home to Lancer. It's where you belong. I'm trying to figure out how you could possibly be feeling, but I can't. All I can say is that you just have to trust us. You love Lancer, we all do. It's part of us, and when one part is . . . missing . . . none of us feel complete." Scott paused, waiting for any kind of response. "Maybe that's what it is; you feel incomplete."

The only indication that the raven-haired form heard was a further tightening of his long fingers on the shiny decorations.

"Is that it?" Scott asked softly. "Am I even close?" Frustration began to edge his words, finally bringing a response from the other man, but it wasn't one he expected.

He'd expected confusion, anger, or even one of the persistent headaches; what the fair-haired Lancer got instead was a look that rendered him speechless.

The sorrow was so deep and so pointed Scott couldn't stop the tiny gasp that escaped him. This was a man in deep, deep pain that went beyond the physical and etched the soul. Johnny Lancer's eyes never bared that kind of emotion; as a gunfighter, it would be a death sentence. This was a look that came directly from the heart, fueled by raw emotion and fired by something unknown to the older man.

It was at that moment that Scott realized he would never be able to understand what his brother was going through right now.

If Johnny had any inclination to speak at that moment, Scott's non-verbal reaction brought that possibility to an instant end. Instead, Johnny dropped his eyes and scrambled to his feet, the silver-edged pants sliding unnoticed to the floor. In the passing of a second his lax posture changed to that of a trapped puma as he quickly put distance between them.

Alarmed, but attempting to keep his cool, Scott rose, too, and let his hands hang loose and unthreatening at his side. "I'm sorry, Johnny," he said in a calm voice. "I wasn't expecting . . ."

'What?' Scott thought frantically. 'What exactly was I expecting? Too much, maybe?' He ended the sentence with a shrug that emanated nothing but exasperation. 'So

much for keeping my cool.' He shook his head in a silent apology; he'd backed himself into a proverbial corner and couldn't see a way out.

Johnny edged to the door, raising his hand to his temple in a familiar pain-filled motion. His eyes narrowed between pinched skin, as he uttered his words that broke Scott's heart. "S-s-s-sorry," he stuttered softly and sorrowfully before he disappeared out the door, leaving a frustrated brother in his wake.



The mentally distraught young man could only think how he wanted to escape the house; the walls suddenly seemed too close and he couldn't think. Head throbbing, he glanced to the living room and saw the girl – Teresa – standing by the large window, her back to him. He quietly slipped around the corner to use the kitchen exit, and saw the woman he felt was his mother kneading bread.

Maria had a wide-eyed, yet blank look as she physically assaulted the dough that bumped his own anxiety level up a notch; he recognized the same look of pain in the small, cracked mirror in his room. Her red-rimmed eyes indicated recent tears.

He hesitated at the edge of the kitchen, and she looked up, feeling his presence. They both froze for a moment, and then her eyes began to shine and her lips to quiver.

"Mijo," Maria said in a low, husky voice, the dough forgotten.

Unable to respond and unable to hurt her any more than she already was, he turned away and rushed outside, one palm pressed to his temple.

"Johnny!" he heard a voice call when he was halfway to the barn. "Johnny, wait!" Part of his mind recognized the calling voice as that of the big man, Murdoch. My father?

"Wait!" Caesar's pleaded

'Papa?' he thought automatically, the headache blooming as he began to run. The whirling, confusing thoughts grew even more chaotic.

Johnny hit the barn door solidly, the sudden loudness causing the goats to scatter and the other stock to jump in their stalls. Even in his agony, the tormented soul felt a shot of guilt for scaring them. He forced himself to pause and try to control his wildly beating heart. Dual nickers caught his attention – something wasn't right. His gaze slowly found that his big-eared friend wasn't alone.

What stopped his heart was standing in the stall next to Conejo; there, watching him intently with the warm, topaz eyes he'd come to know in his mind, was the golden horse he thought existed only in his dreams.

Johnny didn't hear the running feet enter the barn, or the concerned voices asking how he was. He didn't feel any of the hands on him as his knees suddenly

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turned to water and he sank bonelessly to the floor. White, piercing pain stabbed his head and his vision faded away, but the image of the shimmering palomino remained burned into his memory.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By the time the sturdy surrey rolled into San Andreas, Dr. Sam Jenkins' body ached more than he cared to admit.

I'm getting too old for this, he thought with a sigh. And I'm not really sure I can do anything anyway. Sam scolded himself mentally and tried to get into a more positive frame of mind despite his aching bones.

He pulled the rental horse to a stop in front of the small mercantile and allowed the animal a brief respite at the watering trough. He had just set the hand brake when he heard a familiar voice.

"Sam! It's good to see you." Murdoch stepped out from the business, and the doctor raised his eyebrows at the condition of his friend. "Do you need anything before we head out to the farm?"

"No, but you look like you could use some sleep, Murdoch. When's the last time you had a decent meal?"

The big man waved the old doctor off. "I'm fine, Sam. Food is not a problem." Murdoch untied a horse from the hitching rail and retied him to the back of the wagon. "Shall we go or do you need to stretch your legs first?"

Sam snorted and moved over to make room for the Lancer patriarch who had become a friend over the years. "What I need is a softer wagon seat, but I don't think that's going to happen." The surrey swayed with the additional weight, but then settled down. Sam slapped the horse's rump with the reins and they were off on the final leg of the doctor's trip from Morro Coyo.

"I can't tell you how much we appreciate your coming, Sam." Murdoch's voice was controlled, but a sideways glance told the cagey doctor that his friend was more troubled than he let on. "We feel so much better knowing you'll be there for the trip home."

"Is there any change?"

"No, not really." The Scotsman sighed, drawing his hand briefly over his eyes. "It's been five days now. We've discovered that he can follow simple

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instructions, like eating and even standing, which makes caring for him easier, but in a lot of ways it makes it harder.” The big man had locked his attention on some distant spot on the horizon as he spoke. “Teresa’s worried and pushing herself too hard, Scott’s tired and withdrawn and I think feeling guilty. The Arroyos are a big help, but they’re pretty torn up. I’m not sure the Senora will ever recover.”

Sam took a moment to digest both the spoken and unspoken information, knowing that all of the Lancers tended to understate their problems. The Doc knew things had to be bad; very bad.

“Murdoch, this kind of fugue state you’ve described has its good points. Johnny’s mind has simply shut down, and now his body can take the time to heal. And knowing that boy, that may have been the problem all along and his body finally said ‘Enough!’”

The low chuckle that came from Murdoch’s throat gave Sam a little hope. “I hope you’re right, Sam, but tell me the truth – what are the chances that Johnny will be his normal self again?”

That was a loaded question and one that was not unexpected from the no-holds-barred Murdoch Lancer. The Doctor and the Lancers always had an agreement of total truth between them.

The doctor’s reply was prefaced with an appraising glance at his friend. “Truth is, I can’t say. It depends on the original injury, his current physical state, and the patient himself. We both know what a fighter John is.”

Murdoch pursed his lips for a moment before he dropped his fixation on the horizon and cocked his head to his old friend. “There’s a chance he won’t recover, isn’t there?”

Sam hesitated, measuring his words carefully. “Yes, there’s that chance. But there’s also the chance he’ll be fine. Let’s just put all these chances aside for now and focus on what we know about the stubborn John Lancer, shall we? He always seems to beat the odds.”

Murdoch wearily dropped his head in acquiescence. “You’re right. Hope is the last thing we should give up.”

The rest of the trip was punctuated with light chatter about who was covering for Sam in his absence, and what the town was doing to prepare for the winter, both here and in Morro Coyo. Murdoch also filled the doctor in on what he knew about the Arroyos.

The country doctor was very happy to finally step down from the sully when they stopped in front of the small Arroyo house. He took a moment to stretch each limb, and warmly greet the familiar Lancer clan before he lifted his black bag from the sully. In his mind, he noted the same frail state in each one of them.

A small Mexican man moved to take charge of the horses. Murdoch introduced him as Caesar Arroyo, the owner of the farm. Sam shook his hand warmly.

“Thank you for coming, doctor.” The small man’s accent was thick.

“I’ll need to talk to you later about John’s injuries, *Señor Arroyo*,” Sam said. “Thank you for opening your home.”

Caesar nodded and left with the surrey and animals.

The four of them entered the house and Sam was immediately struck by the size of the place. “Six of you are living here?” he asked, surveying the tight quarters.

“We’re managing,” Scott said quietly, turning the rim of his hat through his fingers as he spoke.

“Where is he?”

Teresa took his elbow and tilted her head in the direction of a short hall. Sam heard low humming before he reached the bedroom and when he entered the room, saw it was coming from a small Mexican woman sitting in a rocking chair at the head of Johnny’s bed.

“Maria, this is Dr. Jenkins,” Teresa said quietly. “He’s here to check Johnny.”

When the small woman raised her head to greet the Doctor Sam was taken aback by the depth of suffering he saw there. Murdoch mentioned something about a dead child, he thought. I must ask about that later. He offered his hand and she shook it shyly, then she rose from the chair and left the room without a word.

Sam watched her go and then gave Teresa a questioning look.

“Maria’s not doing very well,” the Lancer ward said softly.

The doctor nodded, and turned to his patient. As he automatically reached for Johnny’s wrist to check his pulse, his visual examination had already begun.

Johnny was very pale, and his facial features lax. Considering the usual animated nature of this particular Lancer, that alone disturbed the experienced doctor. John’s eyes were half open, dull and unmoving. The pupils responded to light, which was good, but there was absolutely no reaction to the match in front of his face. Sam didn’t feel a fever, and the skin tone felt normal.

Sam pulled his stethoscope from his bag and unbuttoned the top button of the young Lancer’s nightshirt. As he pressed the device to his patient’s chest, he noted the stark features of ribs and other bones.

“He’s lost a lot of weight,” Sam murmured as he listened to Johnny’s heart and lungs.

“Yes,” Teresa said solemnly. “We can get him to eat, but only a little bit at a time.”

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Sam nodded and continued his exam, next checking the reflex actions in both arms and legs. "Can you bring in some more lamps so I can examine the head wounds?"

Both Scott and Murdoch, who had been lurking outside the small room, disappeared instantly, returning shortly with lamps. Teresa opened the window drapes to their fullest while Sam sat on the bed next to his unmoving patient. Carefully, he parted the thick hair with his fingertips and clucked his tongue.

"What?" Murdoch asked.

"He had a lot of damage here. I see fresh scars, and there's still some evidence of bruising. How was he before this . . . state? You said he had trouble talking?"

"Yes," Scott answered quickly. "He stuttered when he talked and got headaches. Bad ones."

"His head hurt when he collapsed," Murdoch added. "I thought that's why he passed out; from the pain. But then . . . this."

Sam sat back and studied his charge as his mind worked. "And the amnesia, of course." He was quiet for a few moments.

"Well?" Murdoch urged.

Sam snapped from his reverie and stood. "Straight-up, Murdoch? This is beyond my abilities, as I told you in Morro Coyo. But from what I understand there's not much that can be done. He has damage inside his skull." Sam tapped the left side of his own head. "There may have been an actual fracture, but I can't tell that at this point in time. His brain has to heal, and it has to do that on his own. There's nothing we can do but wait."

"We can take him home, then? It won't hurt him anymore?" Teresa asked hopefully.

Sam patted her arm. "That's why I'm here, Teresa, and I see no reason why we can't continue with our plans. The familiar surroundings of Lancer just may be what he needs." And what the rest of you need, the doctor added mentally. Johnny isn't the only one who needs to heal.



Quiet. It was wonderful silence that brought him around. Nothing assaulted his ears or his eyes or his quiet mind. He awoke slowly, rising out of a pleasant dream that was orderly and bright with colors; no blood, no screams, no falling bodies.

Johnny took a quick breath and blinked in confusion. *'Where am I?'*

The dark shadows of the room refused to reveal details save the oily smell of a lamp, wick low, somewhere outside the room he lay in. Ever so slowly he examined the room as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, not daring to move and

rustle the sheets in an announcement that he was awake. Soft breathing touched his ears, and he dared to turn his head enough to find the source - the lean, blond man that was in his dream was stretched out on the rough, wood hewn floor next to him in a bedroll, sound asleep. The man's hand twitched in some unknown dream, and Johnny froze until the sentinel was settled into deep sleep once again.

'Scott,' he remembered. *'He told me to call him Scott Lancer. There was an 'L' brand on his horse. He's my brother.'* The connecting thoughts brought a twinge and a twitch to his temple. Fearing another blinding headache, he abandoned that train of thought and tried another. *'Murdoch, the big man, and Teresa, the girl. They came here to... to what?'* More frustration, another path: *'Caesar is not my father and Maria not my mother?'* Sweat broke out on his palms and he quickly tried to sidetrack his mind as he felt the familiar and dreaded tickle in his head grow stronger.

He did not want to hurt the woman he felt was his mother, and he knew that accepting the other thoughts would do just that. It was a crossroad of choice that he didn't want to face. There was too much hurt involved, too many destroyed feelings, no matter which way he went. Johnny pushed the palm of one hand against his forehead in a vain attempt to stop his racing mind and threatening headache.

'I need to get away to stop the pain.'

Slowly, he sat up. A flash of something on the trunk at the foot of the bed caught his eye: the black Concho pants and fancy embroidered shirt.

'They all agreed those were mine. And I already know the palomino in the barn belongs to me, too. That's one thing I've always known.'

The memory of the horse, in the flesh, made his heart race and he noticed that his head did not threaten to erupt in pain with that thought. A small smile curled one corner of lips and he carefully sat up and turned so his feet were on the floor, opposite the sleeping man that was his brother. Standing, he was amazed at how weak he felt but the thought of riding out on the horse gave him strength.

Carefully, he dressed in the fancy clothes, pausing occasionally when the room began to wobble. Boots were under the bed, and he slipped them on. A small feeling of satisfaction settled over him. The clothes were like a piece in a puzzle that fit perfectly with another piece, but didn't quite make a whole picture. He plucked the hat from a hook next to the door, and slipped the stampede string around his neck so the hat lay flat against his back.

'I may not know where I belong, but I do know these clothes are mine. And the horse - Barranca?'

The name came to him from the deep, black void, and he smiled again. Slow and easy movements took him out of the small room, down the dimly lit hall and

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through the kitchen. Moonlight coursed through the windows and told him that once he got outside, he would have all the light he needed.

The barn seemed to take an eternity to reach with the halting gait he used but he finally made it. Puffing in exertion by the time he reached the double doors, it took a moment for his shaking hand to work the latch. He slipped inside and leaned against the wall to get his racing heart and shaky legs under control. After a few moments, a pair of soft nickers greeted him.

Despite his loss of breath, he smiled. "*D-descanso, usted d-dos! Ssshhh! Don't w-wake th-the others!*" he chided in a low voice. Two sets of ears pointed in his direction, and two sets of soft, wondering eyes watched him with interest. The goats and cow remained snuggled in their straw beds after a cursory look, their eyes quickly becoming heavy again.

By then Johnny was at the palomino's stall door, his hands on the finely boned face. Then he tried to open the stall door latch with the persistent interference of the horse's muzzle. He smiled hugely, his voice nearly lost in happiness. "*E-e- espera un m-momento, p-por favor!* You are n-n-not helping m-m-much." Finally, he threw the bolt and found himself at the horse's neck.

Both hands ran over the gold coat in awe as he felt warm breath from the horse's nostrils on his hip. From the animal's strong crest to his muscled rump and down to his freshly trimmed and shod feet, the mentally weary man drew a measure of peace - the first he'd felt in a long while. Unshed tears burned his eyes in thankfulness at the calm in his mind. He knew then what he had to do.

Quickly, he stepped from the stall and located the tack he knew would be here - a saddle with the Circle L on the fender and a simple bridle with rawhide bosal - on a rack on the wall. They were as familiar as the horse, and Johnny drew more strength from the feeling.

Conejo watched in interest as his neighbor was tacked up, Johnny's hands fumbling with the latigo and buckles between breaks to gather his waning strength. When he was done, the man realized something was missing and searched the barn with his eyes. The other horses that the visitors had brought were stabled outside, but all the equipment had been brought in the barn. A buckboard wagon against the wall held another saddle, similar to his.

"*Lo s-s-siento, m-m-mi hermano, b-but I n-n-need this.*" He pulled the saddlebags - still fat with supplies - bedroll and rifle from the wagon and put them on his own saddle, then gathered up the reins and led the palomino from the stall.

Conejo nickered worriedly, his big ears flicking back and forth as he shifted his feet, realizing he was being left behind.

Johnny hesitated, and then dropped the palomino's reins in a ground tie before he walked to the small, brown horse's stall and placed the flat of his hand on the wide forehead.

"Adios, *m-mi amigo*. T-t-take c-care of Caesar." As a farewell gift, he dumped a measure of oats in his friend's manger and then quickly gathered the reins of his waiting mount and left the barn.

Barranca arched his neck and trotted excitedly at Johnny's side, ready to hit the trail. Johnny felt his own excitement rise, pleased that the feeling did not make his head hurt. Going behind the barn to cover their escape, Johnny checked the cinch one last time and swung up with a bit of difficulty. He swayed for a moment in the saddle, finding his center of balance and the second stirrup before noticing how the saddle was formed to his body. A sense of belonging settled his mind.

Before he reined the prancing horse away from the small farm, a small tingle of regret washed over him. Was he being a coward? Here was a place where he had a purpose and a tiny bit of peace; for what did he risk throwing it away?

Then he knew why he was leaving - he needed to make this painful decision from a neutral place. He knew that no matter what the decision, someone would be hurt - very deeply hurt - and he simply did not have the capacity to live with that right now.

Dark strands of hair fell loosely across his forehead as his chin dropped in a moment of silent farewell. Then, pushing his exhaustion aside and with a slight touch of heel, Barranca spun smartly and loped away from the Arroyo farm.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was still dark when the Arroyo rooster announced that dawn was coming. Scott cracked an eye at the noise and quickly organized his sleep-scattered thoughts. The room was pale yellow heavily accented in shadows from the low-wicked lamp in the hall, and he remembered that he was sacked out on the floor of Johnny's room.

He rolled over onto his back and realized he'd slept soundly all night – the first all-night sleep in a long time that was dreamless and deep. I guess I was due, he thought as he stretched and sat up. Rubbing his eyes, he automatically turned to check his brother's bed.

"You up, Johnny?" he said out of habit and hope. He wasn't surprised there was no response, but something about the bed itself made Scott frown. Halfway to his feet, he realized the bed was empty. "Murdoch!" he yelled, scrambling to his feet to check the floor on the other side of Johnny's bed. "MURDOCH!" he yelled again as he sprinted to the bedroom door after seeing that the room was empty.

Murdoch, clad in a night shirt, nearly collided with his panicked son in the hall outside Johnny's door. "What . . ." he started.

"Johnny's gone! The room's empty! Check the house!"

Teresa, still in the process of wrestling with her robe, stumbled from her room. "Johnny's gone? How long?"

"I don't know! I woke up and he was gone. I'll get my boots, you two check the house." Murdoch and Teresa went in opposite directions.

Maria and Caesar hurried from their sleeping area already in their robes. Murdoch briefly explained what they knew, and began to excuse himself to search.

"It is your fault," Maria hissed, her eyes smoldering and brimmed with tears at the same time. "You caused this! He did not want to go, and you forced him away!"

Caesar grabbed his wife's shoulders and forced her back into their room. "Maria! I will not have you speaking to our guests like that!" She began a tirade in Spanish, and Caesar gave Murdoch an apologetic look over his shoulder as he forced his wife down the short hall.

Murdoch and Teresa had finished searching the small house when Scott exploded into the living room, fully dressed. "I'll check the barn!" he said as he ran out the door.

Teresa caught Murdoch's arm. "Do you think Johnny's all right? Where do you think he went, Murdoch?"

The big man paused to give her a small smile and a reassuring pat to her hand. "I don't know, honey. I'm embarrassed to say that we certainly didn't give him a good reason to stay here. Let's get dressed so we can keep looking."

By the time the pair were dressed enough to go outside, Scott was on his way back from the barn with a determined stride, speaking loudly in disgust. "He's not here. Barranca's gone, along with all the supplies in the wagon."

Caesar's voice sounded from the house porch. "Where do you think he went?"

The Lancers stopped when they met halfway between the barn and house, and Scott spoke again. "I don't know, but where ever he went, Johnny Madrid is unarmed." He held up Johnny's gun belt, complete with gun, for all to see.

"Oh, no!" Theresa pressed her fingers to her mouth.

"What does this mean?" Caesar questioned, confused. "Did you say Johnny Madrid?"

Murdoch bit his lip and met Scott's angry and worried eyes. "Yes," he said just loud enough for Caesar to hear. "Scott, get the horses saddled." With a sharp nod, the blond son headed back to the barn with the gun belt thrown over his shoulder. Murdoch turned back to the house and indicated that Teresa should start packing their things. "Yes," he repeated as he stepped up on the porch next to Caesar. Teresa continued in the house and Murdoch leaned on the porch rail next to Caesar with a sigh. "There's something we haven't told you about Johnny . . ." he began.



For the past hours Johnny had let Barranca choose the path they traveled, puzzlingly satisfied that it led south. The young man had other problems to deal with.

By the end of the day it was a struggle to keep balanced in the saddle. Johnny was bone tired and annoyingly sore. When dusk settled around them, hunger was added to the list, and in addition, he felt light headed.

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Making a camp was a completely frustrating endeavor. When he tried to think of what he needed to do, it seemed that the black void in his mind that he'd been trying to ignore was all he could see. After numerous attempts, he gave up on a fire and grumbled that if he were the ranch hand Scott and Murdoch were telling him he was, this whole camping process should be a lot easier to him. Had they lied, too?

The only thing that came easy was caring for the horse. He took satisfaction in that as he hunkered down with a thin blanket and a hunk of jerky. The small chunk of dried meat didn't stop his hunger completely, so he added a dry tortilla to the menu and called the meal complete.

With aching muscles and a somewhat quiet stomach, he stretched out under the stars and realized his mind was amazingly clear. Lacing his fingers together under his head, he studied the stars and the rising moon and felt the comforting blanket of peace envelope him. The quiet sound of Barranca grazing nearby, the crickets' night song and the wind rustling through the mesquite and chaparral soothed him into a blissful sleep.

Johnny awoke with a gasp and found that he was sitting up, drenched in sweat, his heart wildly galloping in his chest. The breeze made him shiver as it dried the sweat, which helped to bring awareness back. What woke him?

He glanced around nervously, but everything seemed to be fine. The moon had already followed its path across the sky, and dawn was almost upon him. All he could recall was inky blackness, and the vague memory of feeling like he was falling. A hungry rumbling in his stomach brought his attention back to his immediate surroundings.

With a short laugh and shake of his head, Johnny wiped his brow and stiffly struggled to his feet. "Oowee, I'm n-n-not m-movin' too well this m-m-mornin', horse." He stretched carefully and smiled at Barranca, who was watching him with interest from a short distance away. "D-d-don't s-s-uppose you k-kin s-s-saddle yourself, huh?" The pain associated with speech seemed to be less this morning, and he took that as a sign that he'd made the right choice in leaving.

He found the canteen and shared what was left with the palomino. It took some effort, but he got the horse saddled and packed, and they were ready to hit the road just as a slice of orange sun poked above the mountains.

Sore and stiff, he mounted. "C-comon'," he groaned, nudging Barranca with his knees. "Let's f-f-find s-s-some water."

Refreshing cold water helped both of them. With a few hours in the saddle under his belt, the stiffness wore off leaving only a few tender spots from the saddle. They kept a steady pace, moving in a southerly direction at a good pace. Around noon, they broke for a rest among some oak trees.

For the first time, Johnny tried to gather what thoughts he had and put them in some semblance of order. No matter how he looked at it, he really didn't have any choice but to leave. Distance was the only way to see things more clearly, and separate lies from the truth.

But even with all the information he had, there was still the question of the bottomless, black void that haunted him. Something was missing, he knew. There was some fact or piece of information that would bridge the void and bring everything together - he felt that - but where to get this elusive fact was his problem.

Inside, he knew that the Arroyos did not have what he needed. True, they had lied in the past, but they just didn't seem connected to the blackness. Johnny also felt that the Lancers had the key, but they weren't going to give it to him. That puzzled him greatly.

This was a quest he had to deal with on his own. With a sigh, he remounted, and wondered if he would ever find what it was he was looking for on his own. He hoped so, because he knew he would never rest until he had.

It was late afternoon when they came to a crossroad. There was a weathered post with a peeling sign hanging loose, but still pointing steadfastly south.

"Sonora," he read out loud, hoping to jar a memory free. When it didn't, he leaned over to pat Barranca's sweat crusty neck. "Well, a h-h-hot m-meal a-and a s-soft bed s-sound nice, and I k-know y-you'd like s-some d-decent ch-chow, too. Let's g-git a m-move-on." He wearily rubbed his now thumping head. The palomino eagerly moved out, his pace a little quicker.

Sonora was bustling at dusk. Loaded wagons were making their way out of town while riders came into town looking for entertainment. The stage pulled to a dusty stop and discharged disheveled passengers who looked tired and ready to rest. Johnny looked around in interest, feeling safe studying everything from the back of a horse.

Johnny pulled his hat low over his eyes so no one could see him examining the streets so intently, and wondered why he was concerned about it. The idea of everyone being able to see his face bothered him, he realized with surprise. As he rode, his right hand nervously thrummed his thigh and he began to feel growing nervousness - no, that wasn't it exactly - awareness, that was it, concerning his surroundings.

Reacting to the feeling, he reined Barranca around to a back alleyway, away from the bustling main street. Luckily, he came across a livery, small but clean. Keeping his hat pulled low, he pulled a few coins from his pocket and stabled the horse himself. The grooming put him at ease, but the calmer mind brought forth a rousing grumble from his stomach.

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He laughed and patted his stomach as he turned the horse loose in his stall and dumped in a measure of oats. "Ok. N-n-now it's m-m-my turn. You'll g-g-get your h-hay with the r-r-rest of 'em." With a final slap on the golden rump, Johnny let himself out of the stall and stepped into the alley.

Johnny let his nose find the food, grateful for the money clip he'd found in the pocket of his pants shortly after leaving the farm. He mentally thanked the Arroyos for putting the clip back when they cleaned the pants; when he left the farm he hadn't thought about money.

He'd spent some time on the trail studying the engraved Circle "L" on the silver clip, fruitlessly trying to find an emotional connection.

Right now, though, the only thing he felt was hunger. He followed his nose to a small, dark saloon that was just off the main street. The smell of grilled steak drew him in. Johnny paused in the door and scanned the room. It was fairly crowded, but the darkness appealed to him and he made his way to a far corner table where he finally dragged his hat off from his head and relaxed.

A short, bald man dressed like a bartender came around, order pad in hand. He looked tired and annoyed when he arrived but as soon as he snapped, "What'r ya havin'?" his expression changed.

"S-s-steak and t-tortillas," Johnny said, noting how big the man's eyes suddenly widened. In response, he hunkered uncomfortably lower in his chair. "An q-quit s-s-s-starin'."

The man dropped his eyes immediately. "Yessir. Tequila?"

Johnny nodded without thinking, and the man hurried off. Tequila. The word brought a flash of images to his head, one being Scott making a horrible face that made Johnny smile. The others were a blur of faces in dark rooms much like this one. Those flashes brought an uneasy feeling in his gut. When the waiter brought a shot glass and bottle, Johnny suddenly lost the desire to taste it. Instead, he swallowed hard to try and get rid of the dry feeling in his throat and let his eyes flick around the room.

When his food came he'd visually checked everyone in the room enough to feel comfortable enough to dig into the food. The hunger was overwhelming once the scent hit his nose, and he focused entirely on the plate before him, ignoring the comings and goings of the bar.

"Hey, Johnny, long time no see."

The plate was almost empty when a voice next to him drew his attention. A pair of men who didn't quite look like cowboys grinned down at him with partial-toothed smiles. Their faces were as weather worn and dirty as their clothes, and they stood with their thumbs hooked over gun belts heavy with ammunition.

"What are ya doin' in Sonora?" the foremost figure drawled as he adjusted his tattered hat with a filthy hand. "Ain't heard 'o no jobs hereabouts."

Johnny squelched the rising apprehension he felt and fell into a dark mode that found him speaking without really thinking. "Passin' through," he said lowly, slightly surprised at the sound of his voice. It was like someone else was speaking through him.

A look crossed the speaker's eyes that made Johnny hold his tongue. He didn't drop his impassive stare, and hoped the nervous twitch in his gut wasn't obvious. Finally, the impasse was broken when the man spoke again.

"If'n yer lookin' for work, we kin use ya. Not the kinda thing yer used to, but it'll git ya a dollar or two if ya need it. We're camped north 'a here by the red rocks."

Johnny simply nodded.

"Later, Madrid." The men turned and moved to the far end of the bar. In the smoky darkness, they did not see the stunned expression on Johnny's face.

Madrid? At the sound of the name, something began a slow burn deep inside, and Johnny suddenly felt sick. He broke into a cold sweat as he forced his mind to focus on paying for the food and leaving. He was so intent on his goal of simply getting to the door without vomiting that he didn't notice the number of eyes that followed his progress out.

The cool air shocked him as it hit his damp skin. He gasped for breath just outside and grabbed a post to keep on his feet. Feeling a bit steadier after a pair of deep breaths, he moved off from the saloon boardwalk and stepped down into the dark alley between buildings.

Johnny leaned against the wall and calmed his breathing while his mind raced. The mention of Madrid had caused a black tidal wave of darkness that became a whirl with the visions of red that plagued his dreams.

He'd finally found the key he was looking for, but what it meant was still a mystery. Johnny found himself mentally committed to a trip to the red rocks, hopeful that it would help him remember.



Murdoch and Scott were both weary but neither would be the first to suggest stopping. They both felt they were too close; Johnny was just ahead, they were sure.

"Sam and Teresa will probably be in Sonora by now if they caught the first stage out of Jackson." Scott shifted in the saddle and glanced at the moon rising behind a rocky ridge to their east.

"With the way our luck has been, they probably missed the first stage." Murdoch stared straight ahead as they rode.

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They had just passed a dilapidated signpost for Sonora, and their hopes had been momentarily raised. They were sure to catch up to Johnny there. They both knew it was not the smartest thing to ride along a road like this at night, but neither felt they had any choice.

"Well, we'll be in town within the hour. Our luck has to change, Murdoch. Johnny's life may depend on it."

Without a word, they urged their mounts into a jog.

Neither one saw the lone rider to the east, hugging the moon shadows and following the rocky ridgeline south.



After leaving the saloon, Johnny had made his way back to the livery knowing sleep was out of the question. He brushed Barranca, allowing the horse time to clean up his dinner and giving himself some time to think.

Madrid. The word was connected to the black void, without question. And those two saddle tramps knew how it fit. Johnny also knew that those men were bad news, and he needed to be careful. But when would he have another chance like this? How did Madrid fit in with the Lancers? If they knew, why didn't they tell him? Did he run away too quickly?

The contemplative man shook his head briskly at the last thought, clearly remembering the tension at the Arroyo farm. He didn't leave soon enough. It was time to handle things his way.

Decision made, he quickly saddled the palomino and led him into the night.

'Red rocks to the north,' Johnny thought, recalling his ride into town. He did remember seeing a ridge line that looked rather red compared to the other rocks he'd seen on the trail. Even though the moon was waning full, there was more than enough light to guide him and he pushed his horse into a ground eating lope.

It wasn't quite an hour until he saw the area he remembered and pulled up Barranca. Something inside was screaming to be careful, so he reined off the main road and worked his way to the ridge via a rabbit trail. The bare, worn path was silver in the moonlight and easily followed through the brush and rocks.

The rocks made him uneasy for a reason he could not fathom, but he pressed onward until a low voice in the dark stopped him.

"Hey, Madrid."

Johnny found the source of the voice easily. It was the second saddle tramp from the saloon, the one that hadn't said anything.

"I told Del you wouldn't come. Guess you proved me wrong."

"That so?" The words were out of Johnny's mouth before he even thought, just like in the saloon. It was like someone else was speaking through his lips.

"Yeah. Never heard 'o ya doin' this kinda thing."

Johnny's body had instantly relaxed into a slump, his arms crossed on the saddle horn as he studied the man with a sideways look. His gut, however, was burning with warning. He said nothing, but held the man's stare.

Finally, the other man dropped his eyes. "Well, I'd best tell Del you're here. He'll wanna place ya, but we'd better hurry."

"Why?" Johnny straightened and picked up the reins.

"We gotta mark almost in range. Comon." The nameless man nodded the direction for Johnny to take, and the palomino led the way. "I've gotta stay back here and watch for anyone comin' from town - like you - and head 'em off. Del and Stokes are in those rocks there," he pointed out a large clump just ahead, "and Pete's at the foot of the ridge over yonder." He pointed to the north, where the ridge began. "Morgan's over there somewhere to keep 'em from runnin' west."

The fact that the road into Sonora ran down the middle of this set up did not escape Johnny's evaluation. "Bushwhackers," he said as a lone cloud muted the moonlight.

"Only until we get stake enough to go south. Ah here tell there's still some int'rest in hirin' guns down yonder. That's where you'd come in. Del's good, but your name'd surely get us work."

As the man spoke, the waning moon broke through the solitary cloud and the main road again glowed in the night. Two riders were clear silhouettes against the silver road.

And the leggy horse in the front looked very familiar to Johnny.

Reining Barranca to a stop, Johnny twisted and pulled out the rifle in his scabbard.

"I thought you preferred a pistol, Madrid." The outlaw rode up next to the stopped palomino. "You good with that, too?"

Johnny held the rifle in both hands and looked at it for a second before turning to the rider. "Yup," he said shortly. Then, in a blinding motion, Johnny jammed the butt end of the rifle into the face of his escort, breaking his nose and knocking him clean out of the saddle. Silence followed the grunt and thud when he hit the ground.

After a moment, Johnny leaned over the empty saddle and peered at the prone bushwhacker on the ground. The motionless man's head was at an odd angle, and the dark haired Lancer knew he was dead. The dark pit in his mind swirled in red once again.

"I think I can shoot it, too." The persona's voice that seemed to have hijacked his body spoke in a cool, conversational tone that both surprised and pleased

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Johnny. Letting the persona lead the way, he tucked the gun under his arm and urged Barranca onward. For once, he felt calm and confident, with no sign of headache to temper his actions.

As he moved forward, Johnny found Scott and Murdoch again and did some quick mental calculations. He couldn't reach them in time, but he could warn them, and cut the numbers. Without a second thought, he pointed Barranca's nose downhill to the main road.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Did you hear that?" Scott glanced quickly to the side as he spoke, keeping pace with Murdoch's sorrel, and kept his voice low. "Something's in the brush."

"Yes. I'm hoping it's a coyote." Murdoch kept his eyes forward, but Scott saw his hand move to the sidearm on his hip.

Scott followed suit. "The horses are tired. If it's anything else, we'll have to make for cover."

Murdoch nodded. "There's some large rocks and a dry gully just up ahead. I remember them from my ride through here two weeks ago."

"All right. Listen! Up ahead!"

Both horses jerked their heads up, ears forward, and their pace faltered. The pair was just about to urge their mounts onward when the sound of galloping hooves ahead of them made them rein in instead.

A gunshot pinged the road in front of Charlemagne's hooves and the horse spun around. The shot had come from somewhere along the ridge

"Get to cover!" Johnny's shout came out from the direction of the galloping hooves, and suddenly a gold and silver specter erupted from the darkness ahead. As Barranca slid to a hard stop, Johnny raised the rifle and fired at the ridge.

Scott and Murdoch spurred their horses ahead. "There's cover over here!" Murdoch lead the way.

They made it to the rocks in a hail of bullets and drove the horses into the gully before leaping off. They hunkered down behind the boulders, panting in exertion as they checked their stock of ammunition. Murdoch was alone behind a huge boulder, whereas the brothers each had smaller rocks nearer to each other.

"There's four of 'em," Johnny reported, fixing the rifle's sights on something on the road north. "Two up in the rocks, one behind ya on the road, and another somewhere to the west."

The fact wasn't lost on Scott and Murdoch that Johnny's speech was unimpaired; they simply didn't have time to dwell on it. Realizing they could be

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attacked from the west, Scott placed his back to the rock and kept watch, glancing occasionally at his brother.

The change from the last time they'd seen him was astonishing.

Johnny squeezed off a shot. "Winged 'em," he snapped. "He's on foot now." "Give me the rifle. I'm better with it." Scott's comment caused the younger man to look him with a quizzical expression. Scott reached down beside him and held up a gun belt. "You're better with this." He tossed the belt over, and Johnny caught it with one hand. After a moment, he tossed the rifle over, and pulled the gun from the holster.

As soon as it was in his hand, it felt like home. And then the bloody visions began to erupt from the black void in a parade of red and everything became clear.

Johnny Madrid was a killer.

A series of loud reports next to him jerked him into the here and now as bits of rock bit into his skin. On pure instinct, Johnny spun around, keeping low, and palmed the hammer in a quick two count

A body slammed into the ground behind them. It was the man from the west - Morgan.

"That leaves the two in the rocks, and possibly a walking wounded to the north," Scott barked. "Where in the rocks, Johnny?"

The lack of response gave him pause, and he glanced at his brother. Johnny was frozen, staring at the dead body, gun still in hand.

"Johnny!" Scott snapped. "Are you all right? Are you hit?"

"N-no," the shocked young man responded. This was all happening so fast; the Madrid persona that had been taking the lead was now taking over. Johnny wasn't so sure it was a good thing for a fleeting second, and the hesitation nearly caused him his life.

Shots fired from Murdoch's position snapped him into action. Johnny threw himself to the ground, reacting to movement perceived in the corner of his eye. Instantaneously, a flurry of shots powdered the rock where his head had just been. Without really aiming, he fired until his gun clicked empty and another body flopped to the ground near Murdoch.

"I think it's the one you winged," Murdoch shouted. "That leaves two."

Johnny pulled himself to his knees, his arms weak, and he looked at the dark lump of the second man with total surprise. His own reactions astounded him, and he felt his jaw sag with disbelief.

"Johnny, reload!" Scott's voice didn't penetrate Johnny's mind at first. "Johnny! Snap out of it! You need to reload!"

With a jerk, Johnny came around once again and crawled back to the rock where he began to reload. His hands were shaking so badly it was nearly an impossible task.

Apparently, his condition very clear to Scott., who spoke sharply as he, too, reloaded. "Johnny, listen to me. Everything's all right, you hear me? We need you now. Stay with us!" A shot over their heads made Scott duck and bring the rifle around. "Where are they, Johnny?"

It took a lot of concentrated effort for Johnny to drag his attention up to the hills. His body felt like lead, and his brain like soaked cotton. The black and red void was all gone now, bridged by the realization of who he was. His throat felt scratched and dry, and he swallowed hard, trying to find his voice.

"We have you covered!" A voice roared from across the road. "You can't get away! Where's Madrid?"

Murdoch's voice was low, for Lancer ears only. "They're right across the road, in that clump of boulders. They have us pinned."

"Can you see them?" Scott asked.

"I saw the one talking. Johnny, you sure there's two left?"

Johnny nodded, but then realized Murdoch couldn't see him. "Yeah," he managed to choke. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Hey Madrid! I'm callin' ya out!" The voice yelled. "You 'n me, Madrid! We can stop this right now!"

Johnny felt his heart quicken, but then a strange blanket of calm enveloped him as the Madrid persona again took over. Slowly, he strapped on the worn gun belt and slipped the weapon into his holster where it nestled as a perfect fit. Then, slowly, he stood.

As he did so, all that was left was Madrid, standing alone as usual. He straightened his shoulders, flexed his fingers, and then let his arms hang loose at his side as he turned away from the protection of rock to face his challenger.

"What are you doing? Don't go out there! Johnny!" Scott started to rise to his feet in alarm, but the look his brother gave him stopped him cold just before the voice from the rocks shouted a warning.

"Stokes has you in his sights, blondie! Leave him be! This is between Madrid an' me!"

"You can't," Scott started.

"Johnny, don't," Murdoch ordered simultaneously.

Madrid ignored them both and stepped to the middle of the moonlit road. A slight breeze rustled the brush and lifted his hair from his forehead, but Madrid's gaze was fixed on his challenger. He adjusted his stance so his feet were shoulder width and hooked his thumbs on his belt. A slow grin shaped his mouth as a form materialized in front of him about twenty feet away.

"Del Sebastian." Madrid remembered everything at that moment - everything about Sebastian, and everything about every gunfight he'd ever been in. It was as clear as the shock on Scott's face, and deep inside Johnny felt sorrow.

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He'd hoped to find himself to be a better man than this when his memories returned.

But he also knew there was no better man for this particular job, and he intended to finish it and make sure his family was safe.

"Tell Stokes to back off. They won't interfere." Johnny nodded to his brother and father next to him. "It's just you 'n me, Del."

"Let's just call it insurance, Madrid." Del mirrored Johnny's stance in the road while Stokes kept his rifle leveled on Scott. "'Scuse me for not takin' the word of a gunslinger."

"Fine. I'll just take care a him myself." Johnny's voice was firm and unwavering.

Del laughed. "You shore are sure of yourself, ain't ya? This could have been a good partnership, Madrid. Too bad you never gave it a go."

"Got other plans. Let's get this dance started, shall we?"

Those words brought serious silence as the two men regarded each other. Johnny looked relaxed with his arms hanging loosely and his knees slightly bent. Del looked tense but his face showed no fear. The moment seemed to stretch on, and then everything exploded at once.

Stokes flew backward as Johnny took him out with a shot between the eyes a split second before Del fired. Del's muzzle flash was simultaneous with Johnny's second shot, and Del Sebastian toppled backward over the body of his partner, his gun firing a wild second shot into the air as he went down.

Johnny stood for a second, his left hand poised over the hammer of his smoking pistol. Then, both hands dropped to his side and his head bowed limply. He took a wobbly step backward.

"Johnny!" Scott shouted as he leaped from behind the rock with Murdoch at his heels. "Are you all right?"

Johnny stumbled backward and was abruptly stopped by a large rock. Slowly, he slid to the ground, leaving a smear of shiny blood, black in the moonlight.

His brother and father were at his side in an instant. Scott ripped open the bolero jacket and frantically felt for the wound as blood pooled in Johnny's lap. Dazed, the injured man didn't seem to notice the ministrations.

Murdoch realized the serious nature of the wound and struggled to his feet. "I'm getting a doctor and a wagon. Sam and Teresa should be in town. Here." The big man wrenched off his jacket and laid it gently on his son's lap. "Use this for bandages. I'll be back."

Scott barely heard Murdoch catch a horse and ride out at a gallop. He wondered what his father would find on his return. A short moan made Scott glance up to Johnny's eyes, and he was glad to see they were open and clear.

"I remember everything now." Johnny's voice was low and breathy, the words slightly slurred.

"You're bleeding, brother. We have to get you home." Blood seeped between Scott's fingers as he desperately adjusted the placement over the gushing wound. He barely managed to keep the panic from his voice. "Murdoch's caught a horse and gone to town. Sam's there," he added a mental 'I hope' to that comment.

Johnny winced as he shifted his position against the boulder. His arms hung limp by his sides, his gun lying forgotten in the dirt. "So much blood." His voice sounded dreamy, which alerted a warning in Scott's gut.

The older brother fastened his stormy blue eyes on Johnny's peaceful face, and the alarms shrilled louder.

"Johnny, that's over and done. You aren't that person anymore and haven't been for a long while! You hear me? I need you to hang on. Johnny?" As he spoke, Johnny's eyes glazed and lost focus. "Damn it, little brother! Don't you give up, you hear me? Don't make me lose you again! You are part of a family now, a family that loves you! Johnny!"

A glimmer of life animated the indigo eyes as they sought out the speaker. "I've caused so much pain," he whispered.

"And you saved a lot of people from pain! Johnny, you're a good man. You always have been. And you're an even better brother, and I don't want to lose that! Johnny, do you hear me?" Scott's voice rose to a determined shout, demanding obedience. He could feel his throat begin to clench as his vision blurred, but he couldn't risk moving his hands to wipe his eyes. Scott ground his teeth in an effort to control his growing panic; his voice dropped as he fought to make his point clear. "Johnny, we love you. We all love you. Murdoch, Teresa, Jelly . . . me. Please. Please don't give up."

The solemn eyes watching him filled with confusion as Johnny frowned slightly. "How can anyone love a gunfighter?" he mused softly.

"When the gunfighter is only part of the man we know. You were Johnny Madrid, that's true. Part of you still is and always will be. That's what makes you Johnny Lancer, don't you see? You've always been the same man inside." Scott felt hot tears tracing his cheek but ignored them as he concentrated on his brother's wound. When it looked like he'd finally stemmed the red tide, he found his brother looking at him with a curious expression. "Johnny? You hear me little brother?" He yelled desperately. "You give up now and I'll kick your butt all the way to Mexico!"

That comment brought a short chuckle from the injured man, who then winced in pain and allowed his eyes to drift shut.

"Johnny?" Scott's yelled hoarsely. "JOHNNY!"

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In a voice so quiet Scott could barely hear it over his own wildly thumping heart, Johnny said, "I'll see ya again, Boston." After a terrifying shudder, his body relaxed into itself as he exhaled and slumped slightly sideways; then he was still.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Voices drifted in and out and sounded like they were underwater - not quite clear, not yet identifiable. The curiousness of the whole thing caught his attention and he decided to simply absorb it all without trying to decipher it. He was too tired to do anything else - he was simply aware that he was aware.

Occasionally, he was distracted from the voices by the coolness of - something - on his forehead. I should know what that is, he thought muzzily.

Sometimes it was hard to breathe and he felt his chest spasm and gasp automatically. Occasionally, something else - a feeling - would coalesce as a knot in his gut. It made him feel cold, and he would be afraid.

'Hacer no déjeme solo de nuevo!' was all he could think; don't leave me alone again! Then, he would always feel arms surround him and low murmurs would melt the icy fear away.

Eventually, there came a smell. The discovery of the new sense drew his thoughts together clearly in what seemed to be the first time. It was a struggle, but he felt his eyelids finally win the battle to open and he was blinded by brilliant white.

He heard a groan and realized it came from his own throat which felt like sandpaper, so he tried to swallow the dryness away. The bright white made his eyes burn as his eyes fluttered; then a wave of pain rolled over him from all quarters.

"Johnny?" A cool hand was on his forehead. "Don't move, Johnny, you're hurt. Murdoch!"

The voice was light. A woman's. "T'resa?" he croaked, the word sounding more like a gasp. He still tried to get his quivering eyelids under control so he could stop the burning in his eyes. He felt and heard the motion of more people around him, and, gratefully, the bright light was put out. He relaxed into the mattress with a weak sigh.

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"We've shut the curtains, Johnny, so your eyes won't hurt." The flash of a pretty face crossed his mind when he heard the voice, and then he felt a gentle hand dab the light-induced tears from the corner of his eyes. Again, he forced his eyes to open.

"Son? Can you see me?"

Murdoch. The vision of the big man in his mind's eye was very clear. It almost matched the fuzzy blob in front of his face.

"Bacon," Johnny croaked, his brain finally identifying the smell that had brought him around.

"Bacon?" another voice piped in. "I should have known the first thing you'd think about would be your stomach!" Although the words were teasing, Scott's voice was thick with relief. A second dark blob entered his sight field and Johnny concentrated on getting his eyes to focus.

Maybe if I sit up, he told himself. He tried to get his arms to cooperate.

"Whoa, son, hold on there. You'll need some help for a while." Strong arms helped him sit up, much to his chagrin, and a new wave of pain enveloped him momentarily. By the time the wave dissipated, the faces regarding him were fairly clear.

Teresa's soft hand on his chin was followed by the cool press of glass on his lower lip, and he sipped gratefully at the water. "That's enough for now. Oh, Johnny, it's so good to see you sitting up!"

"Y'all look tired," Johnny said in a hoarse whisper; the statement exhausted him.

"You have no idea, brother." Scott laughed as he set his lean body down on the edge of the bed.

"You were shot almost two weeks ago. Do you remember?" Murdoch's voice was amazingly tender.

Johnny frowned. Things weren't real clear in his head yet - so many images that didn't make sense. "So much blood," he whispered from a half-memory. Looking down at his body, though, all he saw were clean sheets and equally clean nightshirt. The feel of tight bandages around his chest was very apparent.

"You said that before," Scott whispered, all levity gone from his voice.

Johnny looked up and met his eyes, confused. His big brother looked so worried. "I did?" he replied in a questioning tone.

A look of relief washed over the long, fair features when, after a few seconds of study, none of the despair Scott had heard from his little brother before seemed to be present. He cracked a smile. "Yeah, you did. But we cleaned you up real good, Johnny." The older brother playfully ruffled his younger brother's hair. "You should be up and around in, oh, how long you think, Murdoch?"

Murdoch snorted. "Not soon enough for him, I'm sure. Johnny, Sam says you'll need lots of rest, so we'll leave you be for now. It's good to see you awake, son."

"I'll get you some tea and honey, Johnny. It'll help your throat." Teresa gave him a quick peck on the forehead before she turned to go. "I'll be right back!"

Murdoch followed his ward out of the room and was bellowing orders before he was halfway down the stairs. It made Johnny smile, and he leaned back his head and closed his eyes with a sigh.

"What's so funny?" Scott asked.

"At least the old man won't be yellin' at me for a while," he answered softly. He heard Scott chuckle, and some of the things in his mind seemed to fall into place. "Scott?" he asked, puzzled and trying to fight off the overwhelming weariness that was taking over his body. As he struggled to keep alert, his eyes slipped closed.

"Yeah?"

"I've been gone, haven't I?" His voice was fading. "I was on a farm . . ." his brows knit together in thought, but the lines relaxed as sleep took him quickly away.

Johnny didn't feel Scott's fingers brush his hair from his face or hear him say softly, "Yeah, little brother, you were gone for a while. But you're home again, and that's all that matters."

EPILOGUE

Johnny Lancer stretched his legs in front of him, enjoying the comfort of the padded train seat. The last time he'd traveled by rail, he and Scott had been relegated to the wooden bench seats in one of the older cars. How long ago was that? Two years?

Completely relaxed and unusually mellow, Johnny allowed a grin and a short chuckle at the memory. There was a trip that wound up more complicated than expected. The railroad sure didn't take to bulls tearing up the shipping cars.

He became aware that the woman across the aisle was staring at him with a scowl.

"Uh, sorry. Didn't mean to disturb ya."

The apology seemed to satisfy the woman and she turned back to her book. Johnny shifted and tugged his gun belt a little lower. The scar was still tender, even after a year and several months. Sam had said he was lucky to be alive.

Johnny smirked again, wondering how many times he'd been told that. He pulled out the timepiece his father had given him his first year at the ranch, and calculated he had hours to go until the first stop. With a resigned sigh, he tucked the watch back in his pocket and decided to do his own reading to pass the time.

He pulled out a wad of letters from the inside of his jacket. They were worn and torn, well read and very familiar to him. Putting the letters in order by date, he began with the oldest.

Rose Alvarado had been pleased to hear from him, and agreed with his reasons for contacting her. There were weekly letters at first, written in Spanish with a delicate and flowing hand that told of life in Jackson and on the Arroyo farm starting from when Johnny left. The letters helped to alleviate a lot of guilt that Johnny had heaped upon himself. It was a long while before he truly believed he'd done the right by the Arroyos in leaving.

After several months of reports by Rose, the letters fell to monthly intervals. Johnny felt it was time to contact Caesar, and another series of letters intertwined

with Rose's. Johnny still choked up at the compassion shown by the farmer; never once did he blame Johnny or chastise him for his decision to leave. He only offered support and understanding, even though the very difficult times he was having on the farm.

Working the farm alone was difficult at best, and the winter had been long and hard. For a while, Caesar wasn't sure Maria would ever recover. As he read that letter again, Johnny automatically reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the worn rosary beads. He'd considered returning them at that point, but something made him hold them back. A slow smile crept to one corner of his mouth when he finally figured out how to return them.

The letters seemed to be cathartic for Caesar. The two men now held a level of respect and understanding for each other that Johnny admitted he'd never experienced before. The realization of their relationship had also helped Johnny with his relationship with Murdoch. Both father figures had a lot in common, and Johnny felt humbled that he was privileged enough to know them both.

The last interwoven threads of letters consisted of contributions from the Arroyo's priest and, finally, Maria herself. Whereas Johnny's journey of the past year had been mostly physical, Maria Arroyo's had been emotional. Time healed them, but they still had scars, and sometimes the rawness became difficult, but they both persevered. Johnny couldn't help but feel proud of her.

The final letter was the one Johnny held onto as he tucked the stack away again. It was less worn, being the most recent of the bunch, and the one that was the reason he was on this southbound train. It was fat with recommendations and testimony. He tucked the envelope in an outer jacket pocket as the train rumbled to a stop in Santa Ana. From here to Mexico would be on a stage.

The orphanage hadn't changed much since Johnny had last seen it. He'd been a boy of twelve at the time, fighting to make his way in a world that didn't seem to want him. Children were playing in the dusty yard without shoes, even in the coolness of the spring air, and Johnny had to smile. It was amazing to him what these children had been through, yet they still seemed to be happy.

Armed with the letter, he entered the orphanage office and greeted the scowling, prim nuns with a respectful yet charming grin - the one that came so naturally for him, and always got him what he wanted.



With a child on either side of him, Johnny felt trapped. Miguel sat with his arms crossed over his eight-year-old chest, miffed at the fact that Johnny wouldn't let him hold the reins. Angelina, on the other hand, was delighted to count ground

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squirrels, starting over each time she reached ten because it was as high as the four-year-old could count.

It had been a long, long trip from Mexico, and the night in Jackson had been an excellent idea. Senora Rose was delighted to have children in the house again, and hovered over the tykes until they were scrubbed clean and well fed. Rose put Angelina to bed with a new doll Maria had made, and Miguel refused to let Caesar's carved, wooden horse out of his sight. It slept under the boy's pillow.

Now they were going to meet the rest of their new family. They already considered Johnny their older brother, and were eager to meet their parents. Brother Johnny told them over and over how lucky they were, and the children wholeheartedly agreed. A farm like the Arroyo's was all they dreamed about in the orphanage; well, second to a real mother and father.

When he turned the wagon down the familiar drive, the trio couldn't help but notice the spring flowers lining the drive and urging them onward. Angelina squealed with delight at the various colors and Johnny caught a smile on Miguel's mouth before the young boy returned to his pouting. As the children enjoyed the flowers, Johnny scanned the farm that had been home to him.

The fields were green and lush with new growth. The familiar Conejo was at the water trough, huge ears turned in their direction as water dribbled from his lips. He watched with interest as the wagon approached the house.

Johnny smiled when his eyes found the two figures standing in front of the house; he felt a rush of warmth when they waved at him. Caesar looked the same, but Maria looked more relaxed and content than Johnny remembered. He was glad she'd found peace. With Caesar, Rose and the priest, Maria Arroyo had all the support she needed to make it through the grieving process. Right now, she looked wonderful - there was a healthy glow to her cheeks that he couldn't recall seeing before.

"*Allí mamá y papá,*" Johnny said to the excited pair.

"*Lata nosotros en realidad vivo aquí?*" Angelina said in awe.

"Si," Johnny said. "This will be home."

The children were stunned by the farm. Johnny knew that to them, this was like the first time he'd seen Lancer. He couldn't help but grin.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Johnny reached into his pocket, and turned to Miguel. "*Dar esto a su nuevo mamá.* It's a present for her." He pressed the rosary into the small boy's hand, and closed the small fingers over them. The boy nodded solemnly.

He pulled up the horse and jumped down, then helped the children down. They hesitated for a moment, then Johnny reminded them to thank Caesar and Maria for the presents. That was all it took for the children to fly down the rest of the drive into their waiting arms.

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

Then he stood back and watched as the shadows of yesterday were driven away by the light of love.

THE END