

# THE VISITOR

## BY FLISS B



He'd come a long way, sleeping rough, living off the land. He was bedraggled, thirsty and foot-sore as he passed by the Lancer arch. He was too proud and too weary to risk rejection and not wanting another cold, hungry night he decided to check out the lay of the land first. Slowly and carefully, he made his way closer to the hacienda, avoiding anyone working nearby. He edged around the side of the corral, eyes wide as he searched for signs of danger. So far, so good.

He wasn't interested in staying long, he wasn't after a job. That wasn't his style. He liked to be free, a drifter, a wanderer, and some would say a beggar. Sure it meant times of hunger and loneliness, but he wasn't ready to settle down. He couldn't remember what it was like to have a family or friends and he didn't feel the need to start looking for any now. He didn't need all that nonsense. They just tied you down, had expectations of you, demanded time and attention. Things he wasn't prepared to offer anyone. He liked the idea of never knowing what lay over the next hill. And come what may, he would never answer to anyone. He was his own boss and as long as he had his health and lightning fast reflexes he intended to keep it that way. He was afraid to admit to himself that he was getting older and slowing down but this realisation, and the confirming inability to catch anything to eat for some days now, was eating away at him like a cancer. He chased those thoughts from his mind.

He considered sneaking into the kitchen first, the aromas emanating from within a temptation beyond belief. But he had not

survived this long by taking chances. The barn was a much safer option. He'd hide there for now and come out after dark, once the house had settled for the night. He softly, stealthily, made his way towards the open door. He froze, melting into the shadows, as a young man in a blue shirt left the building. He was usually a good judge of character and could deduce his reception from one look at a person but this young man had him puzzled. Sure enough, he was whistling a carefree tune and walked with a relaxed swagger but something about this man left him uneasy. He decided not to count on a welcome from this dark-haired youngster so he stayed hidden until he had passed. When the way was clear he left his hiding place and once again headed in the direction of the barn. He needed food and a warm place to spend the night and experience had taught him this was the safest place to start looking for such comforts.

He had almost made it when, from out of the darkness within, came a screeching bundle of feathers. He knew that geese made much better guardians than dogs any day and the noise this one was making confirmed it for him. He had to get away before someone came out to see what all the fuss was about.

It was beginning to appear as if the kitchen and a direct approach may be the safer bet after all. He quickly skirted the barn and made his way towards the house. In the past he had encountered a few women who had ignored their menfolk and had treated him kindly. If he was in luck he might find another such woman here. He had made it almost to the door when it was flung open and a young

woman carrying a bucket pranced out the door, calling cheerily back over her shoulder at someone working inside. The sight of him startled her and she halted mid-step.

“Oh, hello, what brings you here?” She cautiously approached him but he felt she posed no threat so he stayed put. She was definitely one of those women whom he could rely on for a handout.

“Maria, can you bring out a saucer of milk please? We have a visitor.”

He would hold back and wait until she had placed the milk on the ground and retreated a little. It was no good going straight up to them. They had to feel that they had won you over. He’d played this little game many times before and knew how to play it best. He fancied himself a master of it, in fact.

She placed the saucer on the ground and remained crouched near it, ready to pat him as he drew closer. As hungry as he was he was determined to make her retreat first.

“Come on, puss. I know you want it.”

She waited. He waited.

“Guess you’re a bit timid. Has someone hurt you? You don’t look loved or cared for, poor thing. Well that’s okay. I’ll go inside now and you can come and get it when you’re ready.” She moved inside and he knew she’d be watching his every move from the kitchen window.

As soon as she disappeared he stole over to the saucer, sat neatly with his tail curled around his body and delicately lapped up all the milk, never once dropping his guard. Finally sated, he walked off just a short distance then paused to start cleaning himself, a long-overdue task and one always easier to

complete on a full stomach. He’d been at it for some time when he heard her speak again.

“Oh look Maria. The poor thing devoured that milk in no time. He must be starved. I’m going to give him some of the leftover beef from last night.”

She came outside again and placed a chunk of meat on the saucer he had cleaned. He knew it was time to show a little deference if he was to win her over. Just a little, mind you. He walked towards her, tail high in the air, swaying very lightly from side to side. She seemed to understand and stood still so that he could gently brush her leg with his tail as he passed on his way to the saucer. Then she made the mistake of reaching down to pat him so he darted away leaving her with nothing but a handful of air. He wouldn’t let her get too close too soon. That wasn’t the way this dance was meant to go. Once she had backed away he approached the meaty offering she had left for him. It was remarkably good and caused him to re-think his intention to move on in the morning. Perhaps he might just stay a day or two. However, to do that he would have to offer the young woman something more. Now that he was cleaner he felt it might be prudent to allow her a brief pat. He walked over to her, his stately bearing testifying to his lineage, and allowed her the briefest of touches of his soft grey fur. He knew that would be enough to have her working hard to get him into her lap.



He’d been keeping watch on the comings and goings of the ranch from his vantage point on the top of the garden wall. From there he had a good view in all directions. Only one incident earlier had left him uneasy. The young man in the blue shirt had reappeared and hesitated mid-step when he had laid eyes on him perched on the narrow ledge. As soon

as he saw the man stoop to pick up something he had fled, back over the wall, away from the man and towards the greater shelter of the garden. He was annoyed that this man had caused his pride to evaporate thus but a timely escape from men like this was more important. He'd been right the first time – this was one to watch warily.



It was almost evening and the last of the sun's rays were dropping below the horizon. He knew the wall would remain warm for some time yet, and he settled in for a further nap when a tall older man came riding up on a horse. He backed into the shadows, sensing this was the one the woman would be appealing to. Sure enough, the man was barely at the door before the young woman swept out of the house and grabbed his arm leading him over to the very spot he had been settled in until this man's appearance drove him into deeper cover.

"Oh Murdoch, you must have scared him off. He's been right here all afternoon."

"Steady Teresa. Now who have I scared off?"

"Puss. Oh I hope he hasn't gone far. The poor thing, Murdoch. He was so hungry. Can we keep him please? We could do with a cat around the place. He'd keep the mice away and..." She had the look of a woman who knew how to get her way with this man.

"Hold on, sweetheart. You keep saying 'he' but are you really sure about that? We certainly don't need a cat and her successive litters of kittens."

There was no way he was going to let that affront to his manhood go unchallenged. He held himself to his full size and swept majestically from the shadows, tail held aloft, making his presence known.

"Oh here he is. Isn't he gorgeous Murdoch? Look, he's coming straight up to you. He must like you." He walked from the young woman to the older man, gracing each with a gentle swipe of his tail before settling a few steps off to wash his face, showing off his greatest assets to their best advantage in the process.

"Teresa, I don't think that it's up to me to say whether you can keep him or not. He looks to me like he'll take himself off wherever he wants and whenever he feels like it." At this the young girl's face fell. "But if you can convince him to stay he'll be most welcome. Just as long as he stays outside and doesn't come into the house. I don't want to wake up to find a stray cat sleeping on my pillow."

"Oh thank you Murdoch. You'll see. He'll be wonderful to have around the barn." They started to head indoors, leaving him to his spot on the wall. "Do you know what? We'll have to give him a name. I'm going to call him Puss."

This announcement, which reached his ears as they passed through the doorway, sent a convulsive shiver down his supple spine. Once they named you it was time to move on. It was his unwritten law. One he had always lived by. Well, tomorrow he'd make for the road again. But it wouldn't hurt to spend just one more night in a warm, dry barn.



He had barely settled back into his favoured spot on the wall when a fair-haired man stepped out of the doorway to his left. He watched cautiously, ready to flee at the least provocation, but prepared for now to allow this one to approach. He had a gentleness to him that inspired trust.

"Now what have we here?" The deep resonance of the man's voice was soothing and welcoming. He stood up and stretched,

beckoning with his tail. The young man approached and reached out his hand towards him. He approached, sniffed gently then vigorously rubbed his face against the man's glove, in the process marking this one as acceptable.

"Well, well, you certainly are a friendly one. Does Teresa know you are here? Of course she does. I bet you've won her over already. Here, do you like this?" The man began to rub briskly behind his ear, a feeling both enjoyable and annoying and which he found hard to pull away from. In fact, he found himself pushing against the pressure, desirous of more attention.

"Ah, you're a handsome one, but let me give you a word of advice. If you want to win over Murdoch you'd better make sure you earn your keep. This is a working ranch and there's no room for freeloaders." With those words of advice the blond left him alone on the wall once again.



He took up residence in the barn that night, determined to repay the young woman for her kindness. He had no difficulty at all as vermin always found the stacks of hay most inviting and in the morning she found a dead rat waiting at the back door, clearly a display of gratitude. He'd had no need to catch anything for himself, so well had she fed him earlier that day.

He'd told himself he'd move on today but his curiosity led him astray. So far he had only investigated the garden and the barn. Feeling more secure about his place in the scheme of things he decided to wander over to the corral and see what was happening there. Many men were milling about, saddling their mounts. He had their measure. Then once again he spotted the dark-haired one, this time in a brightly-coloured shirt. All show and no subtlety. He

could tell he was being watched even though he was careful never to make eye contact. This one was slow to trust and his unreadable expression made him untrustworthy. He felt disturbed by his presence and knew this feeling to be mutual. He stalked back towards the barn, pretending nonchalance.

He was almost to the doors when an older man came into view, cursing and spluttering. "Shoo, shoo. Don't you get any ideas about making Dewdrop your supper 'cos I'll make mincemeat outta ya if ya try. Go on now, git."

He looked disdainfully at the old man, pitying him for his lack of understanding. Toying with some noisy old goose was beneath his dignity. There was no test in that. No skill was required, no stealth, no dexterity. There was simply no challenge and therefore no point in playing the game. He moved away at a measured pace communicating his contempt with every step he took.

"Yeah, that's right. You keep right away from her."

The old man's lack of understanding was truly deplorable.



The young woman had once again provided him with a substantial supper which had left him deliriously drowsy. She had settled herself on the grass a respectable distance from him after she had put down his plate and he had watched surreptitiously as she spread her skirt around her while he delicately devoured his repast. Perhaps it would be a good time to offer a little more of himself. He spent a considerable length of time cleaning himself, allowing more time to observe her movements. She was waiting patiently, a well-mannered human worthy of more trust. He finished his toilette then purposefully strode over to her and found a part of her lap almost

to his liking. He circled left once, twice, then proceeded to knead her lap into his desired shape and softness. If she put up with this he would favour her with a brief snuggle.

She was rewarded.



By the time she emerged from the kitchen door next morning he had already deposited his gift from last night's efforts. This time all he could manage was a mouse. The good food and changed lifestyle were slowing him down. He'd have to attend to that very soon or he would find himself unable to compete and that was a dangerous state to be left in, in his line of business.

He watched from under a nearby tree as she inspected his latest offering.  
"Scott! Scott come quickly. Look!"

The blond emerged from the door behind her.  
"What's wrong Teresa?"

"Look. It's just a baby mouse. The poor little thing."

"Teresa, you do realise that baby mice grow into big mice?"

"Of course, Scott. I'm not a complete fool."

"And you realise that mice are vermin, just as much as rats are?"

"Yes, Scott. I know that too. But this one is so little. He never had a chance."

"Teresa, honey, this was why you wanted to keep Puss."

"Oh Scott, you just don't understand." She stamped her foot and returned to the kitchen, pushing past him in her frustration.

The man shook his head wearily then looked up and saw he was being watched.

"A word of warning, Puss. She's a bit unreasonable about these gifts. I recommend you stick with ugly, old rats in future. You'll get a better reception." With that he picked up the dead mouse and made his way around the side of the house.



Early on in his visit he'd found his way to where the horses were stabled and instantly felt comfortable. He'd always had an affinity with horses and enjoyed their company. The feeling was mutual. They seemed to appreciate his company. They certainly behaved well around him. Unfortunately, early on, he discovered also, to his chagrin, that this place was much frequented by the dark-haired one. He'd like to believe it meant this one wasn't all bad but his closed look was still disturbing. However, all was not lost as they seemed to have come to an understanding and each studiously avoided the other.



Days passed, and each one saw him promising the next would be his last. It was time to move on. He'd known that from the day she had first named him. It was a very great pity because he was not keen to go hungry again. He'd discovered that the relationships he had so studiously avoided all his life weren't such a bad thing after all. He had food, comfort, even love and understanding. They cared for him. And, much as he hated to admit it, he cared for them, too.

The only thing that stopped him from staying was the dark-haired one. They had no trust for each other and it kept him on his toes. Were it not for that one he would have turned

completely soft already. He certainly would have decided to stay. Of that there was no doubt. He was yet again pondering the timing of his departure and found himself lost in thought. He'd made his way to the back corner of the barn and was preoccupied by his deliberations. Too preoccupied. Suddenly, he realised he was cornered and this predicament made his decision for him. He still had some speed, enough he prayed, to scoot past the dark-haired one standing in the doorway and make directly for the road away from here. Now was as good a time as any. He watched warily, waiting for the slightest move that would give him an inclination as to what the man had planned. Any moment now. All he had to do was watch and wait his turn.

He waited and waited. He knew the man knew he was there. He also knew he was watching his every move, pretending

otherwise. They were at an impasse. Suddenly the man threw something down on the ground, not exactly in his direction but not exactly away from him either. He edged closer to it and sniffed it cautiously. It was a piece of cheese from the hunk the man had been chewing on. It seemed okay so he took a cautious bite.

"You sure are a cagey one, Puss."

Maybe sticking around a bit longer wouldn't be so bad after all, he thought. He stalked steadfastly past the young man, his tail barely brushing his trouser leg and the man's hand barely brushing his tail, as he made his way to the kitchen and tonight's supper. Just one more day.



# CAMP JUNIPER FILL IN PUZZLE

## BY JANET BRAYDEN



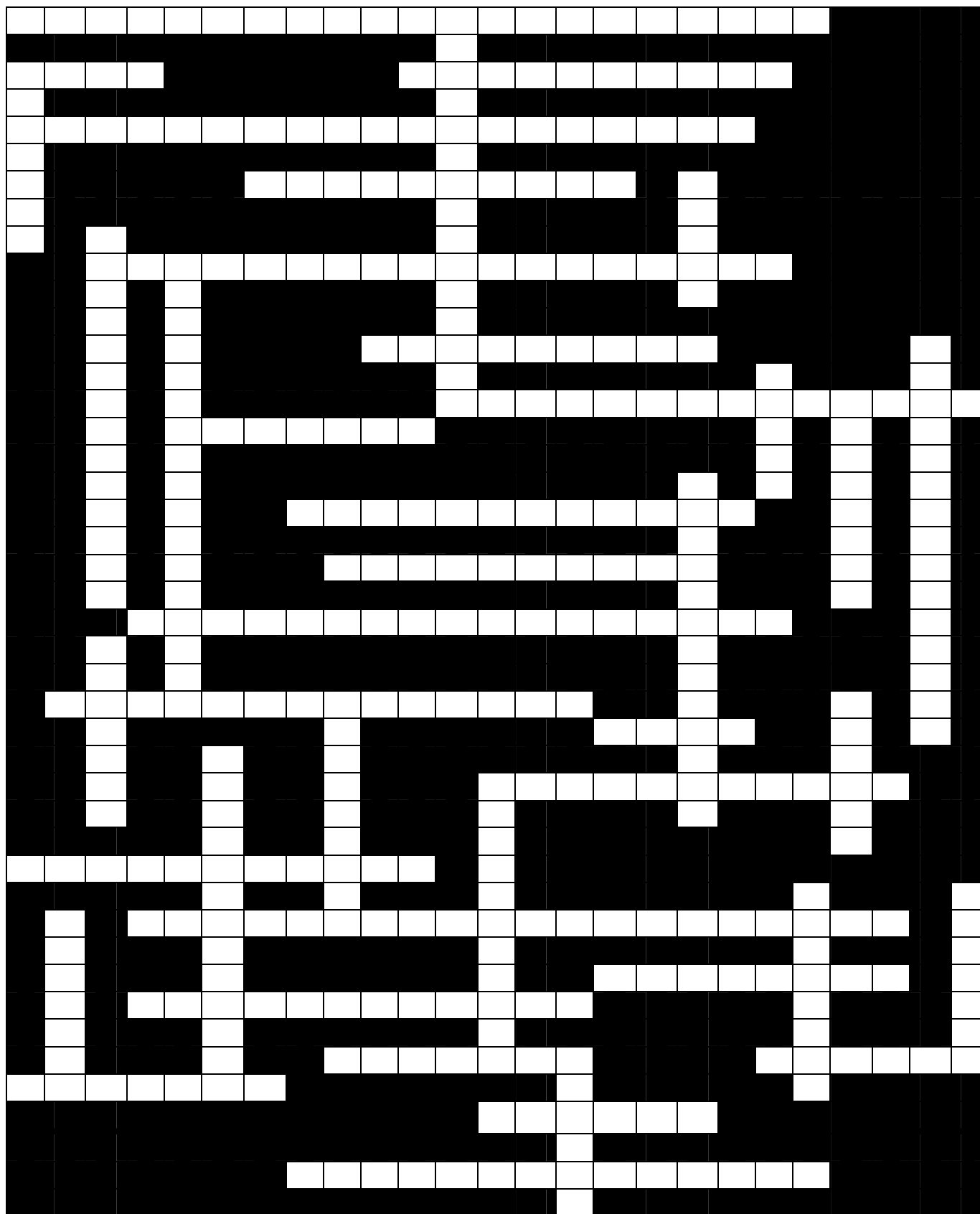
Fill in the blank squares from the word list. They only fit one way!  
Solution on page 186



Academy  
Arkansas  
Aunt Kate  
Bobby  
Boston Herald  
Cattle drive  
Chinese  
Restaurant  
Citizenship  
Classic ballet  
Cooper brothers  
Crocker  
Debutante's  
Cotillion  
Elocution  
Emerson

Hangman  
Harraway  
Harmon  
Hog Wallowing  
Horse wrangler  
Humboldt County  
Jim Harper  
Laundry  
Mean tempered  
Melissa  
Mining country  
Miss Carter  
Moroccan leather  
Mrs. Siddons  
Music  
Needlepoint


Official Suitcase Toter  
Pinkertons  
Poetry readings  
Presidential Suite  
Salad fork  
Vivian  
Walt  
Wedding  
Whip  
Yellow  
Servant  
Typhoid Epidemic  
Unconventional  
Mind  
Upstanding  
Valise



CAMP JUNIPER FILL IN PUZZLE



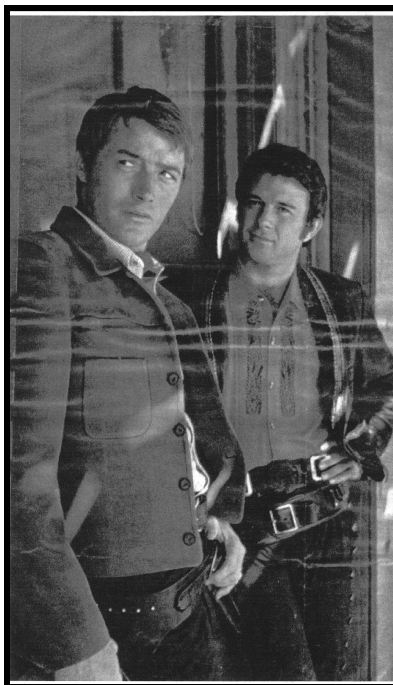
# BUTTERCUP 'N STINKY'S BLACK ANGEL EXAM

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- 1) At the beginning of this episode, what is it that Jelly was supposed to have fixed?
    - A) The water pump on the tractor and the gate at the box office.
    - B) A gin and tonic for Murdoch and a Shirley Temple for Teresa.
    - C) The hinge on the south gate and the handle on the water pump.
    - D) The script.
  - 2) When Johnny says, "Someone's in trouble," does he sound relieved? How relieved? Why? Explain this, without using the phrase, "And for once it's not me."
  - 3) When Murdoch calls Jelly into the house to talk to him, what is Teresa doing?
    - A) Knitting.
    - B) Cooking.
    - C) Sewing the hole in Johnny's britches.
    - D) Finally getting some camera time.
  - 4) While Murdoch is standing behind his desk looking out the window, what is he really thinking?
    - A) They can't possibly believe anyone would think this fake backdrop is real.
    - B) Tomorrow I get to kiss the girl, tomorrow I get to kiss the girl! Hot dog!
    - C) And she's prettier than the one Ben got to kiss last week! Hot dog!!
  - 5) When Johnny and Scott go to town in the wagon, they are whispering to each other. What are they saying?
    - A) "Who's gonna believe a hot chick like that Angeline is gonna go for the two old geezers when there's a coupla studs like us around? Huh? C'mon!"
    - B) "Darned if I know! Doesn't make a bit of sense to me. But, you know, the Ol' Man hasn't had a chance to kiss a girl yet, so..."
    - C) "Hey! Could you quit sliding into me? Every time we go around a curve, you slide into me!"
    - D) "I'll quit sliding into you, if you'd get your arm off from around my shoulder! Geesh! And you're hogging the whole seat!"
    - E) All of the above.
  - 6) What is the name of the insurance company that Davis Bateman works for?
    - A) The New World Insurance and Security Company.
    - B) The Die! Sucker, Die! Insurance Company
    - C) Princess Cruise Lines Insurance Company
  - 7) Bateman tells Johnny and Scott that his company can only insure---
    - A) ---persons of good risk and moral stability.

- B) ---any idiot who'll cough up the \$2/month.
  - C) ---dogs and cats.
- 8) Bateman decides Johnny and Scott are not insurable because they are---
- A) ---hired hands for the Ponderosa.
  - B) ---high school teachers.
  - C) ---gunfighters.
  - D) ---New York taxi cab drivers.
- 9) Angeline tells the Lancers that she would like to---
- A) Open a House of Ill Repute.
  - B) Open a Dress Shop.
  - C) Open a Quizno's Subs.
- 10) Do you notice anything odd about the scene of Jelly riding along the creek bed?
- A) Yes. All the dang-blasted gnats and flies!
  - B) Yes. The out-of-place Disney Princess movie background music.
  - C) How silly the whole scene actually is.
- 11) When Murdoch goes to see Angeline in her room, what strange thing does Murdoch do?
- A) Pick up her hanky and smell it.
  - B) Pick up her hanky and smell it.
  - C) Pick up her hanky and smell it!
  - D) Geesh! He picked up her hanky and smelled it!!!!
- 12) The only place to get a marriage license is in Green River. In order to get there, Jelly must go where?
- A) Through Eagle Pass.
  - B) Over the underpass.
  - C) Under the overpass.
  - D) Past the grocery store.
- 13) When Murdoch, Scott and Johnny are out with the cattle, what did you notice?
- A) That Johnny and Scott switched horses....again!
  - B) That it sure takes a lot of cowboys riding around a handful of cattle in order to make them go nowhere.
  - C) Johnny sure looks nice on a horse.
  - D) Scott sure looks nice on a horse.
  - E) They both sure look nice on a horse.
  - F) Murdoch was there?
- 14) When Angeline asks Murdoch why he never remarried, what was Murdoch's original answer in the script?
- A) "Well, I was going to. Then that double-dealing Montoya went and married his daughter off to some two-bit rancher down in Arizona."
  - B) "Well, I would, but the demographic specialists decided unmarried hunks draw in a larger share of the female audience."

- 15) When Jelly's getting ready to go to Green River, did you wonder why he took his bedroll?
- A) Yes. But then I've learned to not dwell on these things.
  - B) No. I figured it was just another one of those Hellmouth anomalies. You know, like on Tuesdays and every other Friday, Green River moves fifty miles to the east.
- 16) After the gunpowder blows up, and Bateman along with it, Murdoch turns to Jelly and says, "Jelly, let's go home." Is this normal behavior?
- A) Yes, after all, this is the same man who, when seeing Scott lying wounded and unconscious in The Lawman says, "He's not that badly hurt."
  - B) Yes, after all, this is the same man who, when looking for Johnny in Blind Man's Bluff, comes upon Barranca, riderless, and says, "We can't do much around here. Let's ride into Hard Luck," without even getting off his horse to look around to see if Johnny's lying in the bushes somewhere, bleeding to death. At least Scott got off his horse to catch Barranca!
  - C) Yes, he knows that you can't really kill an insurance agent. They just come back as cruise ship captains.
- 17) What is the name of the saloon in Morro Coyo?
- A) Harvey's Saloon.
  - B) Harold's Bar and Grill.
  - C) Buttercup's Bakery
  - D) Stinky's

All returned exams and grades will be kept under the strictest confidentiality, except for being posted on the internet. Please be aware that neatness and originality count, as does bribery and threats.



# ZENITH OF HIS DESIRE

## BY TINA



### Chapter 1 'They' Are the Smart People

Scott rode for over an hour looking for his new brother at Murdoch's insistence. There was a part of him that was concerned and a part of him that knew he shouldn't be. Johnny was a grown man after all, able to make his own decisions with or without his or Murdoch's help and had done so from what little Scott knew for a very long time.

He found him at last, sitting on a flat overhanging rock that jutted precariously out from a sheer cliff face overlooking the valley below. It made his heart flutter in his chest to see Johnny sitting there, legs swinging in the open air beneath him, looking for all the world like a kid on a swing rather than a man who had just gotten over a severe bullet wound to the back.

Scott brought his horse to a halt next to the golden palomino admiring the beauty of the surroundings and the fine specimen of horseflesh their father gifted to them on their first day home. He smiled at the significance of what the word meant to him, amazed he was already thinking of this wondrous and wild territory as his home.

He picked his way toward Johnny and sat down beside him, the two of them brothers, the uncalculated, surprising new factor in his life looking down at what should have been their home all their lives. "It's beautiful . . . isn't it?" he said with awe.

Scott waited for an answer . . . expecting one, but not getting it as he hoped. He blinked,

leaned over the edge and looked down at the sheer drop below with a soft whistle before turning to look at his brother. "I'm not fond of heights."

When his brother didn't respond a second time, Scott asked, "You not talking today or what?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"You could try answering my question for starters," Scott replied.

Johnny sighed and looked down at the lean fingers on the ground beside him and back out across the valley, "I guess it is."

"You know, Johnny . . . this brother thing works a whole lot better when you put more effort into it."

"I answered your question," Johnny said with quiet reserve.

"Barely," Scott said with a hint of annoyance. He wondered if this was what it was like between brothers. Would they have been this way their whole lives or more open, more carefree and spontaneous with each other? He thought the answer a solid 'yes.'

Johnny turned to look at Scott, his dark blue eyes squinting under the brim of his hat. "What do you want from me?"

"I want that cocky, little, know-it-all brother, that you were before you turned into this morose skeleton of a man I hardly know at all."

"Morose?"

"Gloomy . . . depressed . . . miserable . . . take your pick," Scott replied waving a hand through the air. "What's got into you? Why are you so standoffish and quiet lately?" Scott asked.

"Didn't think I was bein' that way," Johnny said calmly. *'How could you hardly know me, when you don't know me at all?'* Johnny thought. *'If you really knew me, you'd leave this place and never return or have the old man send me right back to the pit of hell I crawled out of.'*

"Well you are . . . or I should say . . . you have been ever since we signed those papers," Scott retorted. He nudged Johnny in the arm with his elbow, "Come on . . . tell me what you're thinking when you look out there," Scott asked, spreading his hand toward the valley below and the place they now called home.

Johnny took off his hat and wiped away the sweat on his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. "Guess I don't know what to think."

"Why not?"

"Cause I don't know if it's real . . . if it's permanent or not," Johnny told him honestly.

"I don't understand, Johnny. Look out there. You own one third of everything," Scott declared.

"I can see it," Johnny stated matter of fact. "Don't mean it can't be taken from me if the old man decides he made a big mistake asking me to come here."

"That's crazy, Johnny! Murdoch wouldn't do anything like that," Scott told him.

Johnny shook his head and put his hat back on, "That's because you trust people, Scott. I don't."

"That hurts, Johnny," Scott said looking down at his hands. He had hoped in the short time

they'd been together that he and Johnny could trust each other after everything they had been through. Apparently he thought wrong . . . or maybe thought it too soon.

"I ain't tryin' to hurt you Scott . . . I don't know any other way to think. I stayed alive a lot of years by not havin' trust in people. The one person I did trust . . ." Johnny's voice trailed into nothingness, his guard up suddenly when he realized what he'd been about to say. He didn't think Scott could possibly understand the daily anguish he was going through since he'd heard the truth about his mother.

Scott thought he knew what Johnny had been about to say but he didn't press, knowing it was too personal an issue to take up with him so soon in their relationship. How could he when he knew so little and their father hadn't done much more than issue out commands since the first day they'd arrived?

Of course Johnny had been too ill and Scott too absorbed in learning how to become a rancher for any of them to take the time to talk and set some things straight. And even if there had been time, he wasn't all that sure that Murdoch would tell them anything they wanted or needed to hear. To Scott, Murdoch seemed just as reticent and mistrustful as the rest of them.

The 'old man', as Johnny was prone to calling their father, seemed closed off to baring his soul and speaking of the past, good or bad. Murdoch had made no verbal attempt to make right any of the wrongs done to them with a few comforting words or brief explanations that might have dispelled some of their doubts about him as their father, either before or after taking him up on his offer of a partnership.

But unlike his recalcitrant little brother, Scott had no qualms about accepting the offer, such as it was. He was an adventurer at heart, not

so much ruled by his feelings as Johnny seemed to be, and held no high expectations about Murdoch in the first place. For years he'd felt the loss of both father and mother, but loved and nurtured by his grandfather, he felt little pang in his heart over it other than wishful thinking when he was a child growing up.

The man he met as father was much as Scott expected, no less, no more. Cold, hard, rigid . . . a curiosity to Scott who wanted to know more about him the longer he stayed. Explanations would come later. It was human nature to become closer, to know one another once the relationship had a foundation upon which to build. Until then, Scott thought logically, he would bid his time and do his best to discover the complexities of the one variable he hadn't counted on when he traveled across the country . . . having a brother he knew nothing about.

He knew intuitively that Johnny wasn't ready for secret confidences just yet, but he wanted to say something, anything to break the uncomfortable wall of silence between them. Scott wanted to bond . . . to plant a seed he hoped would grow with time.

"There are rules you know," Scott said without looking at his brother.

The reaction Scott hoped for came quickly, hook, line and sinker. "What rules . . . what are you talkin' about?" Johnny asked while trying hard not to sound too curious. Scott smiled. Playing big brother might not be as hard as he thought it was going to be. "The rules they have between brothers."

Johnny picked up a pebble and threw it into the air, watching it arch and then fall to the ground below with a grin. "Who's 'they'?" Johnny asked playing along with Scott's game for now. Sometimes . . . only sometimes . . . it was easy to like having a brother.

Scott grinned back at his brother and picked up a pebble too, throwing it out into the open and letting it drop to the ground like Johnny had done. "They' . . . are the smart people in the world. The people who make up the rules so bothers like us know what to do."

Johnny snorted softly, the corners of his mouth edging upward into a rakish smile that was remarkably handsome on his face and caused crinkles to deepen around his deep blue eyes. Johnny had called him pretty. But if he was pretty, then his brother was beautiful.

"That doesn't tell me who they are, Scott," Johnny remarked with a wry grin.

Scott shook his head and had to catch his hat when a slight breeze blew up the rock face and threatened to send it flying off his head. Johnny laughed, the sound bright as sunshine, full of musical warmth that caressed the listener. Scott took his hat off and then resettled it on his head a little more securely, feeling happy to be alive and sitting next to the boy, the brother he'd wished for as a child.

"Make sure you don't go reachin' for it if it flies off in that direction," Johnny pointed toward the vast openness in front of them. "Don't think they got a rule for jumpin' off cliffs just to catch a two dollar hat."

Scott laughed, rich and throaty sounding, genuine pleasure in his slate colored eyes as he regarded his brother. "I think I need one like yours," Scott said indicating the leather thong that hung from Johnny's hat.

Johnny regarded Scott mildly, his eyes searching for something in Scott's face before he blinked and turned away again, as if he couldn't find what it was he'd been looking for.

It seemed a small eternity that they stared down at the valley, absorbing the rustic scene below them before Scott continued his

conversation. "I always wanted a brother," he commented with a quiet seriousness. "I conjured one up in my head when I was little." Scott laughed about this part of his life, his eyes crinkling with fine lines and blue bonnet gentleness. "Spent a lot of time telling him what he could and couldn't do."

"You tellin' me you're one of them smart people who made up the rules?" Johnny asked, responding to the lightheartedness of the conversation.

Scott leaned back, hands splayed wide on the gritty surface of the ground, lifting his face toward the bright yellow sun. "I graduated from Harvard. I suppose you could say that I qualify as being smart enough to make up a few rules when it comes to imaginary brothers."

"Is that how you used your fancy education back east?" Johnny asked.

Scott turned his head and looked at his brother. "Most of the time. But don't tell anyone," he said conspiratorially.

Johnny cleared his throat and leaned back, following Scott's example and closed his eyes. "I ain't tellin' anyone anything." Johnny commented thoughtfully, "Ain't none of my business no how . . . just seems like a waste of time though, if you ask me."

Scott sat up and pushed his hat back off his forehead a little, "I didn't think it was a waste of time. Didn't you ever imagine having a brother or a sister when you were growing up?"

Johnny opened his eyes, sighing as he sat up straighter and plucked a pebble from the ground. He rolled it around between his fingers, then squinted and drew back his arm tossing the small rock into the air. "Guess I did a time or two."

Scott hoped his brother would go on. He waited, but gave up when Johnny seemed more intent on crossing his ankles and kicking his boots back and forth while he fingered a small band of turquoise beads around his wrist. *Someday you'll talk to me*, Scott thought. *Really talk to me.*

"You going to stay up here much longer?" Scott asked, switching to another subject, the original reason he had been out looking for Johnny instead of pouring over the accounts with Murdoch.

Johnny stopped kicking and leaned so far forward to look at the ground below them that it almost took Scott's breath away. One slight move and he could slip right off and Scott wouldn't be able to do anything about it. His palms got sweaty just thinking about it, hoping Johnny would say he was ready to go back so he wouldn't have to tell him that Murdoch demanded it.

As if reading his brother's mind, Johnny replied, "Guess we should get back. The old man didn't want me stayin' out too long anyways. Figure I been gone now 'bout twice as long as he said I could." With his head bent Johnny added quietly, "Guess you already knew that though, otherwise you wouldn't be here in the first place."

Scott wondered if he had been that clear as to why he was there all along. He had hoped not. He had hoped that Johnny would have seen his arrival for the better cause. Scott had wanted to spend time with him, talk to him, grateful for the opportunity to do so, but the fact was, Murdoch had sent him out to search for Johnny and bring him home.

"Are you always able to do that?" Scott asked.

Johnny scooted back, propping the heels of his boots on the rock, his hands splayed beside him on the ground. "Do what?" Johnny replied.

Scott pushed himself back and crossed his legs, “Read people. You knew as soon as I sat down that Murdoch sent me to get you?”

Johnny laughed and pushed himself to a standing position, “Didn’t have to read you to know that, Scott. Murdoch ain’t let up on the reins since I got here.”

Scott stood up and faced his brother, “He worries, Johnny.” Would his brother believe him?

Johnny started to turn and walk away but Scott grabbed his arm and kept him from leaving. Scott’s heart skipped a beat when Johnny looked down at his hand and then slowly moved his dark heated gaze up his arm and to his face.

Johnny shook his head slowly, a veil of warning swirling in the depths of storm blue eyes, “Don’t ever grab me like that.”

Scott swallowed the lump of first fear in his throat but immediately chased it away. He knew how Johnny felt about physical confrontation. They had fought once before. Then as now, Johnny had that same look, toxic lethal ferocity, a man fully prepared to strike back if threatened. He should have known better. “I apologize, brother. No harm intended.” He fingers relaxed letting go of Johnny and dropped to his side.

The storm in Johnny subsided by sheer willpower, vanquishing all trace of the wildness that had been there a moment ago. He dropped his eyes, hiding the overwhelming sadness in his heart, the hate that made him coil up and strike like a rattlesnake just for being touched. He couldn’t help it though. It was his way. It kept him safe, distant from anyone who might hurt him if he opened the door to his heart too wide. Black curling lashes fluttered like soft feathers in the breeze when Johnny looked up, smiled timidly, cautiously, and then turned,

making his way toward his horse. “You like to swim, Boston?” he asked over his shoulder.

Scott stared at his brother’s back, watched the muscles ripple beneath the faded red shirt Johnny wore as he reached down and grabbed the reins into his hand. Once again Scott was shocked, stilled by the look that had been in his brother’s eyes and then by the quicksilver change in Johnny’s disposition after he walked away. He shook off the disturbing feeling and replied, “I do.”

Johnny put a foot in the stirrup and pulled himself up into the saddle with an inaudible grunt. The pain in his back still bothered him, but he tried not to let it show. He sat up straight in the saddle and got his other foot in the stirrup, then leaned forward on the pommel while he waited for Scott to mount up. “Want to find a spot tomorrow . . . go swimmin’?”

Scott noted the exhaustion on Johnny’s face, the forced attempt to change the turn of the conversation, but kept his thoughts to himself. Johnny was offering him an opportunity to spend more time alone with him. He didn’t want to spoil the offering by remarking on how Johnny must be feeling or break the unspoken truce and forgiveness between them. Murdoch would do that on his own, none the wiser for any plans they might make before heading home.

“Sure . . . You got a plan for how we can get away?”

Johnny smiled as they pulled their mounts around and rode them down the rocky path that led to the valley below. “Not right this minute . . . but give me a while and I will.”

## **Chapter 2**

### **Hard Knocks and Bruised Knuckles**

“Sam said not to overdo, Johnny,” Murdoch reminded.



Johnny sat on the arm of the sofa facing his father's desk, his dark head bowed, his hands in his lap, his fingers constantly in motion as he listened to Murdoch go on and on about his health and disobeying the doctor's orders.

"He didn't tell you all that stuff for his health. He said it for yours." Murdoch got up from his chair a little stiffly, grabbing the cane that leaned against the edge of the desk. With his back to Johnny he stared out the great window overlooking the front drive and corralled pastures. "It took me nearly three months before I could walk without constantly being in pain, and in all that time . . . I've had to use this blasted thing," he said, gritting his teeth and shaking the wooden staff for effect. "A wound like yours . . . like the one I suffer from . . . makes a man tired," Murdoch added, dropping the bottom of the cane to the floor with a louder than usual clunk.

Johnny lifted his eyes without moving his head to look at his father. It was strange for him to hear someone admonish him for not caring about his health, for pushing himself too fast, too soon. Being this way was a part of him, he knew no other because of the life he'd led. His world swam before his eyes and he beat down the incomprehensible feelings he didn't understand and shifted guiltily on the arm of the chair. "I wasn't gone all that long."

Murdoch sighed and limped around his desk to stand in front of his son. He laid a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You worried me. I had visions of all manner of bad things . . . and I didn't like them."

"I don't understand why you were worried. I can take care of myself," Johnny told his father. Looking up into Murdoch pale blue eyes he was taken aback for a second by the look of concern he saw on his father's face. He swallowed self-consciously, feeling almost sick from the loopy feeling in the pit of his stomach, his insides churning because of the

closeness . . . the touch of the hand he wasn't prepared to accept just yet, not from Murdoch, not from Scott . . . not from anyone.

Johnny slid to his left, off the arm of the sofa and moved to stand in front of the open fireplace, breathing in . . . out . . . counting . . . uno . . . dos . . . tres, his hands flexing and un-flexing with nothing to keep them occupied other than the invisible confusion he wanted to knock out of his head if he could.

Murdoch's hand dropped to his side when Johnny moved away from him. *I can take care of myself.* It hurt to have his son be so detached, so unaccustomed to the compassionate touch of another human being. It made him wonder if Johnny had ever been close to anyone. He thought perhaps not, except for his mother. But if she had been close to him, able to lovingly touch and hold her son, it must have been a long time ago.

Murdoch wasn't sure when 'it' had happened. He hadn't asked. What he knew, he knew from Johnny's nightmarish fevers while struggling to survive the bullet removed from his back. The words echoed despondently in his ears, *I can take care of myself.* He wanted to cry in anguish. The Pinkerton reports hadn't contained enough information, nothing that could have prepared him for the insurmountable peak of hatred he would feel when he learned the true extent of his son's abuse.

During Johnny's fevered state of mind, frightening visions were screamed into the night. Sketches of horror that made Murdoch weep for his son in the dead of dark as Johnny tossed and turned his head fitfully on the pillow. The depiction of evil was horrendous, too much for even him, a helplessly horrified father, unable to accept what had happened to his child, without losing his mind. His heart had bled from the knowing on that night, and wept for tainted love unpredictably lost forever to him. His anger toward Maria,

toward the man who killed his adulterous wife and tortured his son, overwhelming him, swamping his soul with a tidal wave of fury, a need for vengeance so raw, so blistering, he thought he might die of it if he did not find some kind of release from his sorrow.

And yet Murdoch was compelled to show nothing of his feelings. He was a drowning man, a sinking ship in a sea of guilt he was unprepared to face just yet. But there would come a time. He vowed to Heaven on his knees the day his sons came home that he would face his past, explain his life, the life he unwillingly gave to them . . . and ask for their forgiveness despite what he told them in the beginning. But first he wanted loyalty, commitment to who he was now and not who he used to be then. 'A *tall order*,' Murdoch thought. Selfish and maybe a little cruel, but then he felt that way. It was who he was, what he made of himself after the hard knocks that beat the selfishness into him.

Murdoch subconsciously rubbed his fading bruised knuckles and limped over to the chair beside the fireplace where his son was standing. Hating that he could still hear the words in his head, *I can take care of myself*. He sat down, placing the walking cane beside his leg. "I know you can take care of yourself, Johnny. No one said you couldn't."

Johnny crossed his arms over the mantle and laid his forehead on them, toeing at some imaginary something or other with the tip end of his boot. Back and forth, a slow, grating shuffle that had rhythm and no meaning to it. "Then why do you do it? It ain't doin' you or me any good. I'm gonna come back if that's what you're worried about."

The shuffling stopped abruptly, as if he had an unexpected notion. "Or is it that you don't trust me?" Johnny stood up straight and dropped his arms to his sides and turned to Murdoch. "Is that it?" he asked accusingly, as if he already thought he knew the answer. His

face was dark and smoldering, shadowed by his secret deep-rooted fear of being unwanted by his father.

Murdoch frowned and sighed wearily, "No, Johnny . . . that isn't it."

The grandfather clock bonged to the hour, loud in the middle of their conversation, low and mournful, a reminder that supper was getting nearer. One more hour . . . and it would be their thirty-sixth meal together. Murdoch had been counting . . . foolishly, happily, eccentrically, from day one. He told no one, they would think him crazy insane for doing so. It was his secret . . . his delight that the number of times they ate together was growing and growing in number. How stupid, yet how wonderful, he thought and smiled while they waited for the deep musical chime to end. Dinner together . . . his idea of family . . . of good times and pleasant evenings spent with each other. His past . . . his new future, Murdoch hoped.

"Then what is it?" Johnny asked, floundering with the content of the conversation.

"Concern . . . for your health . . . for your well being. Is that so hard for you to imagine me doing?"

Johnny stared at his father, gauging Murdoch's tone, weighing his sincerity while doubting it all the same. "A little."

Murdoch sighed and picked up his cane. He stood up, wincing, putting a hand behind his lower back. When he saw Johnny move toward him, hesitate and wait, he looked up and grinned assurance, "I'm fine . . . just need a little axle grease to get me going."

"You want me to help?" Johnny asked hesitantly.

Murdoch shook his head, "No . . . no need. I'm fine really. Just about to get this thing licked if my back wouldn't stiffen up so."

"Can I go then?" Johnny asked, his momentary concern for his father evaporating when the man straightened without further trouble, a full head taller than him, with a hard chest and set of broad shoulders massive enough for Johnny to wonder if his father was invincible. Johnny thought he was and backed away as Murdoch limped across the room, heading for the front door, the healing injury, no weakness on behalf of the man who had just finished lecturing him.

"Yes . . . but don't go far. Dinner will be ready soon and you know what the rules are about that."

The door was opened then closed behind Murdoch. He limped his way toward the barn, each step getting stronger, better as he moved. *I can take care of myself. Someday we need to talk, you and I,* Murdoch thought. *Really talk. And then, when that day comes, I want to wash away the hurt and the pain of those words I hate . . . the ones that keep you from my heart.*

### Chapter 3 My Golden Son

Murdoch watched his fair-haired son, his first-born, loving the smoothness of his features, the liveness of his body, so familiar, yet so different, so manly compared to his Catherine, Scott's mother. The child he had but one memory of, this man so very much like his dearly beloved wife, was a wonder to him, an amazement that startled and pleased Murdoch immeasurably. He marveled at how well Scott had turned out, despite the fact that he had been raised his entire life by a man that Murdoch both despised and to some degree, begrudgingly admired.

The last quality was a surprise to Murdoch. He hadn't expected to feel this way, a quandary of mixed emotions about Catherine's father. Harlan Garrett was a despicable man, a treacherous thief who took what belonged to Murdoch without regard to right or wrong, only seeing things in his way while others wilted and died by the wayside without a by your leave or a may I please. Harlan was immeasurably rich and Murdoch hadn't been able to fight the man and take back what belonged to him . . . his son.

Murdoch limped up to the corral and crossed his arms on the top rail, watching as one of the vaqueros lent his experience in shoeing a horse with patience and ease to the eastern dandy. Already, they respected and admired the long lost son, the golden caballero who could ride like the wind and face the devil head on. Scott's skill with a rifle, his courage, his fierce commanding leadership in the heat of battle earned him the status of legend in the making with or without the skills he needed to run a ranch from the get go. The vaqueros thought him to be honorable, a young man who could learn, a good man who would one day assume his father's role, el Patrón del rancho.

Scott looked up from the hoof he was working on, smiled at his father and finished driving the last nail in the iron shoe. His thighs bulged, squeezing the horse's fetlock between tight muscles before gently setting the hoof down with a sigh of satisfaction. He stepped away and watched as Pedro inspected his work.

"Muy bueno," the older man said, smiling at Scott.

"You think I'm finally good enough that I could do it without you next time?" Scott asked.

The vaquero smiled, big and toothy, pure fantasy white in a face the color of rich brown

earth. He shrugged, glancing quickly at Murdoch then back to Scott, "Es posible." Pedro grabbed the halter and led the horse into the barn, his teaching done with.

Murdoch pushed away from the corral as Scott climbed through rails and then clapped his gloved hands together a few times to rid the kid leather of dust and dirt that clung to them. "I think you impressed him," Murdoch told his son, watching with carefully hidden fascination as Scott pulled one yellow glove off then the other with precise care just like he did with all his things before stuffing them inside the leather of his belt.

"You think so?" Scott asked, pulling a handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiping the sweat off his brow.

Murdoch chuckled and picked up his cane from against the rail, "I'm pretty sure. He's singing . . . can't you hear him?"

Scott cocked his head to the side and smiled at his father, "Yes I can, now that you've mentioned it."

Murdoch clamped a hand on Scott's shoulder, "When Pedro's happy . . . he sings. So I think you did all right."

"Good to know, Sir," Scott said swiping at the dirt on the sleeves of his tan shirt.

Murdoch winced at the title Scott bestowed upon him time and time again. He hated it almost as much as he hated Johnny's too independent nature. His son's good manners, tight-lipped politeness were aching painful to hear, too refined for his taste and too remindful of where Scott had learned his manners in the first place. He begrudged Harlan the years he claimed Scott and for the sanctimonious reasons he gave for keeping his son from him. No matter the reasons, they hardly made up for the loss that Murdoch experienced or the suffering he endured by

having no contact other than a brief, five-minute introduction twenty years ago. Too long ago, too little time, too little memories for comfort or solace in his life.

In that minute, watching his eldest son, Murdoch wished for time to roll back, to start over. How different he would do things if he but had another chance. He would beat the stuffing out of Harlan, escape with his child, make haste to find Johnny and put his family together as it should have been.

"Murdoch . . . Sir?" Scott asked, looking at his father with concern.

Murdoch sighed, his breath heavy, his heart gladdened to hear Scott's voice but not the *Sir*. Never . . . he would never get used to that so long as he lived. Father . . . Pa . . . Murdoch . . . they settled for Murdoch. Ah well, better than *Sir*.

Scott touched Murdoch's shoulder, reminding Murdoch so much of himself. "Sir? Are you alright?"

Murdoch coughed into his hand, "I'm fine. Just got caught up in some thoughts . . . I'm sorry . . . didn't mean to worry you." He wanted to tell his son what he'd been thinking, but not now. It was too soon. He would though . . . one day, when he gathered up the courage to do it. And then, he would make it right with Scott somehow. But for now, he couldn't trust himself, his overwhelming hatred for Harlan was too great, too complicated and sour on top of all his other wounds. *'Someday we need to talk, you and I,'* Murdoch thought. *'Really talk. And then, when that day comes, I want wash away the hurt and the pain, the title that I hate . . . the one that keeps you from my heart.'*

Murdoch started toward the house, his cane thumping the ground right alongside his stiff leg that limped when he walked, hurt when

he sat too long. "You come on up to the house, Scott. Get washed up soon . . . you know how I feel about dinner." The cane kept thumping, the leg lifting, the heel of his boot keeping time with its newer partner.

Scott watched his father limp away, his back rigid, his vest swishing with every swing of his right arm. He wondered what had been on his father's mind, what had him so lost a moment ago. He'd seen the look a few times, embarrassed by the intensity of it. At times, it was as if he were on display, being watched and regarded as if he might do something wrong . . . and not. The pensive moments were more than that, and Scott knew it. What a dysfunctional motley crew they were . . . his new family. Scott had yet to figure them all out, except for Teresa perhaps.

She was the easiest of all of them. Sixteen she was, full of pride and unrestrained, unpolished eagerness to make them all a family who loved and cared for one another. She was full of sass . . . spit and vinegar . . . a girl raised in a man's world with a man's zest for life, for adventure. She was no wilting flower, no hothouse pampered, run of the mill, society debutante who couldn't find her own slippers if the house were burning down. Teresa was mother, sister, daughter, cook, housekeeper, rider, roper and doctor when they needed one. A sharpshooter in her own right, not afraid to point a gun and kill to protect if she had to.

Teresa could run with the best of them, Scott thought. She was as adept at digging out a bullet as she was roping a steer, not that there had been much call for her to do that sort of thing. But in her exuberant youth, she'd shown him that she could, and been proud of it. And the surprising thing of it all, the men had let her, Murdoch too for that matter. They seemed to take it for granted that she could do most anything, not all, but most.

The ranch thrived on it, this show of pride and accomplishment by all. Teresa was just a small part of it, but a vital part that held them all together. Her faith, her love and compassion, her femininity when she used it was the glue that kept the three of them from going in three different directions, from butting heads every minute of the day. Like a queen bee, they respected her place in the home and often tempered their words and their actions for her benefit.

Scott washed up at the basin, glad to get the dirt and grit off his face and neck. He couldn't wait to take a bath. Dinner was almost ready though and a bath would have to wait. Murdoch had one main rule . . . Dinner . . . six o'clock sharp. If you're late . . . you better have a damn good explanation. He hadn't asked why, but he did wonder.

"Scott!" he heard his name being called through the open door by Murdoch. A loud bellow and it made Scott want to smile. Ordinarily Murdoch hardly ever raised his voice, except to argue with Johnny. But Scott saw that he tried, much as he could, and usually Murdoch managed not to. Johnny might disagree with him on that, but Scott thought he was right even if Johnny didn't. They were alike those two, though neither would admit it for a second.

As Scott dried his face and neck off he wondered how the lecture went after Johnny got home and he left them to shoe a horse. Murdoch didn't seem as if there had been a problem. Hmmm, time would tell. "Coming, Sir!"

## Chapter 4

### A Little Slice of Heavenly Pie

The house was quiet save for the crackling of burning wood in the fireplace. The hour unusually late, his family in bed, while he sat quietly alone and reminisced the evening spent together. A peaceful setting it had been,

a glass of scotch, a thick cherry cigar, the latest edition of the Daily Chronicle held lightly in his hands while he sat near the cozy warmth of the fireplace. A little slice of heavenly pie, his dear mother would have called it . . . until he had ruined it with his infernal guilt ridden conscience and private self-loathing for being properly addressed.

Johnny had fallen asleep on the sofa, his head on Teresa's lap, one arm hanging loosely off the edge of the cushion, while his other, his left, was tucked comfortably under his cheek, oblivious to the soft kisses of the yarn that occasionally drifted across his face while Teresa knitted over him. Not a scene Murdoch would have predicted of his tough ex-gunfighter son. Almost too domestically tranquil, too opposite the wild thing that Murdoch expected from Johnny. The very essence of the serene picture made Murdoch wonder what else he would discover that was contradictory about his young son as the days passed and time brought them closer together.

Teresa sat at the end of the sofa, the one nearest to him, her ankles crossed, her right foot wiggling back and forth while humming a soft gentle tune, blue eyes full of concentration as her fingers worked the yarn feverishly with her needles over Johnny's dark head. Then there were moments, the melody would stop, the pretty face would scrunch and the fingers would unravel what had been done so meticulously. Teresa wouldn't complain, except maybe in her head. She was content, happy it seemed to Murdoch as he watched her from the corner of his eyes sigh and shake her head delicately at the mistake she'd made. Murdoch's heart fluttered as he watched her without her knowing, smiling when she smiled, wishing Paul could see the woman she had become in such a short and eventful time of their lives.

Scott sat across from him, his hair still wet and remarkably dark, drying by the heat of the fire to a burnished gold, his nose buried in a

book he couldn't put down. He wore a white shirt, tails out, one leg casually crossed over the other in soft tan colored pants and white snowy socks. Murdoch watched his son surreptitiously over the top of his newspaper, reach over without ever taking his eyes off the page, pick up his drink and sip at the liquor in his glass and then set the drink back down again. Precise movements, no unnecessary motion wasted, no written words missed in the process, until . . .

Murdoch had been caught . . . staring, conspicuously like a peeping tom. He sucked in his breath through his nose, quickly lowered his eyes to the newspaper and pretended they hadn't just made silent contact with each other from across the room. It unnerved him to be caught out like that. To have his inner thoughts exposed like raw bacon sizzling in a frying pan. Scott had a way about him, a look that said he knew exactly what was going on and that he knew exactly what it was that Murdoch had been thinking. Catherine had been like that. She had been able to see right through the rough exterior of his personality and find the man who loved and could be loved.

"Murdoch?" Teresa asked quietly from her seat.

Murdoch looked over at her, noting that Scott was once again engrossed in his book. "What is it, sweetheart?"

She smiled at him and set her knitting between her body and the arm of the sofa. "Are you alright? Can I get you anything?"

Murdoch pressed the newspaper to his lap and thoughtfully rubbed a finger along the side of his nose. "I'm fine, dear."

"You're sure . . . I don't mind."

"I'm sure," Murdoch, guaranteed her.

"Should I put another log on, Sir?" Scott asked politely.

Murdoch looked at his elder son. Could Scott see it in his eyes . . . the hate for that damnable word? "No, no . . . It's getting late." Murdoch averted his gaze, waved off the offer and stood up, letting the paper slide to the floor unheeded. He stretched and yawned while looking at anything other than Scott so his son wouldn't see how much the proper title affected him. Polite to a fault, Murdoch thought. He liked, but didn't like it all the same. He wanted to be alone, to think about it all the sudden.

He picked up his cane and limped heavily toward his desk. "You should wake Johnny. It's getting late and the day starts early around here." The cane thumped loudly on the floor. "In fact, you should all go to bed." He sat at his desk, the leather chair creaking under his weight and pulled open a drawer, his manner and tone telling them all that they had been summarily dismissed for the evening whether they intended to retire right then or not.

They had, and with no grumbling whatsoever for the sudden interruption of their quiet evening. Like a good soldier Scott had awakened his little brother, helped Teresa to her feet, and then offered a polite good evening to Murdoch just as he would to any stranger before leaving the room. Teresa had kissed him on the cheek, a little worry in her eyes but keeping any thoughts she might have had to herself, and followed Scott's example. Johnny being tired and more than willing to go to bed after a long day, waved a sleepy hand toward him and trudged up the stairs behind Scott and Teresa without a word.

It all seemed perfectly normal, Murdoch thought while sitting alone in the dark. But he knew different. He knew there were things left unsaid between them, things that needed to be discussed and confronted regarding

their lives, but he was afraid. Discussing their past without him in it meant acknowledging and facing his two greatest failures in life, something Murdoch wasn't quite sure he was ready to face just yet. But as fate would have it, it was just a matter of time . . . a single night of heart wrenching eavesdropping that would eventually lead him on a path to finding the courage he lacked.

## Chapter 5 Playing Hooky

"You're slick . . . you know that . . . Right?"

"Ain't nothin' slick 'bout it, Boston. Either I go to Doc . . . or he comes to me. I can't help it if Murdoch could see the sense in lettin' me ride to town, instead of Doc comin' all the way out to the ranch," Johnny replied.

"What about that, 'I promise to take it slow and easy' remark you made?" Scott asked. "Are you telling me that wasn't said just to give us more time?"

"It is what it is, Scott. Murdoch can take it any way he wants. In the meantime, we're goin' swimmin'."

"I have to hand it to you . . . you came up with a plan . . . and it worked."

Johnny looked over at Scott, a mischievous smile on his face. "Didn't have to come up with a plan . . . Murdoch gave me the idea when he said that ol' doctor was gonna come out to see me in a few days. Just thought I could save that ol' bag a bones the doc calls a horse a little less work."

Scott rolled his eyes, "And he bought it . . . just like that?"

"Well . . . you heard me when you came strollin' in on the tail end of it. I had to convince him to let me. I'm gonna go ridin' whether he likes it or not. Might as well be to

go see the doctor. Good as any reason, I figure.” Johnny laughed softly, “Guess he thought so too.”

“You know if he finds out we snuck off to go swimming we’ll never hear the end of it?”

“I reckon so.”

“Doesn’t that bother you . . . his lectures?” Scott asked.

Johnny shrugged and relaxed his hands on the reins of his horse, “Nope.”

Scott in all his sophistication, snorted inelegantly. “You’re lying to me!” He pushed his hat back and kept his horse in sync with Johnny’s. “I see how you look after he’s put you through the ringer.”

“So.”

“You hate it!” Scott declared knowingly.

“I can take it,” Johnny stated flatly.

Scott shook his head. “That’s just it, Johnny. You don’t have to take it.”

Johnny swallowed and shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. “Can’t do anything ‘bout it, Scott.”

“Why not?” Scott wanted to know. Maybe now he would finally get an answer to this puzzling problem. Johnny was talkative enough today. Not so withdrawn and melancholy as he had been the day before.

Johnny turned and looked at Scott as if he had grown two heads. “Are we talkin’ ‘bout the same man?” he asked seriously.

Scott’s eyes went wide, his brows lifted, arched, his hands splayed wide over the pommel of his saddle, expressive in his answer. “Yes,” he rolled the word.

“Well . . . then you should already know the answer,” Johnny replied as if he were talking to a simpleton.

Scott had to think what it was that Johnny was saying without saying. And then it hit him as they turned off the road and crossed a wide pasture of knee high grass and scattered cotton wood trees. “You’re scared of him . . . aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?” Johnny asked in return.

“I asked you first, little brother,” Scott tossed back to Johnny.

“A little.” Johnny pressed his knees to his horse and the golden palomino took off, heading for a small pond not too much further away, its crystal clear blue water, shining like a flat jewel in a depressed part of the land surrounded by weeping willow, clusters of white birch and leafy cottonwoods.

Scott kned his roan, still unnamed and a little tetchy if he wasn’t handled just right. No match for the speed of the stallion that Johnny rode, but a good partnering for him. When he reined up to Johnny’s horse, unburdened of its reckless rider, Scott dismounted and walked down to where his brother waited for him.

He was flummoxed by the admission, scarcely believing it, unaware he had a skeptical look upon his face when he stood next to Johnny. With his hands on his hips he said, “I don’t believe you.”

Johnny squinted and pushed his hat back, “Believe what?” He turned away, sat down and began to remove his boots and socks.

Scott sat down and followed suit, “That you would be scared of Murdoch.”

Johnny tugged on his second boot, “He’s big, Scott.”



“So?” Scott said, starting on his second boot as well.

“So . . . He could knock me into next week if he wanted to.” Johnny got up, barefoot and pressing his top teeth into his bottom lip, tugging on his blue print shirt, pulling it free from the tight cinching of his two belts.

Scott started unbuttoning his shirt, pulling the tail of it from his belts while he was still on the ground. “He wouldn’t do something like that, Johnny.” Scott knew he wouldn’t. Not after seeing the unspoken pride and contentment on his father’s face last night when he had been caught unaware of it showing.

Johnny unbuckled his gun belt and put his rig down on the ground, his gun face up, easy to grab if there was a need. He unbuckled his belt and took his pants off, leaving him clad in only a pair of cut off johns in the meantime. “I ain’t ‘bout to press too hard and find out.” Johnny grinned, “Leastwise . . . not yet.”

Scott stood up and undressed. He figured one way or the other his little brother would come up with something to get them out here. He was prepared and had a cut off pair of johns the same as Johnny.

Johnny laughed, pointing at Scott’s naked torso, “Might be . . . the ol’ man’ll find out where we went without any of my help.”

Scott dropped his head and with palms flat on his chest, ran them down to his flat stomach. He grinned, “Guess it won’t take much sun to give us away, huh?”

“Nope.” Johnny shook his head. “I ain’t much better though after bein’ cooped up for so dang long.”

They walked together, side by side until they reached the waters banks. A stark contrast between them, one light, one dark, but the

same . . . brothers, and that’s what counted for both of them on that day . . . a day they took a chance together, played hooky and became a little closer as friends for having done so.

## Chapter 6 Ol’ Swayback and Barranca

**M**urdoch laid the big heavy hammer he was using on top of the black anvil where he was working. He put the flat of his hand up to his brow and felt that overwhelming relief he always felt whenever he saw either of his sons coming home. There was a part of him that worried when they were gone. He knew someday, the longer they lived with him, that he would get over that odd feeling, but not all the way, never completely. Life had been too hard, his grief too intense and painful to ever let it go completely. Time was a healer and he believed in that, in some small way, his hurts would be healed but not forgotten.

They rode into the yard, looking sun kissed and bronzed, more than they had been that morning and more than they should be for having only ridden to town and back. Paternal instincts warned him, knowing all about boys, told him. There was more to their color, their happy smiles, their warm greeting. “Boys,” he said, not letting on. He knew . . . but he didn’t. No harm he thought. It was good to see they took a chance, spent time together if his guess was the right one. And it was.

“Murdoch,” they said at the same time.

“You boys are just in time. I’ve got three horses that need shod. Johnny? You think you’re up to it? Scott . . . you?” Murdoch asked.

Johnny nodded his head, Scott said, “Yes, Sir.”

“Good. You two stall your horses and I’ll have the last shoe finished by the time you get back.”

Johnny and Scott dismounted. They led their horses into the barn and began the routine of getting them unsaddled and groomed for the night ahead. "We'll let 'em stay here for now . . . when we're done, we'll come back and let 'em take a roll in the corral."

"That's just going to get them dirty again," Scott said.

Johnny pulled the saddle off his horse, "Guess we'll just have to clean 'em again . . . won't we?" Taking the blanket and saddle, Johnny carried them to the stand where he put his gear away, wiping at the leather before he left and started brushing down his horse. "Besides . . . Barranca here likes a good roll . . . Don't yah boy?" he crooned to the horse.

"You named your horse!" Scott exclaimed as he stowed his gear away.

"Had to. He's too nice a horse just to call 'im 'horse'," Johnny said with pride in his voice. "When are yah gonna give ol' swayback a name?" he asked teasing, Scott.

Scott looked at his brother with mock severity, "He is not a swayback and you know it."

Johnny laughed, but refrained from saying any better.

Scott removed the bridle and his horse shook his head as if glad to have it gone. A quick scratch behind the ears and the horse whinnied loudly, appreciatively at his owner. "I haven't given mine a name yet. Guess I should come up with one now that you have."

Johnny looked over his shoulder at his brother, "This ain't no contest, Scott."

Scott started brushing his horse, "I know that. Just seems to me that if your horse has a name now, then mine should too."

"Then give 'im one," Johnny said matter of fact without taking his eyes off the job he was doing. "He ain't gonna name himself."

"How did you come up with . . . what did you call him?"

"Barranca."

"Yeah . . . Barranca. What is that . . . Spanish?"

"Sí . . . Named 'im after a place I used to go to when I wanted to be alone. It was a pretty little valley that ran through a canyon, and when the sun set . . . it was all gold and perfect. Might have been a good place for a little horse ranch if a man could stomach the climb down and the climb back out . . . it was pretty steep goin' either way. Hard place to get to, even with a good horse."

Scott took a mental note, give his brother something he liked talking about, like horses, and Johnny was suddenly a very talkative man.

"So you considered horse ranching at one time?" Scott asked, hoping his brother would continue, surprised when he did.

"Thought about it more than once, breedin' horses . . . few cattle. Just never had the cojones to make it happen."

"Why not?" Scott asked his brother.

The hand that was grooming Barranca stopped, thinking on whether or not to answer Scott supposed.

"Guess I was too scared."

Scott slid his hand along the back of his horse and walked out of the stall to stand at the one Johnny was in. He crossed his arms over the top of the chest high wall and thoughtfully watched his brother's smooth strokes. "You've surprised me twice today, little brother."

Johnny looked up from where he squat next to Barranca's front legs, "How's that?"

"You used to be Johnny Madrid. From what I understand . . . you're a legend. And legends like you . . . aren't supposed to be scared of anything."

Johnny laughed and straightened up, "Where did you get that idea?"

Scott smiled and laced his hands together, "Read it."

"Oh yeah?"

"Um hum. Dime store novel . . . Baldemero's."

Johnny stood up slowly, regarding his brother with wary eyes. "What else did you learn in that book?"

Scott pushed away from the wall, turning away from Johnny and the awkward suspicion between them. As he walked away he called back over his shoulder, "I learned that little brothers are way over exaggerated by people who obviously don't have any." Scott turned back at the door, hardly able to see his brother from his vantage point with the sun behind him, "The description in that book . . . It doesn't fit."

"Fit with what?" Scott heard Johnny say.

"Those rules I told you about," Scott answered, leaving his brother behind, smiling when he heard the sound of laughter and Johnny's retort.

"You never did say what those rules were, Boston!"

## Chapter 7 My Way and My Rules

Dinner was on the table. His sons, they were there with him. Murdoch felt like a king on

his throne. He wondered if this is what his father had felt like, supposed he must have. There had been eight of them, five boys and three girls. A big family compared to the one he had now.

They were all alive, the siblings that is . . . their parents, long since gone from this world to the next. He wished them alive for the first time in . . . well . . . it had been ages, he thought. But he wished they could see his sons . . . they were beautiful if such a word could be used for two grown men.

He was proud of them . . . one so fair, so refined and cultured . . . the other . . . darker, so bold and wild, so much like he had been before he left home and traveled around the world to settle in America, before he'd been tamed by Scott's mother. His first had time to do that before she left his side forever to join the angels' choir. The wildness was still in him, he could feel it now and again, but never let it breach the walls of decorum ingrained in him by Catherine.

"You saw Sam Jenkins today?" Murdoch asked Johnny.

Johnny stopped the fork of roast beef he was about to put in his mouth and answered, "Yes."

"What did he have to say?"

Johnny chewed on his food, swallowed and drank some water to wash it down. "Said I was good."

"And?"

Johnny shrugged. "That was all."

Scott slid his boot toward his brother, tapping lightly against his ankle.

"What?" Johnny asked, his fork in midair. He wanted to eat, thought he said enough.

Scott rolled his eyes and cocked his head quickly toward Murdoch with mild exasperation.

Johnny sighed and set his fork down. "He said it looks good, said I could go back to work so long as I don't go all half cocked, ridin' around the ranch like the devil was after my hide so he could skin it. He said he doesn't want to have to come back out here and . . ."

Murdoch coughed into his hand, "Johnny . . . thank you . . . I get the picture." Murdoch was certain he knew the rest of what Doc Jenkins had told his son. The man was an old friend, but he had some colorful language if he felt put out and his patients weren't following his instructions to the letter.

"Teresa, you still want to go to town tomorrow?" Murdoch asked, changing the subject.

"Pass the peas, Scott," Teresa said. As she took the bowl from Scott she replied to Murdoch's query, "Yes, I do. If we can fit it in your schedule."

Murdoch drank a healthy sip of wine, "I was thinking one of the boys could take you."

"That works for me," she replied cheerily while spooning green peas onto her plate.

Murdoch looked from Scott to Johnny, "Who wants to take her?" he asked.

"I will, unless you'd like to, Johnny," Scott replied, looking to his brother.

"It don't make no never mind to me," Johnny said with disinterest. "Already been to town once this week, don't think I need to go again." Hungry, he lowered his head, concentrating on his food like it might disappear if he didn't eat it fast enough.

"Sir?" Scott looked to Murdoch for his approval on the matter.

"A done deal then," Murdoch replied. He forked a hunk of roast beef and spoke to Johnny. "You'll take a ride with me tomorrow, Johnny."

Johnny coughed, choking on the food he just swallowed. He grabbed his throat and leaned over to the side, his eyes tearing as he swallowed and got his food to go down the right way.

"You okay?" Murdoch asked, scooting his chair back and acting as if he were going to get up and help if there was a need.

Johnny wiped at his eyes with his napkin and righted himself on his chair. His eyes widened and blinked, staring at the food left on his plate. Clearing his throat he nodded and said, "Yes." He felt like he croaked the word.

Johnny was on the verge of telling his father he didn't think that going with him was such a good idea when he felt the nudge of Scott's boot under the table again. He looked at his brother and wished he could throw himself over the top of the table and wipe the silly grin off Scott's face. Maybe he'd stop kicking me under the table like I'm some kind of little kid, Johnny thought.

"So, what will you and Johnny do tomorrow, Sir?" Scott asked politely, ignoring Johnny's anger at him, his eyes telling Johnny to keep quiet about how he really felt on spending the day alone, with their father.

Murdoch relaxed, sipped his red wine and said, "We're going out to Black Mesa where I took you last week. I want to look for a herd of wild horses that have been running the hills around there."

Scott wondered if the last was said for Johnny's benefit. It seemed so. They had gone

there last week, but it hadn't been to look for any wild horses. Could it be that Murdoch knew of Johnny's passion, his love for that particular part of ranching? And if he did, then that must mean that Murdoch was more astute than Scott gave him credit for where Johnny was concerned. He'd only discovered Johnny's passion for horses just that afternoon.

Whatever the reason behind the saying of it, the topic raised Johnny's interest considerably from just a few minutes ago. His eyes brightened, his face almost eager as he looked at his father. "You mean it? We'll go lookin' for a wild herd?"

Murdoch showed no sign of his delight. He schooled his features and let them all think it was not such a big deal to him, more a chore if anything. "Yes, Johnny. I mean it." He sat his fork down and leaned back in his chair, his hands splayed across his stomach as if he'd eaten too much.

"There's a big white stallion in that particular area I want to find. The vaqueros call him, Loco Blanco, Crazy White," Murdoch explained to his sons. "He's been raiding some of the local ranches . . . including ours."

"Is that how we lost those four mares a few weeks ago," Scott asked.

Sighing, Murdoch said, "It is, and it isn't the first time he's come down out of the hills and kicked in a few of our fences trying to free our mares. He nearly killed two of the hands last year when they got close enough to get a rope around his neck."

"I wish you'd told me. I coulda been lookin' for 'im already."

"I didn't tell you because I knew you would try," Murdoch commented dryly to Johnny.

"It's just a horse, Murdoch," Johnny said. "He can't be all that hard to catch."

"Some of my best men have tried," Murdoch told him.

"Murdoch, you have me now. I can find that ol' horse and have 'im back here in no time. And I don't need any help doin' it."

"We're only riding up there to look, Johnny."

"But if we find 'im . . . don't see any reason not to go after 'im," Johnny told his father.

Murdoch looked at his younger son with indulgence, "There's one reason I can think of."

"Aw Murdoch . . . Doc only said that stuff cause he has to."

"Makes no difference," Murdoch replied pushing his chair away from the table. He stood up and walked around the end of the dinner table, stopping to put a hand on Johnny's shoulder. He held firm when his son tried to move away, and bent close to his ear, "When Doc gives the okay . . . that horse is all yours. You can take him any way you want. Until then . . . you'll do it my way. Alright?"

Johnny's eyes darted to his father's hand. He wanted to shrug it off his shoulder, the look he gave, said so. But Murdoch kept it there, waiting, watching, wanting to make sure that Johnny understood he would brook for no argument on the subject.

"Alright," Johnny said, the word hardly more than a pouted whisper.

Murdoch patted the shoulder, "Good . . . I knew we could see eye to eye on this."

They didn't, not really, Johnny thought. But he let it go for the time being after he looked up and saw his brother watching him

carefully from under lowered lashes with a slow grin on his face. Was this a part of the rules, Johnny wondered? Big brother looking out for little brother?

Shyly, he grinned back at Scott . . . maybe it wouldn't be so bad having a big brother and playing by his rules after all. Might help though if he knew what those rules were . . . might save him from wanting to belt his brother every time Scott kicked his foot under the table.

## Chapter 8

### Shame and Constant Sorrow

**M**urdoch tossed and turned, unable to sleep. He finally threw back the blankets and climbed out of bed, his nightshirt wrinkled and bunched up around his waist, until he wrenched it downward and straightened it out. He hated the blasted thing, wishing he'd just put on a pair of long johns instead.

He would have too, but decided instead to go downstairs, thinking maybe all he needed was a cool glass of water to settle him down. He was thirsty. Murdoch opened the door to his room and silently made his way down the hall and the stairs. The house was solid, no chance of creaking stairs so he walked with confidence in the darkness, knowing he wouldn't wake anyone with his nocturnal visit to the kitchen, using his hand against the wall and the railing to get to the lower part of the house without tripping.

He would have gone into the kitchen, but stopped just short of doing so when he heard hushed voices in the room he planned to visit. Johnny and Teresa. Murdoch waited, listening by the door, afraid to interrupt the nocturnal confidences he guiltily overheard by eavesdropping on them, ashamed of his cowardice by the time they were done.



Johnny drank the whole glass of water he poured for himself. He needed it after the hell he'd just gone through. His hair was matted in sweat, his body still shaken and trembling from the nightmare he'd had. He set the glass down and rubbed his hands up and down his face to clear the ugly gruesome visions from his mind. He was tired, wanted to go back to sleep, but couldn't seem to find the strength or courage just yet to go back up. *Another drink*, he thought. And then, he would make himself go up whether he wanted to or not.

"Johnny? Is that you?"

Johnny jumped, startled by the softly spoken inquiry. Teresa. "Yeah . . . it's me."

Teresa padded her way into the kitchen, dressed in her nightgown and robe. "I couldn't sleep . . . I came to get a glass of water." She walked up to the sink and grabbed a glass out of the cupboard, "I'm sorry I startled you. I didn't mean to." She kept her voice soft and low, just above a whisper because of the late hour.

Johnny sniffed and let out a deep breath, "It's okay." There was enough light from the moon shining in through the window, but Johnny asked anyway, "You want me to light a lamp?"

Teresa brushed the back of her hand against her forehead, taking a deep drink before she answered. "No . . . I'm fine . . . I can see well enough. Just needed a drink." She tilted her head to the side a little, looking at him thoughtfully. "You don't look well. Are you alright?"

Did she know? Had he lost his edge since coming to Lancer? Was he so transparent she could tell that he was hurting inside? Haunted by the truths she revealed to him instead of his father or his mother when she had lived. He didn't want Teresa to know how much she hurt him with the truth. He swallowed,

nodded, told his lie and hated doing it. "I'm fine."

Teresa reached up, and by the light of the moon pushed the clammy bangs off Johnny's forehead with the tips of her fingers. She wasn't sure she believed him. She dropped her hand back to her side a little self-consciously, knowing he didn't like to be touched in such a manner, wary of the intimacy unless he initiated it. "You're sweaty."

"So are you," he said quietly, jutting his chin at her.

Teresa smiled sadly, "I know. I . . . I had a bad dream."

Johnny tentatively reached out, pushing back a thick strand of hair, hooking it around the back of her ear with such gentle tenderness it made Teresa almost want to cry for the memories it gave her. Her father used to do that very thing, push her hair back behind her ear . . . kiss her on the forehead . . . hold her as if to never let her go, saying he loved her so.

"I had a bad dream too," he confessed to Teresa, barely above a whisper. Why he told her, he didn't know. "The weather I guess," Johnny offered as a lame explanation. They mirrored each other, two lost and lonely souls brought together by their frightening dreams.

Teresa nodded, dropping her eyes to the floor, the two of them staring at nothing but their bare toes, wondering what the other had dreamt of. Johnny hooked his thumbs in the waist of his pants, pushing back the white front panels of his shirt, lost in his own dreary nightmarish thoughts until Teresa spoke to him.

Her voice was so sad, so heartbreaking and innocent. She sniffled, clasping the glass between her hands in front of her, "I saw my father . . . the way I remember him. Tall, strong, handsome . . . smiling." Her words

trailed off, a mere whisper. She turned her head, staring over her shoulder into the empty darkness of the kitchen, a staged backdrop where her dreams could be seen and played out in her mind. "And then . . . he was walking toward me . . . in the middle of my dream, nothing around him but blue skies turned black.

"He called my name . . . he begged for me to go to him, but I was afraid, Johnny . . . I was so afraid. There was so much . . . so much . . . blood." She closed her eyes, swaying on her feet, her hands very nearly crushing the glass she held before she blindly set it down on the counter.

Teresa held her breath, holding back a year full of tears until she thought she'd die of suffocation. Trembling, she opened her mouth, breathed in and breathed out, the sound harsh, ragged in her throat. "He held his hands out to me, Johnny. And I finally ran to him . . . as fast as I could . . . and held him as he fell . . . dying in my arms."

She shook her head and reached for a towel on the counter, wiping her face, her eyes. "He spoke to me one last time, Johnny." Fat tears finally gave way and spilled from her velvet blue eyes. She closed them tight against the pain in her heart, her lashes thick and wet against fine boned cheeks. "He said . . ." her voice hitched, she wiped her tears away in one hard swipe, as if angry at the world, "he said . . . he said . . . he loved me."

Johnny couldn't stand it any longer. He pulled Teresa to him, wrapping his arms around her and hers around him. He laid his cheek against the top of her head and willed the unshed tears in his eyes to go away. He crooned and held her tight for long unselfish minutes, brushing the back of her head with his slow steady hand. He let her cry, harsh, ragged tears that left the body breathless. Life had been hard on Teresa, and sometimes Johnny forgot in all his self-centeredness, that

she was just as lost, just as sad and angry for the hand fate dealt her, as he was about his own loss. He ached for her . . . for them . . . for the sadness that never went away.

He squeezed his eyes closed, hating the moisture he could feel welling up under the lids. Teresa pulled away from him, but kept her hands clinging to the upper part of his arms. "Tell me," she said, searching his face in the dim light. She wanted to know him as he knew her. She knew from experience, shared misery often led to comforting solace.

Johnny's eyes were so dark, more slanted and closed off by her asking him this much. He couldn't do it. It was enough to say he dreamt badly, enough to hear her pain and let it inundate and touch his heart. He shook his head, barely discernible and started to back away. He was done with this. He never let anyone touch him . . . and this . . . this closeness was suddenly more than he could bear though he instigated it. He just couldn't do it, never should have allowed it . . . not even for her. He shielded his heart, erected a barrier to hide his near panic and tried but failed miserably to move away.

Teresa sensed his overwhelming fear through her grief, his need to run away and hide from exposing too much of himself and the heartache that he felt. Her hands moved up his arms, sliding slowly, tenderly until they reached his face. Like the gossamer wings of a butterfly, she held him between her hands, her eyes shining and bright from her tears. "You can tell me," she whispered to him tenderly, coaxing his sorrow through the invisible shell he put between them.

Johnny's heart filled with lonesome hurt, a hurt so strong he thought he would die of it if she kept her hands on his face and kept looking at him that way. As if he could tell her anything, and she could make it all right again, when he knew she couldn't. He closed his eyes, bent his head, held by invisible

chains that kept from being able to just simply walk away. He was a prisoner of her mercy, her understanding compassion and desire to free his soul from the grip of his self inflicted prison of emotional torture.

There was a flood inside him . . . an angry torrent of emotions he feared letting loose because he might drown in the misery and sorrow of it, it was so strong. How could this tiny wisp of a girl do this to him . . . make him feel like crumpling at her feet and cry until he couldn't cry no more? In that moment he almost hated her.

He opened his eyes and through the swimming waters in them, shook his head stubbornly, fiercely, his breath catching in his throat while bound by the chains of her naive sisterly love for him, "I . . . can't!" His breath was ragged, "Please let me go."

Slow hot tears rolled down her eyes, she could feel his wanton suffering, knew he wanted her to let him go, but knew in her heart that Johnny needed this . . . had needed it all along just as she had needed his comfort. "I won't let you go . . . I won't let you walk away and suffer all alone. You need me."

Her knowing of him, it was Johnny's undoing. The thing he feared most he did. He dropped to his knees, pushing her away from him and sat roughly on the floor, drawing his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around his legs. He buried his head on his kneecaps, silent deadly unshed tears of mournful frustration and years of bad memories making him feel like he was suffocating, strangled by the hands of every man who ever took their fists to him. Everything inside of him shattered like broken crystal, thousands of tiny shards, prickly and sharp, shredding the man, his soul, until he felt like a raw open wound with the sting of salt rubbed in for good measure.



Teresa sat beside him, undaunted by his physical strength of avoidance and wrapped her arms around his trembling shoulders, afraid because of the silence, the thick air around them, reeking of oppression and despair. She pulled him down, and he let her, until his head was on her lap, hidden in silver shadows cast by the moon. The cold floor beneath them, she brushed his bangs, smoothed a hand over his face and gave back to him what he had given to her, comfort and unadulterated loving support. Teresa lowered her head, kissed his throbbing temple. "Tell me," she whispered into his ear, bandaging his wounds with the healing balm of her affection.

He fought her mentally until the dam exploded and his body shook with great tearing sobs of misery he could no longer control. Masculine cries, gut wrenching, soul bearing tears that gushed out of him like a raging river untamed. The hated memories spilled out of him for the first time that he could remember.

He spoke of his mother, of watching her die, the meager life they shared. Revelation after revelation came rushing out of his mouth like a cascading waterfall. He spoke brokenly of the abuse he'd suffered, of starving and most grievous of all, how by his hand he had killed the man who had killed his mother, his tears so heavy, his breathing so hard, she could barely comprehend what he was saying to her.

"I had blood . . . on my hands . . . on my face. He hates . . . me. She told me . . . she swore it . . . over . . . and over again." His words were jerky, hitching, rambling from one place of wretchedness to another. "I wanted . . . him . . . I . . . I . . . needed him. I wanted my pa. I asked her . . . I begged her. I didn't care if he . . . if he . . . hated me. They beat me . . . tortured me . . . all I ever . . . ever wanted was my pa. I wanted him . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . wanted him to . . . save me."

Johnny pound his fist onto the floor over and over again, anger mixed with grief, "She . . . she lied to me! She . . . she let . . . she let them . . . hurt me." The pounding got louder, harder against the floor, the fury more intense. "I hate her! I hate her! I hate her!" he cried with every pounding force of his fist until Teresa thought he might break the bones in his hand.

Teresa bent her head down, her hands caught in his hair, afraid for him, pure strength in her hold of him, "Johnny . . . Johnny." She held his shoulders, "Ssshhh." She rocked him, whispered in his ear, calm soothing words that broke through the madness and made him slow down and catch his breath, though it hitched haltingly in his chest. Sing song words of comfort like he remembered hearing the night before, only different, more soothing because these words were for him and him alone. The sweet melody of her gift made him feel better, made Teresa feel better.

The moonlight shifted, sliding like slow molasses across the floor, blanketing the two misfit mourners in velvet blue darkness as they clung to one another and shared a past best left forgotten when the telling was done. The grieving sadness . . . the constant sorrow . . . the bleeding hurts . . . those feelings weren't gone, but confiding to one another and allowing that weaker part of themselves to be exposed . . . made it all, a little bit better, a little bit easier to live with and gave to them a closeness they thought long lost to their imprisoned bereavement.



New hurts were made that night, new sorrows of a different kind that gave way to a better understanding and promise to make things right with the world . . . with his sons. Murdoch silently backed away from the wall, climbed back up the steps, shamed because of his cowardice, his inability so far to address his sons individually or otherwise. He'd told them the past was the past . . . dead and gone.

Maybe for him . . . but not so he realized, for his children. He knew in that moment, walking blindly toward his room in the welcome dark of night, why he hated what he hated, the too polite *Sir* and the too independent *I can take care of myself*. Products of their past . . . a past he'd been afraid to confront or share, but now knew . . . he must face.

## Chapter 9 The Wild Son

Murdoch and Johnny waved goodbye as Scott and Teresa drove away. The sun was up, shining brilliant and sassy in the sky. The light kissed the world around them, made everything pop with a fusion of bright vivid colors.

Johnny loved days like this, when the earth was beautiful to behold, when he could look up into the vast sky above him and get lost forever in the undulating blue waves of the heaven. "It's a good day to look for those horses," he said looking up at the sky.

Murdoch smiled uncertainly at Johnny, his heart heavy for all that he now understood about his son. He had worried most of the night about what the morning would bring, not sure that Johnny's temperament would be up to spending even a short time with him. It wasn't like his son to comment overly much in the first place, especially in light of what he overheard the evening before, so it pleased him even more to hear the observation. He owed Teresa much for even this small little change in his son so soon after their gut wrenching confessions to one another.

With his cane thumping beside him, Murdoch turned to go inside the house, "It surely is," he remarked. "Why don't you get our mounts ready and I'll be out in just a few minutes."

Johnny looked over his shoulder, watched his father walk away, his right leg stiff with each

step. It worried him of a sudden, an uncommon feeling he wasn't used to. "You sure you can do this, Murdoch?" he called loudly with his hands on his hips.

Murdoch stopped just before going inside the hacienda. Was that concern he heard in his son's voice? Another rare trait coming from Johnny, two things he owed Teresa for. Without looking back, he answered, "I'm sure."

An hour or so later, they neared Black Mesa. They way out had been slow, steady, companionably quiet. No unnecessary words between them, though Murdoch ached to make it personal. It was just his way to feel like that. Never one to hold off 'til tomorrow what could be done today once the courage was built up, but in this case, not the right time or place.

Murdoch pulled up on his reins and Johnny stopped beside him. "We'll head up there," he said pointing north toward a steep rise. "The top of that ridge will give us the best look at everything we can't see from here."

Johnny looked up to where his father pointed and gave Murdoch a nod before spurring his horse in the direction they needed to go.

Murdoch watched his son ride away, feeling more than ever at fault for the silence that existed between them. He found it hard to talk about nothings, when all he could see and hear was his son's wretched cries in his head and wonder if Scott too held inside him long bled hurts untold. He felt time pressing in on him, pushing him to address each of his boys about their respective pasts. Wanting more than ever after last night to do so quickly, but how . . . and when. That's what bothered him, kept him from being more open and caring of mind toward them. His fists tightened, he would not think on it just yet. He wanted this day to be special for Johnny, his main reason for deciding it quickly in the first place. Had it

been Scott left behind, the day would have been entirely different he was sure.

They climbed the rise, high and steep, until they reached the plateau overlooking the valley on the other side. Here there were great stands of trees, Sugar Pine and Silver Fir, Tall Cedar and Spruce. A ribbon of sparkling blue water snaked its way through the basin. The scent of honeysuckle drifted through the air, sweet and sugary, and all through the grasses, white daisies and yellow goldenrod, pink manzanita and clusters of blue violets . . . all in all, a profusion of colored jewels against the rugged backdrop of the great Sierra Mountains.

They sat their horses, side by side, looking down at the valley, both men lost in the wonder of it all. "It always takes my breath away," Murdoch said so quietly that Johnny was pressed hard to hear him.

Barranca shifted and the saddle leather creaked, Johnny looked at his father from beneath the rim of his hat. "All this belongs to us?"

Murdoch thought he heard awe in Johnny's voice. Pride swelled in his chest. He was reminded of how he felt the first time he came to this valley. Pushing back his hat he said, "Everything you see."

Johnny dropped his chin almost to his chest and Murdoch wondered why he did so, and what he was thinking. Not wanting another chance to escape him, Murdoch asked, "What are you thinking, Johnny?"

Johnny lifted his head and looked at his father with troubled blue eyes full of incomprehensible questions, "I don't understand."

"What is it that you don't understand?"

"How she could leave this?" he swallowed, unable to say his mother's name.

Murdoch sighed deeply, hardly able to keep from looking away. "I don't know, Johnny. I've asked myself that question a thousand times over." He shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, "If I knew the answer to that question . . . I might know why she took you from me in the first place." There . . . he said it. Johnny gave him the opening, and though it wasn't when he thought he would say these things, he could do nothing less than be honest with his son.

"Teresa said she ran off with a gambler." Cold, detached, still not wanting to believe but knowing it was the unbearable truth.

Murdoch could only nod his head and stare down at the valley below. A hard lump swelled in his throat.

"I searched for you." A piece of cold hard truth that only pacified the person telling it.

"For how long?" There was bitter doubt from the person needing to know the answer.

Murdoch took his hat off, pulled a white handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the nervous sweat off his brow. "Days . . . weeks . . . months . . . Years." He swallowed the hard lump. "You . . . just disappeared off the face of the earth."

Time stood still, a wall of uneasy silence between them until Johnny reached up with his right arm, swiping his sleeve across his eyes. "I . . . I wish you'd found me." It was all the wild son would say, and it was hard saying it to the rigid man who was the father.

A snorting streak of white lightening bolted from out of nowhere, the echo of its hooves and ferocious whinny, bouncing from one end of the valley to the other, colliding with their thoughts. The earth rumbled and a trail of color thundered down from the hills beyond. They ran as if chased, through the snaking river like shiny multicolored satin ribbons

blowing in the wind, running wild and free, recklessly across the valley, in and out, down and around through the trees and over brush and rock.

The conversation over but not forgotten, Johnny stood up in the stirrups, his face alive, more animated than Murdoch had ever seen it before. The palomino moved restlessly, prancing as he lifted his head and challenged the leader with a call that was fierce, crazed by the nature of the beast. Challenging snorts stretched his nostrils wide, barring large white teeth that could take a huge chunk out of a man in seconds. He shook his golden head, whipping his mane and tail, rolling his eyes backward, his mouth chomping the air in wild frenzied excitement. Hard to control, the golden neck arched, pulled tight on the reins and stepped back unwillingly under Johnny's direct command with his hands.

Murdoch could see it in his eyes, his heart lurched, called Johnny's name, not so loud, a careful warning he thought was enough, but soon found it wasn't. Horse and rider moved away, each step a kingly stomp upon the ground. The golden horse reared, and Murdoch sucked in his breath, unable to breathe for fear his son would slide off, but didn't. Murdoch's authority was rejected, tossed back at him amidst the dying thunder of pounding hooves and the thrill of a chase that could not be ignored.

And then he was alone, watching the wild decent, angry and yet feeling the same need to run recklessly down the hillside after them, remembering a time when he had done the same. The sorrel bay snorted, moved to the left, the right, tail swishing, poised for the run if Murdoch's hands but allowed it. The thick head pulled down, every muscle bulging in its neck, straining on the tightness of the reins, his brown mane billowing in the breeze.

He didn't know why he did it afterward, foolish thing it was. He kicked his horse, his

big sturdy bay, leaned back in the saddle on the decent, man and beast, chasing the thunder, reckless, so much like his wild son, so much like the man he used to be and still wanted to be.

## Chapter 10

### Stop the World From Turning

"You know, Scott . . . you don't have to stand there waiting for me. Besides . . . it makes me feel like I have to hurry," Teresa said a little exasperated.

Scott was leaning against one of the tables in the general store, his arms crossed, his hat pushed back just enough that a tuft of blond hair peeked from beneath the hatband. Teresa thought him mighty handsome in his blue shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, brown pants snug, fitting his muscular thighs like a glove. She shook her head, distracting, that's what he was, casually standing there with that devil may care grin and tapping his fingers along his biceps.

"I wish you would," Scott said matter of fact.

"Oh, Scott, for crying out loud. Go find something better to do. I can't think or make up my mind with you staring at me."

He laughed, dropped his arms and said, "How much time do you need, Miss Grouchy?" Teresa sighed. Normally she had a little more patience, but not today. She hadn't slept well, and to top things off, her and Johnny had spent a great deal of the night talking after the two of them had broken down in each other's arms. She was glad they had, she felt closer to Johnny for it. But today she was dealing with those feelings and at the same time, trying to appear normal, as if nothing had ever happened in the first place. She wondered if Johnny was doing the same.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be this way."

Scott walked up to her, slipped a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. "It's okay. Sometimes . . . I feel a little grouchy too when I don't get enough sleep."

Teresa frowned and pushed his hand away, "Do I look and sound that bad?"

Scott chuckled, the sound was more than pleasant, "Only a little. Tell you what. I'll go get a beer over at the saloon. You think by the time I get done you'll be ready to go?"

She nodded, pushing back a wispy strand of hair that tickled the side of her face. "I suppose I could be."

Scott put his hand behind her head and kissed her on the forehead. "Then I'll be back in a little while."

He turned to walk away, straight shoulders, firm steps, gun belted to his waist like every other cowboy, no longer the eastern dandy that he used to be by outward appearances. "Scott?" Teresa called before he left the store.

Scott stopped, put his hand along the doorframe and looked back at Teresa over his shoulder, "Yeah?"

"Thanks."

He smiled, slid his hand down and rested it on the butt of his gun. "You come running if there's any trouble." He stepped into the sunshine, not really wanting to leave her alone, remembering back to when they'd had trouble in Baldemero's. It hadn't been all that long ago and yet . . . it felt like a lifetime ago.

Scott wandered across the street, the view from the window of the saloon, easy to look through and watch for trouble. He didn't expect any, but he was cautious all the same. For the most part, Green River was a peaceful town and soon, a new sheriff would be taking his post to make sure that it stayed that way.

He pushed his way through the swinging doors and sauntered up to the bar. There were few men inside the saloon this time of day. Two were sleeping off the night before, heads down, snoring loud, arms splayed wide along the tabletops. A third man wasn't much better off, his drunken head bobbed up and down until his chin finally propped itself on his chest, his long arms hanging limply at his sides.

"Hey, Scott," Frank Dobe called out as he finished polishing one of the nearby tables.

"Hi, Frank," Scott said putting one foot on the brass rail under the bar. "You have any cold beer for a man who's waiting on a lady to finish her shopping?"

Frank laughed and threw the white damp towel over his shoulder. He made his way around the bar, pulled on the tap and filled a clear mug to the brim with beer, wiping away the foam that spilled down the sides and onto the countertop. "That ought tah fix yah right up, Scott."

"Thanks, Frank." Scott pulled out a coin and plunked it down on the counter. He left the bar and walked over to the table in front of the window and sat down with a grateful sigh.

"You in town with, Teresa?" Frank asked as he cleaned the countertop of the bar.

"You guessed it," Scott answered sliding down his seat a little and kicking his boots out in front of him under the table.

"Johnny with yah?" Frank asked.

Scott shook his head, took a drink of his beer and licked his lips when he set it down. "No . . . he's out with Murdoch today."

“Nice day for it, if those two can get along for any length of time,” Frank commented casually.

Scott thought so too, but refrained from commenting on it. He was about to inquire on the health of Frank’s pregnant wife when the back corner door suddenly opened and one of the saloon girls came through it. Scott knew who she was, Clara O’Riley. He’d spent a time or two with her since coming to this part of the world. She was pretty, slim, still fresh faced though she was one of the more expensive call girls. Tall for a woman, their eyes nearly met square on when the two of them stood face to face. Long hair, a burnished gold, pinned up on the back of her head, made her seem even taller, more refined and stylishly elegant.

She walked to the far end of the bar, all grace in her lithe body, wearing a moss colored dress with cream tatted lace, more expensive than the average girl who worked upstairs would wear, even if they could afford it. She let her hand slide along the polished surface of the bar, smiling at Frank, then at Scott. “Mornin’ Frank,” she said, checking her hair out in the mirror over the bottles of liquor. Her lips were pink, just a hint of color added to make them seem more blush. Her teeth were perfect, white and even when she smiled at Scott.

She crossed the room, sat down in the chair opposite from Scott. He tucked his boots in, scooted back in the chair and leaned with his elbows on the table. “Clara.”

Her blushing lips parted, she smiled, ran a hand along the table and touched Scott on the knuckles with her fingertips. “Scott.”

Scott moved away from her touch, pulling his mug closer to his chest. The smile on Clara’s face grew wider, teasing. She thrummed the pads of her fingers lightly on the table, saying

nothing, yet saying everything with a sparkle of amusement lighting her cat green eyes.

“You’re up early,” Scott remarked. He lifted his beer, watched her over the brim of his mug, drank slowly and set it back down again.

“Not so early if you really knew me,” Clara said. Her voice was like silk, it attracted him like a moth to a flame. She seemed too refined, too cultured for the line of work she was in. He should have asked her why, but never did, always too caught up in his lust when they were alone.

She laughed, not so loud, but softly, as if she found him oddly funny, but didn’t want to hurt his feelings. She liked Scott, wished at times their circumstances had been different in life. She’d thought more than once they could have made quite a pair, in a different world. His face was readable and she knew he thought about it too. “We talked about that some . . . remember?”

The corners of Scott’s mouth went up, “So now you can read minds?”

Clara shook her head and Scott sucked in his breath. She was damn beautiful, her neck, kissable. “Among other things.” She laughed, small and light, lowering her eyes to the fingers that were now making little circles on the table. “You do make me laugh, Scott Lancer. I like that about you.”

Scott looked out the window toward the store. Everything looking fine, he brought his gaze around to Clara and raised the corners of his mouth into a small smile.

He liked her, liked the way she teased and smiled at him, spoke to him with that soft smoky voice that sounded like pure velvet. He leaned over his mug, tapping the rim with the pads of his thumbs. “There’s a whole lot I like about you.” Scott’s eyes dropped from Clara’s,

traveled down to her chin, her neck, the top of her creamy bosom, rounded and firm beneath the lining of lace that made her feel more proper during the day.

Clara leaned forward, grinning from ear to ear, “Why Scott Lancer . . . I do believe you are toying with me,” she declared softly to his seductive tease.

Scott shook his head and studied her for a moment before answering. “If you really knew me, then you’d know I’d never toy with perfection.”

Clara slid her hand across the table, picked up Scott’s beer and took a drink from it, all the while watching him as he watched her. This wasn’t the first time they’d played this game, and it wouldn’t be the last. She sat the mug down, ran her tongue along her lips, smiling as if with a secret, “I do know you . . . very well I might add.”

Scott shifted in his seat uncomfortably. The room seemed hotter. He pushed his hat back wishing for a cool breeze. “You up for company Saturday night?” he asked knowing her answer but still wanting to hear her reply.

Clara rubbed a finger along her pink lips, her green eyes dancing with yellow flames, “Honey . . . I always have time for company when you’re around.”

Scott scraped his chair back and stood up. Chin lowered slightly and a smile on his face, he said, “Then I’ll be seeing you . . . Saturday night . . . for a little company.” Scott tipped his hat, started to walk past Clara but stopped when she grabbed his hand in a light grip.

Scott looked down at her, eyes shadowed by sandy colored lashes. He raised his eyebrows, asking without asking.

Clara tilted her head up at Scott, “Bring that new little brother of yours too.”

Scott looked at her oddly, confounded by her request. He shook his head, “Don’t you think it’ll be a little crowded with the three of us?”

Clara dropped Scott’s hand and held her stomach as she laughed. “Oh, Scott . . . Like I said before, you do make me laugh.”

Scott knit his brows, “Well . . . what else was I supposed to think?” he asked.

Clara smiled up at him, “Not that.” Then she said wickedly, “But I guess we could . . .” She let the suggestion trail off with a wicked gleam in her eye.

“Very funny.”

Clara grinned, “I thought so.”

Scott narrowed his eyes at her, “Why did you tell me to bring Johnny then?”

She sighed and picked up the beer mug Scott left on the table and finished off the last golden swallow. Licking her lips she said, “The girls want to meet him. They saw him riding into town yesterday, looking fit as a fiddle.” Clara shifted, turned in her seat and stood up. Her eyes fastened on his lips as she spoke, “You know, I wouldn’t mind an earlier visit if you were of a mind to be a little reckless.”

Scott grabbed her hands, stilling their wandering trail upon his chest, “You know I can’t do that,” he told her, giving her hands a slight squeeze while wishing in that moment that he could say he would come see her sooner.

Without lifting her head, she raised her eyes to his, the color of sweet clover, her mouth closed in a delicious pout that Scott ached to kiss away. “Well if you change your mind,” she told him coquettishly, “You know where you can find me.”

He kissed her then, a mere touch of the lips, barely enough and yet . . . too much for so early in the morning with her looking so fresh, so sweet and ready to pluck off the vine if he were of a mind to right then and there. Scott took a deep breath, "You do tempt me, Miss Clara O'Riley."

Clara sighed wistfully, "But not enough to change your mind." She shrugged turning a rosy colored cheek to Scott, smiling with disinterest at the drunken man sleeping slumped over at the far table. Indicative of her life she thought, wishing once more that things could be different, that she was a real lady with whom Scott would stop the world from turning just to be with.

"See yah Saturday night, Mr. Scott Lancer." As she walked away, regal and proud across the saloon, Clara called over her shoulder, "Don't forget to bring that little brother of yours." And then she was gone through the corner back door, the only sign that she had ever been there in the first place, the scent of sweet jasmine and the lingering feel of her soft blushing lips on his.

Scott touched his lips with his fingertip, grinned and wondered if he might find a way to surprise Clara. He liked her more than just a little and wanted to be with her. When they were together he felt in her a kindred spirit, a person who on the outside looked one way, but was altogether something else on the inside. Something like the way he felt dressed in his new western clothes, a gun strapped around his waist, tough leather boots upon his feet. Looking nothing at all like he had been and yet he still felt the same inside, refined, cultured, a man of society, but a man with a new set of priorities, a new zest for life because of his family.

"You leavin', Scott?" Frank asked as he brought in a box load of new liquor bottles to put up on the shelf in front of the mirror.

"Yeah, I'm leaving," Scott answered as he moved his eyes from the corner door to the bright sunshine that streaked over the swooping curves of the saloon's batwing doors.

"If you get time, you and Johnny come by Saturday night. Got some new entertainment comin' in for a little singsong. If yah like that sort of thing."

Scott waved and grabbed the top of the swinging doors. He looked back and on second thought said to Frank, "Might be in a little sooner, Frank."

"Yeah?" Frank asked with a knowing smile. He laughed and set his box down on the floor, plucking out a dark green bottle and wiped it off with his cleaning rag. "You do that and Miss Clara is gonna think the world done come to a halt."

Scott smiled at the thought. "Then I guess I'll just have to stop the world from turning," he said under his breath, pushing through the doors. "See you later, Frank"

Frank grunted an unintelligible goodbye, never knowing he would be instrumental in granting at least one of Clara O'Riley's deepest wishes.

## Chapter II Three Times the Fool

"**W**hy couldn't you listen to me for a change?" Murdoch bellowed as he brought a pan of water and a couple towels into the great room.

"It ain't nothin', Murdoch. I wish you'd stop fussin' and leave me alone," Johnny said as he swiped at the hand that tried to touch his right temple with a cold wet towel.

"If you push my hand away one more time I'm going to smack it good!" Murdoch barked. "Now be still."



Johnny sighed and leaned backward against the sofa, allowing his head to lie upon the top of the cushion. "You're makin' a mountain out of a mole hill, Old Man."

"So you've said . . . for the third time," Murdoch remarked sarcastically as he dabbed at the blood on Johnny's forehead.

"Are you done yet?" Johnny asked before Murdoch was finished with his ministrations.

"I'm not done by a long shot, boy," Murdoch said, dabbing just a little rougher than was necessary on the uninjured part of Johnny's face. "You've already got one hell of a bruise beginning to show."

Johnny pressed his hands against his belly and laughed cynically, "Ain't entirely my fault yah know."

"Are you getting smart with me?" Murdoch asked irritably while daubing at the dried blood on Johnny's face. With his eyes closed, Johnny retorted crossly, "No!"

"No what?" Murdoch asked placing another wet towel over the swelling cut.

Johnny stomped his right boot heel on the floor when Murdoch pressed a little too hard on the wound. "No, Sir . . . Ow!" he yelped. "Damn, Murdoch! You tryin' to take my head off or what?"

"Don't cuss . . . and no . . . I'm not trying to take your head off. I'm trying to make it stop bleeding if you'd hold still and be quiet."

"I'm tryin' to," Johnny snapped at Murdoch.

"Try harder then and I'll try to be more gentle." It was about as close to an apology as either of them could make, but it seemed to work between them as the harsh tones lessened.

The wet towel was taken off and Johnny opened his eyes. His father was right over him, peering closely at the cut that was just above his right eyebrow.

"It's deep . . . Sam is going to have to stitch it up."

Johnny shook his head from side to side, stopping as soon as he realized that wasn't a very good idea. His head hurt, and the more he moved it now that he was sitting down in one place, the sicker his stomach felt for doing it.

"I don't need Doc stitchin' up my head. It's just a little cut. In a day or two . . . you won't even notice it's there," Johnny told his father quickly. The last thing he wanted was for that ol' saw bones taking a needle to him.

"Hold this," Murdoch said, putting the wet towel back over the wound and ignoring his son. He tried to be gentle, but knew he was failing miserably. His hands were shaking something terrible and his stomach rolled when he saw the open cut on Johnny's temple.

Johnny hissed in pain when Murdoch put the towel back on, he felt like cussing some more but kept his mouth shut. He knew Murdoch wasn't trying to deliberately hurt him. His father had been this way since the first moment Johnny opened his eyes and heard Murdoch frantically calling his name after being grazed on the head by one of Loco Blanco's lashing hooves.

Murdoch walked to the front door and opened it. His voice was loud and it carried a long way when he called out, "Charlie!"

In seconds, Johnny could hear footsteps running toward the front door. "Yeah, boss?"

"I want you to go to town. Fetch Doc Jenkins and ask him to come out here as soon as he can. Tell him Johnny's going to need some stitches."

I'm on it, Mr. Lancer." Charlie turned to leave and the door was closed behind him with a forceful shove.

"I told yah I don't need that ol' saw bones, Murdoch."

Murdoch stomped, near forgetting his limp and crossed the front foyer and into the great room. "You got kicked in the head by a horse's hoof. What part of that mental picture are you not getting?" Murdoch had it in his mind real good. A frightening image that kept replaying itself over and over in his head. Johnny's 'Old Man' riding hell bent for leather down one of the steepest hillsides on Lancer just to catch a wild crazy white stallion that couldn't be caught by even his best vaqueros on a good day. Christ almighty, what had he been thinking acting like some foolhardy kid again?

Johnny shifted on the cushion and slid one hand to his neck up under his chin. "Murdoch?"

"What?" Murdoch demanded from the fireplace, hands on his hips as he angrily paced half limping back and forth. He was angry with himself, fuming for being such an idiot and putting his son's life in danger. Of all the foolish things he'd ever done, roping that wild stallion was one of them. What had he been trying to prove?

Johnny pulled the towel down and lifted his head. It hurt to move but Murdoch was driving him crazy. "Would yah stop pacing . . . stop shouting? I feel sick enough as it is."

Murdoch blanched, the last thing he wanted after what he'd done, was to make his son feel worse than he already did. "I can't help it, Johnny. I feel terrible."

Johnny sighed, rolled his eyes and laid his head back on the cushion, "You ain't the one that got kicked in the head . . . remember?"

"That's not what I mean, and you know it!" Murdoch exclaimed, not quite shouting but a little louder than he intended because he felt guiltier with every passing second. He kept seeing the mistake he made in his head, over and over again . . . and the blood . . . there had been so much blood. "I should get you upstairs," he mumbled, "Get your shirt changed before Teresa gets home."

"I ain't movin', Old Man." Johnny picked up the towel and put it over his face again, gingerly pressing on the area where the wound was still bleeding a little. "I'm gonna be sick if I don't keep my head still for a little while." It was all he could do to keep from throwing up as it was.

The sound of a wagon approaching ended any disagreement Murdoch was about to give his son. "Damn!" he said walking with a burning limp to the door. He opened it, watching as Scott jumped off the wagon seat and then held his arms up to Teresa to help her down.

He could tell by the looks on their faces that they must have run into Charlie on his way to town. More than ever, he felt three times the fool knowing he was going to have to explain Johnny's injury and every blasted thing that led up to it that was all his fault.

Murdoch stepped back from the door when they got to him, Teresa glancing up at him quizzically before brushing her way past without saying anything to check on Johnny first. Scott stopped just inside the front foyer, turning to his father with questioning eyes when he saw his brother sprawled against the back of the sofa, a stained wet towel covering one side of his face, his shirt smattered with spots of bright red blood.

"Charlie said something about him needing stitches. So what happened?" he asked with that calm reserve Murdoch had come to admire.

*Murdoch's face turned cold and hard on his elder son, "I think it's plain to see . . . I just about killed your brother . . . that's what."*



Sam closed his medical bag and stood up after checking one last time on his patient. The sutures were nice and tidy, eight little stitches that neatly blended over the line of Johnny's dark brow. The boy looked as if he'd been in a bare-knuckle fistfight with a grizzly bear and after having thrown up, his disposition was a little less than pleasant to those around him. Not surprising, Sam thought, considering the whopper of a headache Johnny must be having.

He turned to the family who waited anxiously behind him in the great room. Murdoch had hovered over him almost the entire time he worked on Johnny. Telling bits and pieces of what happened, while poking his nose a little too close one time too many, until Sam asked him to back away until he was done. He understood how his friend felt, and even sympathized with him just a little. After all, Johnny was still recovering from the wound to his back by Day Pardee. Murdoch blamed himself for Johnny's newest hurt and like any new father wanted to somehow make it all better . . . make it all go away if he could. But he couldn't, and Sam told him so in that matter of fact way he had of saying things while he worked under Murdoch's scrutiny.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I could use a cup of coffee right about now."

"What about Johnny? Is he going to be alright?" Murdoch asked with that same worried frown that had been on his face the whole time since Sam arrived.

"He's fine. Now how about that coffee? I'd give just about anything for a cup right now. I was up all night with Heather Baines and she

still hasn't given birth to that baby of hers." Sam shook his head and scratched at his chin. "I'm beginning to think it isn't ever going to get here the way it keeps going back into hibernation."

"You better tell 'im what he wants to hear first or you ain't gonna get anything, Doc," Johnny said grumpily from the sofa.

"Is that a fact?" Sam asked skeptically, arching a bushy gray brow at Murdoch.

Johnny rolled his head to the left and cracked his eyes open to look at the doctor with a wry grin, "Might even smack yah if you don't answer him quick enough."

"That will be enough out of you John Lancer," Murdoch warned, pointing a finger at his son.

Sam Jenkins harrumphed, snapping his medical bag closed and said, "I can safely say your son is going to live. I put eight stitches in his hard head and I'm recommending light duty for the next few days until he feels better." He picked up his bag and walked to the front door, dropping it down on the tile floor with an exhausted sigh and a grump. "Should have been taking it easy anyways . . . but no one ever listens to me," Sam muttered under his breath to himself.

"Is that all you have to say?" Murdoch asked sternly to Sam's grumbling back, wanting more assurances concerning Johnny's state of health than he felt he was getting.

*Sam turned around and ran his fingers through his hair. "No it isn't. I'd like sugar and a little cream too," he added with the first hint of a smile on his face. He knew he was goading Murdoch, but there was a part of him that couldn't help teasing his friend just a little. Murdoch was being the proverbial new father, more worried and anxious over Johnny's little wound than he might otherwise have been with one of the hands. "Well?" he asked.*

"Oh, for Pete's sake! The coffee is in the kitchen!"

Sam laughed and walked to the end of the sofa where Johnny was laying. He leaned down and whispered into Johnny's ear, "See . . . that's how you get what you want without getting smacked. He stood up and smiled at Murdoch, "You gonna come with me and tell me how this happened?"

Murdoch limped across the room clearly exasperated with his friend, "I already told you what happened," he stated emphatically.

"So tell me again," Sam said following the tall rancher. "I want to make sure I have the story straight when I tell our poker buddies what an old fool you are."

"You tell them anything and I swear to Heaven . . ." Murdoch could be heard saying, his words trailing off as he and Sam disappeared down the hall toward the kitchen.

"I think I'll join them. Might do to have a woman around playing referee with those two," Teresa remarked. "You want anything, Johnny?"

"No," Johnny said without looking at her or opening his eyes.

Teresa looked at Scott questioningly. Scott held up his hand and shook his head, "I'm fine."

"All right then," Teresa said smiling at Scott and Johnny before leaving the room.

Scott sat down on the coffee table in front of the sofa, "How are you feeling?" he asked his brother.

Johnny cracked one blue eye open toward Scott, the good one, the one that didn't hurt,

and smiled easy and slow, "Guess I'll live . . . leastwise that's what ol' saw bones said."

Scott sighed through his nose and arched his sandy brows at Johnny, "Yes . . . that's what Sam said. But I'm asking you . . . how do you feel? And no smart remarks."

Johnny splayed his hands across his stomach and grimaced, "I feel like I could throw up again, but there ain't anything left inside me." He frowned and his forehead crinkled from the effort, "My head hurts and when I open my eyes I feel like I'm gonna fall right off this sofa." He reached up and tentatively touched the stitches over his brow with a heavy sigh, "And I'm tired, Scott . . . real tired."

Scott leaned over and put his elbows on his knees letting his hands dangle between his spread thighs, "You want me to help you upstairs?"

Another sigh and this time Johnny turned away and lay on his side, "Nope . . . think I'll just sleep right here so the ol' man don't forget how he nearly got me killed today."

"Johnny," Scott drawled out in brotherly fashion, a fair warning that maybe Johnny was going to push Murdoch too far. "You know Murdoch didn't intend for you to get hurt."

"Yeah . . . I know. Don't mean I can't give 'im a hard time though."

Scott started in on a lengthy diatribe about reaping what you sow, that is, until he realized Johnny wasn't listening to him. The boy, his little brother, he thought fondly, was fast asleep, his young face bruised and purpling from Loco Blanco's lashing hooves, the spot just over his brow, stitched like bird tracks and angry red. He shook his head, stood up and grabbed a throw that lay on Murdoch's chair, covering Johnny while wondering if his brother would be up for a Saturday night on the town at the end of the

week. He had high hopes that he would, for Johnny wasn't one to stay down for very long.

Scott touched Johnny's hair, smoothed it back and thought how wondrous it was to even have a brother. He still marveled at the very idea, wanting so much to spend more time with him, get to know him better. But at the rate they were going, 'the getting to know him better' part seemed like it was going to take a lifetime. He smiled though remembering their afternoon playing hooky and thought, better a lifetime than no time at all.

## Chapter 12

### A Horse With No Name

Johnny walked into the barn and into the stall next to the one where Scott was getting his horse saddled and ready to ride. He crossed his arms over the top slat and laid his chin on the top of his forearms. "Where you goin'?" he asked.

Without stopping to look at his brother, Scott tossed a saddle blanket over the horse's back and said, "Town."

Johnny watched his deft movements, Scott's rigid back as he hefted his saddle off the rack and tossed it over the blanket. Strong lean fingers grasped the stirrup on the far side and pushed it off, reaching beneath the belly of the horse to grab hold of the cinch. "It's only Thursday. Must be somethin' mighty important for you to go traipsin' off in the middle of the week . . . it bein' late an' all."

"You could say so," Scott commented while tightening the cinch.

"You name that horse of yours yet?" Johnny asked, abruptly changing the subject.

Scott stopped what he was doing; his hands idle on the seat of his saddle. "Aren't you going to ask me why I'm traipsing off to town . . . aren't you the least bit curious?"

Johnny shifted and stood up straight taking his chin off his arms, "Figured if you wanted me to know . . . you would have told me right off." Johnny took hold of the rail and leaned back on the heels of his boots, smiling. " 'Sides that . . . I figure I already know."

Scott shifted one leg in front of the other leaning heavily to his left while resting his arm on his saddle. Chin dipped, he looked sideways at his little brother and grinned, his blue eyes, light and dancing. "Oh yeah?" Johnny pulled himself forward, then let himself fall back again, his face animated, tinted a myriad of colors around his right eye and cheek, "Yep."

"Do tell then," Scott challenged. He didn't think there was any way on God's green earth that Johnny could know about him and Clara. How could the little imp when he'd only been to town once after convincing Murdoch to let him go see Sam Jenkins?

Johnny let go of the slat and bent over to slide a wooden stool over so he could stand on it and look over the wall good and proper. "Well for starters . . . yah got your fancy pants on. Tucked in nice and tight inside those spit polished walkers on your feet. That blue shirt yah got on is buttoned up to the neck and you're wearin' a string tie like a noose under a jacket that's too hot to be wearin' in the first place." Johnny lifted his chin, sniffing the air and then looked down at his brother. He smiled, "And I'll bet a month's wages if I was deaf, blind and dumb . . . I could still find yah in the dark cause a body could smell yah comin' from a mile away."

Scott snorted inelegantly, "You say all that as if I look bad and stink."

Johnny shook his head and stepped off the stool, pushing it back to its proper place with the toe of his boot. "Naw . . . you don't stink. You smell real pretty. Miss Clara ought a like it sure enough."

Scott's eyes narrowed at his little brother who was leaning against the stall wall again. "And what do you know about Miss Clara?"

Johnny stifled a laugh, but his smile grew wide, "You sound jealous."

Scott dropped his arm from his saddle and faced his brother, taking a step closer toward him with a mock glare on his face, "I am not jealous. Now tell me how you know about Miss Clara . . . brother."

"Nothin' to tell yah . . . brother. Simple observations. Gotta be able to do that in my line of business if yah want to keep your head from gettin' blown off."

Scott made his way to the wall of the stall and laid his arms in like fashion along the top next to Johnny. "Ex . . . line of business and what observations were you able to make that gave us up, not that I'm admitting to anything."

Johnny sighed and leaned his head a little to the right as he studied his brother. "You really want to know?"

Scott gave a curt nod, "I really want to know."

"It's late. No daddy in his right mind is gonna let his little girl see a man at this hour. No proper lady either would entertain the idea cause her reputation might get stained and all the gossips would shun her. That only leaves one conclusion . . . saloon girl. And with your taste . . . she'd have to be a looker. So I was bettin' on it bein' Miss Clara."

"You know her?" Scott asked.

"Nope," Johnny answered. "Saw her in town the other day when we rode in. She's kinda fancy, like she don't belong there, and she don't look nothin' like the other girls so I figure it has to be her. 'Side's that, she was watchin' you from the window of her room. Kinda wistful like."

"So how do you know her name?"

"I asked doc when he was pokin' at my back." Johnny leaned back from the rail while holding on. The glow of the lanterns flickered and danced behind him, giving Scott the impression his fidgety little brother could dance away with them.

He bowed his head and tried to see the toes of his shiny boots, "She is different."

Johnny leaned toward his brother, "Sounds like you like her . . . smells like you like her."

Scott grinned at his brother, "I do."

Johnny thrummed his fingers on the rail, "Good. Now what about that horse with no name? Yah know . . . I told you a good horse ought a have a good name."

Scott shifted from one foot to the other, "I've been thinking on it."

"And?"

"I was thinking about calling him Sheridan."

Johnny smiled, "After that smarted up fella in the picture?"

"Yeah. What do you think?"

Johnny pushed away from the wall and started out of the barn. Over his shoulder he said, "I think you ought a call him whatever you like." He stopped at the door of the barn and turned around, his arms spread wide, "At this point . . . anything's better than ol' swayback."

And with that remark, Johnny disappeared out of the barn, his likable presence sorely missed by Scott as he led Sheridan out of the barn and mounted up. But right now, there wasn't anything he could do about spending more time with his brother. He had a surprise to make, an unexpected visit to a woman who

knew how to make his blood sing with just the touch of her hand.

### Chapter 13 Crossing the Line

Murdoch flicked his paper over his breakfast plate for the third time and Teresa thought sourly if he did it one more time she would get up and snatch it out of his hands just to make him stop. The man was perturbed of that she was sure. Neither Scott nor Johnny was at the table yet and being a punctual man, Murdoch was in his own way throwing a mild temper tantrum that grated on her nerves.

She hated starting her day off on the wrong foot, especially if she hadn't slept well and last night she hadn't slept well at all. The air hadn't cooled off much the whole night long and she found herself getting up time and time again just to get a drink of water or to stand by the window in the hopes that a breeze might cool her off. It hadn't and here she sat in front of her plate, yawning and tired, a full day ahead of her, cleaning and cooking.

Lord but she wished at times she were a man, able to go out into the world and work as they could out on the range. But the days of being able to do those types of boyish things were done and over with after the battle with Day Pardee started and her father was shot and killed.

Murdoch said she was a lady and that ladies did not do such things, as she wanted to do. Though the dictate rankled, she understood why he put his foot down.

The paper was flicked once again and this time she heard him sigh from behind his paper. "I can go get them if you want," she offered.

Murdoch folded his San Francisco Chronicle and set it to the side of his plate. "That won't

be necessary darling. If they aren't down in a few more minutes, I will personally go up and get them myself," he threatened mildly over the rim of his coffee cup.

The words were no sooner out of his mouth when Scott, bleary eyed, his hair wet and combed over as if done with his fingers, came trudging into the kitchen. "Good morning," he said quietly and sat down.

"Good morning, Scott," Teresa said, glad that one of the boys arrived for breakfast before Murdoch had to go get them.

"Is your brother on his way?" Murdoch asked unable to hide the displeasure in his voice.

Scott smiled up at Maria when she picked up the coffee pot and poured him a generous helping. "I thought he was down already. He wasn't in his room when I checked. Buenos días, Maria."

"Buenos días, Señor," the housekeeper responded.

"Then where the devil is he?" Murdoch wanted to know.

Scott sipped his coffee, "I suppose he'll have to tell you that, because I don't know."

The remark was calm, relaxed sounding but nevertheless it grated on Murdoch's nerves. "We have breakfast at seven sharp."

Scott drank another mouthful of coffee, eyeing his father over the rim of his cup. "I know, sir. I apologize for not being on time. In the future, I'll do my best to be more punctual." He set his cup down, filled his plate with scrambled eggs and biscuits, ignoring the frustrated look on his father's face. He knew the man didn't know how to handle acquiescence with good grace, when what Murdoch really wanted to do was rant and rave to someone.

"When was the last time you saw him?" Murdoch asked forking his food.

Scott swallowed a bite of his biscuit, "Last night . . . in the barn."

Murdoch picked up his coffee cup and eyed his son before taking a sip. "You have any idea where he might have gone this morning."

Scott seemed to think on his answer for a moment and then said, "No, sir. I don't."

Maria fluttered around them, filling their plates with more food and refilling their cups with coffee. It came to Murdoch then, that maybe she might know something and so he asked, "Did you see Johnny this morning, Maria?"

Maria took the coffee pot to the stove and set it down. Nervously she wiped her hands on the white apron strung around her waist and looked as if she wanted to be anywhere else than where she was at the moment. Murdoch was instantly suspicious that the good woman knew where his errant son had gone off. "Maria?"

She nodded her head, but then looked as if she might leave before telling. Murdoch stood up and went to her side, putting his hands upon her shoulders. "Maria, if you know where Johnny is, I want you to tell me now." He knew he sounded harsh but he couldn't help it. Images of his son lying bloody in his arms just two days before swam before his eyes.

She shook her head and turned a cheek to Murdoch, biting on her bottom lip. She would not betray the muchacho's secret confidences, not even to the patrón.

"Maria!" Murdoch said a little louder than he intended, frustrated by the woman's lack of response and the fact that he was certain she knew something and was hiding it from him. In his frustration and unaccustomed worry,

his fingers had gripped harder than he intended.

She looked up at Murdoch, her eyes wide and frightened by his strength. "Usted no debe pedir . . ."

"Let her go, Murdoch," came a hardened voice from the kitchen doorway.

Maria sagged beneath Murdoch's hands. "Madre de dios. Gracias Jesús dulce!" she cried softly.

Johnny stalked across the kitchen and pulled Maria away from Murdoch and the startled expression he wore on his face.

Maria put her hands on Johnny's cheeks, smiled and brushed away the moisture in her eyes with her apron when she let go. "You a good boy. You tell your papa where you go. ¿Sí?"

Johnny nodded and gave Maria a kiss on the cheek. "Sí."

Maria sighed and quickly left the room. She liked the patrón's son very much, but she did not like coming between them when they argued, especially if the argument was going to be about her.

Johnny waited until Maria was out of the room and then he turned to his father, "Don't touch her like that. It scares her."

Murdoch's face turned three shades of red, "I didn't hurt her or intend to scare her. I asked her where you were."

Johnny shifted, standing heavily on one foot as he thrummed his fingers against his thigh, "It doesn't matter what you intended. You still scared her and I'm tellin' you not to do that to her ever again."



"You don't call the tune around here, boy," Murdoch stated heatedly, more so because he did not understand the reaction of his younger son. He had no clue how things had looked to Johnny or what kinds of memories the very act of putting his hands on Maria evoked in his son's mind having totally forgotten about what he'd heard that night in the kitchen. After the near deathblow from the white stallion to Johnny's head, the only sound reasoning he understood was his and no other. He was right . . . and the rest of the world was wrong . . . and that included his son.

"I'm not going to argue with you about this, Murdoch. It has nothing to do with callin' the tune. She's not one of your assigned chores or some decision you have to make. She's a person . . . a woman."

"And that woman is my responsibility. She's been in my employee ever since you were born."

"All the more reason why you should respect how she feels," Johnny stated. "I shouldn't have to stand here and tell you that she was scared. You should have been able to see it for yourself."

Murdoch's chest puffed out. "I was simply asking her a question, Johnny. There was no reason for her to be scared," he claimed resentfully.

"There is if you were hurting her . . . and that's what you were doing," Johnny said not backing down to his father. He remembered all too well the look on his mother's face when she was grabbed in much the same manner, and nothing Murdoch said was going to change how he felt about what he saw.

"You're crossing the line with me, Johnny," Murdoch stated harshly.

Scott pushed away from the table, his chair grating on the floor. "Will both of you stop it," he said. "Honestly . . . this has gone too far and I for one stand in agreement with my brother." Scott pushed his chair up under the table, "Murdoch . . . you were a little too gruff with Maria and I agree . . . there was no need to handle her physically for an answer. And Johnny . . . there's no need to press how you feel any further. I think Murdoch gets your point by now." Scott turned toward his father and his brother, "This is a ranch. We have work to do . . . so I suggest we get on with it."

Teresa scooted back in her chair, "I second that," she said. "Both of you, out of my kitchen unless you want to sit down like civilized men and finish eating without all this bickering. Johnny . . . I'll go have a word with Maria and make sure she's okay."

After Teresa left the room, leaving all three men standing in attendance to one another, Scott said, "Well . . . what's it going to be?"

Johnny closed and opened his eyes, slow, heavy, glaring at his brother, "I said what I wanted to say."

Murdoch never drew his gaze away from Johnny's bruised face or the blue frosty eyes that could be so defiant one second and filled with deep longing the next. He felt cheated of a win, knew his thinking was ridiculous, but unable to help himself feel otherwise. He said in like tone to his young son, "I've told you what I think as well."

Feeling more like an officer in combat, Scott sighed and splayed his hands along his belt, "Then we're done. Johnny?"

Johnny dropped his eyes, no longer able to look his father or his brother in the face. They didn't know or understand what any of this meant to him and he wasn't about to explain any more than he already had. He turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Murdoch

and Scott staring at his back and wondering each in his own way if life was ever going to get any easier between them.

## Chapter 14

### A Friend's Advice

The day was finally over Murdoch reflected as he sat in his bedroom and pulled off his boots. It started off not so good and he partly blamed himself for that. Feeling mad and needing to vent, Murdoch had saddled up and ridden into town to visit his friend Sam.

The man knew him better than he knew himself he often thought, especially now, when all that he ever knew seemed topsy-turvy. Right seemed to be wrong and wrong seemed to be right, and in all of it, Murdoch seemed more confused and beleaguered by the new challenges in his life than at any other time he could remember.

When he told Sam about what happened that morning, it nearly floored him that he hadn't seen the entire episode in the kitchen for what it was. He mentally kicked himself for having to be told what was plain before his eyes, the shame and constant sorrow he knew full well after seeing and hearing Johnny the other night with Teresa. And yet, he still ignored it because it would mean facing up to some cold hard truths and confronting his son . . . both of his sons when he knew he wasn't ready yet. He still lacked the courage and the faith, the conviction of his worth to them.



"What did you expect him to say when he saw you manhandling Maria? For Heaven's sake, Murdoch, you were there when I took that bullet out of his back. Any fool can see he was abused while growing up. And if that's what was done to him . . . imagine what his mother went through and what Johnny has seen and been through. You already suspect

that Johnny was there when his mother was murdered, or have you forgotten that little piece of information about Maria from the Pinkerton report?"

Sam didn't know that Murdoch's worst fear and the report from the Pinkerton agency had been confirmed, and Murdoch wasn't about to add that wicked piece of information about himself to his friend just yet. He'd look like a bigger fool than he was already feeling.

"No . . . I haven't forgotten that little piece of information, thank you very much," Murdoch ranted as he paced Sam's front parlor. "I wasn't thinking of that this morning. Nor have we spoken of it."

"Have you tried?" Sam asked.

Murdoch stopped his pacing, rubbed at his lower back and glared at his friend, "No I haven't. How can I when he doesn't talk to me? How can I when the only thing I have in common with either of my sons is the here and now, the ranch, and even that tenuous connection doesn't seem to matter when Johnny and I butt heads or Scott and I have a tactical disagreement."

Sam sighed and crossed one leg over the other. His elbows rested on the arms of his chair, his fingers tipped together, steepled and tapping just under his chin in a slow thoughtful process as he studied his friend. "I would suggest you start by deciding what it is you want from your sons now they've signed the contract and have become a part of your life legally."

Murdoch limped ungracefully toward the empty chair across from Sam and sat down heavily, "I thought I made that perfectly clear to both of them. The past is the past, dead and buried. They're partners with me and I expect them to abide by my say so on all matters whether we talk about it or not."

Sam's eyebrows rose up in surprise, "What a strange thing for you to say."

"Why?" Murdoch asked as he shifted in the chair to get comfortable. "I think I was completely upfront about what I expected from them and they both agreed. And, I might add . . . they did sign the contract . . . it was all spelled out."

"And just like that . . ." Sam said dropping his hands to the arms of his chair and snapping his fingers, "they're supposed to just accept whatever you do or say without question . . . never discuss the past with the father that didn't raise them."

"I didn't say that," Murdoch stated coldly.

"You didn't have to. It's very clear by your previous statement that that is what you meant. If not . . . then tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong!" Murdoch gritted.

"Then what is it you really want from them?" Sam asked helping his friend along, pressing on an old wound that had been buried deep within Murdoch's heart for a long, long time. He knew what Murdoch wanted for his sons, for himself, but he also knew his tough friend would have a hard time admitting his real hopes and dreams for Scott and Johnny out loud. Nor would it be easy for him to talk to them independently about the role he played or didn't play in both their lives. Doing so would mean opening up a Pandora's box of old hurts and wounds that Sam thought neither of the boys were aware their father had right alongside their own.

"I want . . ." Murdoch hesitated, thinking about earlier thoughts concerning each of his boys, one so golden and fair who called him, 'Sir' . . . the other . . . wild and untamed who could 'take care of himself'. "I want them to know me . . . their father," he finally concluded

softly, as if the wind had been blown out of his sails.

Murdoch lifted his eyes from his hands, "But you knew that already . . . didn't you?"

Sam smiled, "All too well my friend . . . All too well."

Murdoch shook his head, "I don't know how to do it Sam. How do I tell two grown men who think I abandoned them in their childhood, that it was all mistake? That I loved them and wanted them . . . always," he asked sadly. "What do I say to fix over twenty years of neglect and lies?"

Sam sat forward in his chair, clasping his hands together, "I can't tell you what to say, but I can tell you that the last thing they need or want right now . . . is a boss or a business partner. You'll never truly have their love or loyalty by acting out the only thing in your life that you've ever known. And just for your information, no man knows how to be a father until they start acting like one, no matter what has happened in their past or yours. They wouldn't have stayed if they weren't willing to know and understand the man you are today. Use your instincts my friend. You know . . . you have to walk before you can crawl, and you have to love if you want to be loved."

Sam stood up and walked over to his friend. He clamped Murdoch on the shoulder and looked down at him with a fondness forged by their many years of friendship. "Go home Murdoch. Talk to them. Tell them what's in your heart and let them know you care. Answer their questions if they have any and do it like a man . . . with bravery."

Murdoch smiled tightly up at Sam, "I don't feel very brave right now."

"What man does when he's on the frontline?"

Murdoch reached up and clamped a hand over Sam's, "You're a good friend, Sam . . . better than anyone knows. I'll do my best to follow your advice."

Sam laughed and pulled his hand out from underneath Murdoch's, "Good . . . I'm glad you can see the sense in it."



*The soft leather boots were placed next to the chair with a tired grunt. Murdoch had had every intention of speaking to his sons that evening but never got the chance. As with breakfast that morning and almost as if in defiance of the one house rule he insisted on, his sons missed supper and came dragging in hot and exhausted near bedtime. Too tired to eat and too tired to talk, both men said their goodnights and turned in early, leaving Murdoch and Teresa to spend what was left of the evening together in a comfortable silence that neither was inclined to break.*

Murdoch undressed down to his underwear and turned down the wick in his lamp. With the room dark and the windows open to allow the slight summer breeze. Murdoch settled in under the sheets and thin coverlet to reflect on his life while he stared at the stars on the black horizon.

All good intentions aside, Murdoch thought that talking to his sons was going to be a lot harder than he wanted. Even talking to Johnny that short bit of time while they sat on the hill and looked down over the valley in search of Loco Blanco had been difficult. Short as it was, the memories, the unknown parts he agonized over had been hard to speak of. He wanted answers, knew that Johnny did too. And that was where he was having the most difficulty . . . not being able to give or receive what he wanted to hear and know without either of them being hurt in the process. About the only thing he had to give were explanations for what he did know . . . and those . . . he thought lame and

unacceptable if he were honest with himself and putting himself in Scott and Johnny's shoes.

He supposed that fear played a big part too in his cowardice for not wanting to talk about the past. Like he told Sam, he wanted his sons to think of him as father, because that's what he was, and yet that's not what he had been to either of them. He worried over what he thought they would think of him if they knew just how incapable he had been in keeping either one of them. It was a tragedy really when he looked back on it. He had been young, too full of himself and too absorbed to know better . . . and a coward to boot.

And now, looking at the man he had made of himself, he had to ask why he hadn't moved heaven and earth to do then what he knew was possible now. What had changed him? He thought if dealt the same hand today, the outcome would be far different. His thinking, different with age, and no longer caring if he was the same young man, near penniless and just making ends meet, would never be convinced that Scott was better off with his grandfather. He would have punched the man and taken his son then and there in that grand hall of Harlan's. He would have fought his way, tooth and nail even if it meant the old man's death by his hand.

Nor would he have sat idly by while other men searched for his younger son, his baby. He would have gone himself and hunted for his family. He would have killed the man who took his son, divorced his wife and brought Johnny home . . . any home . . . even if it was nothing more than a seedy hotel room. At least they all would have been together and Johnny wouldn't have had to live the life he'd led, or be punished just for being his son. He and Scott would have been protected and loved. And he, Murdoch thought, would have been a better man for having done those things.

Hindsight was a bitter pill to swallow though. There was nothing he could do or say to make those things happen . . . but he could tell his sons, if he were a brave man, that that's exactly what he would have done and would do now.

He closed his eyes, his dreams, filled with images of what might have been, knowing in his heart of hearts that no one . . . not even his sons could be harder on him than he was on himself.

## Chapter 15

### It's Saturday Night

Scott was just coming out of his bedroom when he saw Johnny about to enter his own room down the hall. "Hey, Johnny," he called out.

With his hand on the doorknob, Johnny turned his head to look at Scott, a slow smile creeping upward on his face. He moved his hand from the knob, sliding it up the wooden doorframe as he tilted his head and whistled through his teeth at his smartly dressed brother.

"You're mighty dressed up for a Saturday night on the town," Johnny commented, looking Scott up and down from the top of his head to the toes of his freshly polished black boots.

Scott straightened the black string tie around the collar of his white shirt, "Too much?" he asked.

Johnny dropped his hand to his side and stood up straight, "Guess not . . . if you're tryin' to impress someone special."

He started to turn away, walk into his room, but Scott stopped him with a slight grip on his arm. "You're coming with me, aren't you?"

Johnny laughed softly then leaned in toward his brother and wiggled his string tie until it was slightly askew, "Be kinda crowded with what you have in mind . . . don't yah think?"

"Who says I have anything in mind?" Scott asked mildly, lifting his chin and straightening his tie once again, unperturbed by his brother's mischief.

Johnny shrugged, "You tellin' me you don't?"

"No . . . but that doesn't mean we can't go into town together, have a few drinks and maybe play some cards."

Johnny put his hands on his hips and dipped his head down, thinking, "I don't know, Scott," he said at last. He slid a hand along the right side of his face and looked up again, "I might scare off your Miss Clara lookin' like this and well . . . that just wouldn't be brotherly of me."

Scott laughed and put a hand along Johnny's shoulders, tugging on his neck, "I never said I was seeing Miss Clara and for your information, you look fine. A little beat up . . . but fine. Besides . . . who's going to notice you when they could be looking at me."

Scott stepped aside and jugged his chin in the air, turning his face left to right, showing off what was supposed to be his perfect profile to Johnny. And it was, Johnny thought. His brother was a handsome man, fair-haired with a hint of bronze kissing his face after long hours working outside in the hot California sun. Scott's hair was a little longer now, a little lighter and not so dandified and perfect as when Johnny first met him. Tougher than he expected, Johnny still thought of Scott as Boston, an eastern dandy with a lot to learn in his tight fitting brown pants, crisp white shirt, and tailored doeskin jacket that fit his frame with perfection.

Johnny smiled at him and swatted him on the stomach. "Guess I'll have to go then. A man as pretty as you are might need a little protection once the women get a whiff of that sweet smellin' perfume you like to pour all over yourself."

Scott grinned and said indulgently, "It's not perfume, it's cologne and you might try using it once in a while. At any rate, what I have in mind won't require any protection from you little brother. Besides . . . that's my job." He winked at Johnny, "Those older brother rules, remember?" he reminded, swatting his brother back and walking down the hall toward the stairs. "I'll meet you downstairs," he called over his shoulder as he disappeared down the staircase.

Soon afterward Johnny made his way down the stairs, clean-shaven and smelling remarkably like the new cologne Scott had sitting on the dresser in his room. Scott smiled at Johnny's bold attire. He didn't know another man on earth who could pull off wearing such bright colors as his brother wore without getting into a fistfight with every man in town. The color of a summer rose set off Johnny's dark features, complimented the ocean blue of his eyes and made Scott imagine paradise, lush island flowers and wild untamed waterfalls. Exotically handsome, Scott thought, even though half his brother's face was covered with a fusion of colors that made him want to wince with imaginary pain.

"You look mighty fine," Scott complimented sincerely.

Johnny stepped lightly off the bottom stair, grinning at Scott, "Been told a time or two I clean up good."

"Both of you look very nice," Murdoch commented idly while getting up from his desk and walking over to them.

Scott beamed and said, "Thank you, sir."

Johnny just dipped his head not looking at or responding to their father. Murdoch noticed. He'd noticed it all the more because it was the same as it had been since their spat on Friday morning. A subject he had yet to talk to Johnny about or make amends for other than to take Maria aside and apologize.

Murdoch clamped Scott on the shoulder and said, "Why don't you get the horses Scott. I'd like a moment with your brother before you both take off."

Scott looked hesitantly between his brother and his father. He and Johnny worked hard the past week and the last thing he wanted was for one of Murdoch's 'moments' to turn into a shouting match or something worse just as they were about to leave for a little fun and relaxation.

Noting his uncertainty Murdoch gave Scott a squeeze of assurance and said, "It will only take a minute, Scott. There won't be any problems between us."

Scott arched his brows and looked at his brother with unspoken doubt clearly written on his face, "Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged and waved his brother toward the door, "I'll be right out, Scott. Just give me a minute."

Scott really had no choice in the matter. He gave a nod and left them to it, hoping the two men wouldn't clash as soon as his back was turned.

Johnny lifted his head, his eyes cold and distrusting, still angry over Friday morning's incident with Maria in the kitchen. "So what do you want?"

Murdoch mentally shook off the irritation Johnny's cold stare gave him, knowing in a

sense that he deserved some of what Johnny was dishing out to him after talking things out with Sam. He believed he had a better understanding of what his son must have thought at the time, but it still rankled to have that feeling Johnny gave him when he looked at him that way.

Murdoch cleared his throat and plunged on, "I took too long in doing this . . . but . . . I want to apologize about yesterday."

Shorter than his father, Johnny had to look up at him to gauge whether or not he thought Murdoch was being sincere. He thought Murdoch seemed to be and some of the coldness he'd been feeling toward him since yesterday started to thaw. He shrugged and looked away. "Okay . . . But I'm not the one you should apologize to," he said slowly.

Murdoch took a deep breath and mentally counted to ten.

"I apologized to Maria yesterday . . . if that's what you mean."

Johnny's dark lashes blinked heavily against his cheeks, "Then I guess we're done, cause that's all I wanted from you."

Murdoch laid his hand on Johnny's shoulder and with some disappointment felt his son stiffen before shrugging away from his touch. "Johnny . . . I . . ."

Johnny shook his head and reached for the handle on the front door. "Scott's waitin' for me," he said pulling the door open.

Murdoch grasped the edge of the door with his hand, his arm effectively keeping Johnny from walking away from him.

"Your brother can wait for another minute," he said, not wanting Johnny to leave before he had a chance to make things better between them. He was trying his best to remain calm,

but Johnny made it very difficult for him to keep his patience at times.

Johnny sighed, not wanting to go through this with his father when he and Scott were just about to leave for town. Dropping his hand from the door handle he stepped back and put his hands on his hips, shifting most of his weight onto his left leg, waiting impatiently . . . warily. "Well?" he finally asked when Murdoch said nothing for just a little too long.

Murdoch dropped his arm, "I'm doing my best to apologize and make things right between us but you have a way of making my attempts seem useless."

"You already said you apologized to Maria. That's all I wanted."

"It seems to me you're still angry," Murdoch pointed out.

"I'll get over it."

"Just like that? Without talking things out?" Murdoch asked.

Johnny shrugged and could no longer look his father in the eyes. He dropped his head and stared at the toes of his boots. "Nothin' to talk about," Johnny mumbled, shrugging again for emphasis, "I said I'd get over it."

Murdoch could hear his old friend's advice in his ear and knew he must say something to bridge the gap between him and Johnny so they could find a way to openly discuss their past when the time was right. He sighed heavily and plunged on ignoring his own fears.

"I know you'll get over it . . . eventually. But I don't think 'getting over it' is as easy as you claim. And before you start to protest," Murdoch said, putting up a hand to ward off Johnny's predictable objection, "I know for a fact that you haven't gotten over much of what's happened to you in your life, and it's a

subject I wish to discuss with you and Scott at a more opportune time.”

Johnny looked up at his father and for just the briefest of seconds fear flashed across his face. Was it possible that Murdoch had gotten up the night he and Teresa cried in each other’s arms? His father seemed to be intimating more knowledge about him than Johnny had given. Or was his father guessing after hearing him ramble in the throes of a fever while he was recuperating from his bullet wound? Both possible explanations bothered him greatly. The last thing he wanted was for Murdoch to feel sorry for him or to think him vulnerable and weak. He couldn’t speak for Scott but he could certainly speak for himself when it came to discussing his past in any kind of morbid detail.

“Why can’t you just let it go? You said the past is past . . . dead and gone,” Johnny asked suspiciously.

“Because letting things go is how I wound up losing you and Scott in the first place. I realize now that I never should have made that remark. It wasn’t fair to either of you, and I refuse to let the same mistakes tear us apart this time around. We’re a family . . . I’m your father like it or not and I want things straight between us. Is that understood?”

Johnny swallowed and lifted his head, brushing back the bangs that fell over his brows with shaky fingers. He hadn’t really thought of it the way Murdoch put it. ‘We’re a family’ . . . it wasn’t something he was used to. And having a father to remind him and set him straight without it being at the end of a belt or fist blew every other thought right out of his head except the one he knew Murdoch expected to hear from him. He suddenly felt like a fish out of water floundering to find the right words that would allow him to escape and think on what Murdoch wanted from him.

“Yeah . . . I understand,” he said hesitantly, finding the only answer somewhere in his subconscious he thought acceptable. He glanced somewhat nervously at Murdoch then back to the tiled floor again. When Murdoch stood there, staring at the top of his head without saying a word, hardly breathing it seemed, the need to get away increased tenfold. His head bowed slightly, Johnny asked, “We done? Can I go now?”

“As long as we have an understanding.” Not a question from Murdoch, but a promise to continue later.

Johnny nodded not knowing what else to say in Murdoch’s commanding presence.

The silence stretched between them, slowing time uncomfortably until Murdoch finally stepped away and let Johnny pass.

Murdoch watched him leave from the doorway, feeling like he did so many times when he watched either of his sons walk or ride away from him. He felt like it was for the last time. It sent a chill up his spine he was hard pressed to ignore and gave him an unaccustomed worry he wasn’t sure he would ever get used to. He knew in that moment like no other that Sam was right. He needed to talk to his sons not only for their sake . . . but for his as well.

On impulse he called out, “Johnny!”

Johnny came to skidding halt in the dirt, turning on his heels toward Murdoch, “Yeah?”

Murdoch stepped out onto the tiled entryway. “It’s Saturday night. You and Scott have a care. Watch each other’s back and come home safe.”

Johnny grinned and touched the butt of his gun reverently with the palm of his hand. “No problemo,” he said. “Ése es algo que puedo



hacer muy bien.” (That is something I can do very well.)

Murdoch’s eyes narrowed at Johnny’s reminder of how good he was with a gun, but quickly followed it up with a smile when he thought his son far enough away not to see him. Wild, Murdoch thought . . . reckless . . . a fistful of dynamite and trouble with a capital T, but Murdoch wouldn’t have it any other way. He loved his sons and soon . . . he’d let both of them know just how much they meant to him.

Johnny sprinted the rest of the way toward the barn, swinging up onto Barranca after Scott handed him the reins to his horse.

Scott studied his brother before they took off. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Johnny replied when he got settled.

“You want to talk about it?” Scott asked hoping to find out what was said.

Johnny’s first reaction was to say ‘no’, but then he thought better of it. Maybe it was time to let Scott into his life a little . . . tell him how he was feeling about the things Murdoch said to him. Wasn’t that what brothers were supposed to do? Confide in each other . . . compare notes? He figured he’d find out. It was a long way into town and he had a lot of mixed up thoughts going on in his head. Murdoch said they were family . . . Scott was always reminding him that they were brothers . . . and family. Making up his mind, Johnny decided to test the waters of his newfound relationship with Scott.

As they started out of the yard at a slow walk, Johnny turned to Scott and said, “Yeah . . . I think I do.”

## Chapter 16 A Better Place

“You and Johnny have a good time last night?” Murdoch asked nonchalantly at the breakfast table the next morning.

“Yes, we did, Sir,” Scott replied as he filled his plate from the platters Maria had set on the kitchen table.

“I tried to wait up for both of you but Teresa caught me sleeping in the chair near midnight. She woke me and gave me a lecture for my effort then sent me off to bed like some errant child.”

Scott wanted to smile at Murdoch’s tone. Though his comment was casual enough, there was a hint of petulance in it that was barely contained. He forked some eggs and said, “I’m surprised you even tried, Sir.”

Murdoch cleared his throat, “I find it . . . worrisome when you’re both out late,” Murdoch commented over the rim of his cup. He blew on his coffee then sipped it gingerly when he thought it cool enough to drink. “I suppose I shouldn’t, hmm?”

Scott swallowed his bite and shook his head, surprised to hear Murdoch admit such a thing to him. It wasn’t something he thought Murdoch would normally say out loud or question for that matter so early on in their relationship towards one another.

With polite acquiescence he said, “No, Sir, you shouldn’t.” He watched Murdoch from the corner of his eyes and thought the silence lasted a little too long after his comment. He wondered what his father was thinking and added, “But it’s nice to know. I’m just not used to it, I suppose.”

Murdoch sipped his coffee then set his cup down almost too carefully. "Hmm . . . I suppose."

The Sunday Chronicle was moved slightly, a biscuit was picked up without thought and Murdoch asked before biting into it, "Do you have plans today?"

Scott sat his glass of orange juice down on the table then wiped his mouth with the napkin on his lap. "No, Sir . . . at least . . . nothing that's pressing."

Murdoch pulled his gaze from the paper and quizzically raised his brows at Scott. "Oh? I was under the impression you might spend time with Clara O'Riley today."

Scott nearly choked on his eggs when Murdoch made the surprising statement. His face turned three shades of red and he had to put his napkin to his mouth to keep from spitting his food across the table. He almost choked again when Murdoch smiled faintly and picked up his paper to shuffle it open to the next page without so much as a glance in his direction.

His first thought was that Johnny had said something to Murdoch about Clara O'Riley, having mentioned her just the day before in the hallway upstairs. But just as he was picturing the strangulation of his little brother and regaining his composure at the same time, Murdoch burst his vision and told him otherwise.

"Frank Dobe came by yesterday afternoon." Murdoch picked his coffee cup up and took a drink while perusing the paper. "Brings me my special order of scotch when it comes in on the stage," he remarked casually. To Scott's chagrin, Murdoch finished painting the full picture by adding, "Frank's a talker when he's not working behind the bar in his saloon. We had a pleasant visit while you boys were out working. I'm sorry you missed him."

Scott wasn't. His embarrassment would have been double the way he felt right now. The next time he saw Frank Dobe he would have a word or two with the man about spreading gossip whether true or not concerning his private affairs. And if that didn't work . . . he thought he might just strangle the man instead.

Without looking Murdoch set his cup down and picked up his fork, regarding the paper as if it were a bug under a magnifying glass. Leaning forward, he placed a bite of food in his mouth then tapped the paper with his fork. "Says here that beef prices are going up."

"Sir?" Scott said.

"Mmm?" Murdoch mumbled.

"Johnny mentioned last night that you might want to discuss some things with us."

Murdoch looked up from his paper. For a moment, he seemed lost in his thoughts but then he turned to Scott and said, "Yes . . . I do. But I want to wait until after your brother has come back from wherever he's gone to again."

"I thought Johnny was still up in his room sleeping off last night," Scott said forgetting momentarily about his earlier embarrassment in light of the news.

"One would think . . . but no. He was apparently up and long gone before any of us were out of bed this morning."

"And you have no idea where he went?" Scott asked genuinely surprised to hear that Johnny had gotten up so early after the amount of tequila and beer they had consumed the night before. He still felt a little thickheaded and wondered how his little brother managed to shake the affects of the alcohol so quickly.

Murdoch stood up and shook his head. He tossed his napkin onto his plate, picked up his

cup and carried it to the stove to pour himself another cup of coffee. "No I don't, and I'm not going to find Maria or Teresa this morning and ask them. I figure after the way I handled things the other morning it might be best to lay low and find out from Johnny when he gets home."

Scott grinned and settled back in his chair while Murdoch made himself comfortable at his end of the table again. "If you don't mind me saying so, I got the impression from Johnny your apology went well."

Murdoch scratched his chin then rubbed a hand along his jaw, "No I don't mind and I'd say it went well too but after everything that's happened . . . I feel the need to sit down with both you boys and have a good long talk about our pasts. I'm sure you both have questions you'd like answered."

"I have to admit, I was surprised when Johnny told me that you were willing to. You made it clear the first day that you didn't want to go into it."

Murdoch pursed his lips and stared long and hard at the wood grain of the table, "I thought I didn't, but now I'm thinking it's best . . . Don't you?"

"I know I have a few questions I'd like to have answered."

The rest of the conversation was forgotten when at that moment Teresa came bounding into the kitchen. Her face was red from the exertion of running and her hair had come loose from the ribbon that held it back. "Murdoch, Scott . . . You've got to come quick. You won't believe it!" she exclaimed excitedly. "You just won't believe it!"

Teresa turned away from them and ran from the kitchen, not waiting to see if they followed. Scott and Murdoch momentarily looked at each other with confusion on their faces, quickly displaced by mounting curiosity

when they heard the young girl yelling for Maria to come with her quickly. By the time the front door slammed closed they had both gotten up out of their chairs, Scott fairly running from the room while Murdoch grabbed up his cane and limped quickly behind.

Outside in the open yard space in front of the barn and corrals, men, women and children had gathered together in a great crowd. Some of them, men mostly, whooped and hollered, slapping their neighbors on the backs while others tossed their hats into the air and stomped their feet in wild crazy excitement. The women hugged and smiled at each other, while others like Maria and Teresa swiped tears from their eyes and grasped at the children that ran playfully around their legs.

Wondering what they could all be looking at that would give them so much to cheer about, Scott and Murdoch pushed their way through the crowd and finally saw what it was. It was Murdoch who nearly stumbled and fell when he thought the breath in his chest would cause him to explode. Scott saw the surprise and utter disbelief on his father's face, his wavering stance and grasped Murdoch by the arm to help steady him.

"I don't believe it," Murdoch whispered disbelieving his own eyes.

Scott pulled his gaze from Murdoch's and held his hand up over his eyes to shield them from the glaring sun. A slow smile crept up his face and wonder deepened the lines around his soft blue eyes. His brother had pulled off a feat no other had been able to do according to every man, woman and child who lived in the area. Johnny was coming home, and behind him on a lead rope was Loco Blanco, the horse Murdoch believed incapable of being caught and of nearly killing his son.

Incredible, Murdoch thought when one of the vaquero's ran to the corral, unlatched the gate

and swung it open. The white stallion followed Johnny past the crowd and through the opening, prancing and unafraid of the throng that moved toward the corral to watch as Johnny dismounted. The same vaquero took Barranca's reins and led him out of the pen, handing off the golden palomino to a small boy who gladly took over while the man latched the gate and turned to step on the rails and watch what would happen next.

The white stallion reared, his hooves rolling menacingly close to Johnny's head. Murdoch sucked in his breath, limping ever closer until he made his way to the rails, watching in deep fascination along with everyone else. Johnny held the rope in his left hand and stretched with his right, speaking softly, promising the wild horse that everything would be all right.

Loco Blanco calmed, landing his front hooves hard on the ground while snorting through his nose and shaking his head up and down. His mane billowed, soft and snow white under the blinding sun, his black obsidian eyes blinked heavily and for a moment Murdoch and Scott thought he might charge, but Loco Blanco merely shook his head again and walked up to Johnny one hesitant step after the other. The horse nosed him on the chest then bent his head down toward Johnny's hand. Murdoch heard Johnny laugh then smiled when he saw his son take out a lump of sugar and feed it to the horse. How? When? He turned his head, caught sight of Maria whose gaze never wavered from his questioning eyes. She smiled at him and then he knew. He owed her another apology.

With head bowed, Murdoch was barely registering the significance of Johnny's accomplishment when he looked up and found that Scott had climbed through the rails of the corral to stand fearlessly beside his brother. He could hear his boys laughing, talking, congratulating and jesting to one another in front of the wild beast, not really comprehending the exact words but catching the meaning behind them by the way they were with each other. Murdoch didn't know how his son had done it and in such a short time, but Johnny had managed to tame the untamable.

And in that moment, he knew he had received without a doubt, the zenith of his desire. His boys were together, alive and well, under his roof and by his side, all that he had ever dreamt of these long lost years gone by. Never more than now did he feel right about knowing he would sit down with them and discuss their past. A past he finally felt at peace being able to discuss though the process might be long and difficult for all of them.


Through the eyes of his sons, he saw that the impossible was possible. It gave him the courage he lacked, the faith to believe and the heart to make their world a better place than that which they grew up in. They would still have their difficulties of that he was sure, but life looked different now. Life looked better, golden like the sun rising above the majestic mountains, better because they were home where they belonged at Lancer.



# BEEF TO FORT BOWIE

## SCRIPT AND STORY BY TOMMY THOMPSON AND KEN TREVEY

### NOVELIZED BY AJ BURFIELD



#### ACT ONE

The Arizona desert in the late afternoon was still unrelenting heat and little shade. Even a well prepared man would find the atmosphere difficult at best and deadly at its worst.

Murdoch Lancer sat his horse heavily, already tired and knowing it was only going to get worse. From where he stood on this small rise he had three views – a milling herd of restless cattle on one side, a chuck wagon laden with very sick cowhands, and the vast desert that surrounded them all.

Murdoch grimly lifted his hat, wiped his forehead with a dusty forearm, and resettled the hat firmly before turning toward the chuck wagon and signaling Jelly to start out with a wave of his big hand.

“You can’t send your men back. Not now!” the cavalry sergeant beside him protested.

“Those men are sick, Sergeant,” Murdoch said with tired patience. “They can’t move cattle.”

Sgt. Vandegrift glared at the departing wagon, then turned his glare to Murdoch. “Lancer, you contracted to deliver this beef to Fort Bowie. You can’t abandon the drive!”

“I don’t intend to,” the big rancher said softly.

“The Fort’s starving,” Vandegrift explained once again. “And it’s not just soldiers! Civilians, too. Women and kids who came

there for protection during this Indian trouble.”

“I realize that, sergeant,” Murdoch replied, his patience wearing thin. “That’s why we agreed to take the risk of delivering this herd. But we’ve got fifty miles of Apache country to get through and sick men can’t punch cows!”

The two men stared angrily at each other for a moment before Vandegrift conceded with a short nod of his head. “Then what are we going to do?”

Murdoch squinted at the horizon. “There’s a mining town just south of here. I’ll take the men there for treatment. Maybe I can hire replacements there. Johnny’ll stick with the herd and help keep them together.”

The hostility in the military man’s demeanor melted away as he nodded again. He turned his attention to the milling cattle. “We gotta get then through, sir. It’s life and death to the Fort.”

Grimly, Murdoch agreed and a silent pact was formed.



Jelly hauled on the reins of the exhausted team of horses, turning them around a final corner and onto the main street of a small town called Quartzite. As he straightened from the turn, Murdoch loped next to the wagon and indicated with a nod that the

grizzled drover and cook continue down the dusty street. As they passed the Quartzite Sheriff's Office a mangy dog crawled from under the boardwalk and growled at the wagon, holding his ground in front of the office. Jelly snorted at the dog's audacity and continued by.

Murdoch loped ahead and signaled him to pull up in front of a small house. Quickly, the large rancher dismounted, tied off his horse and stepped up to the front door where a doctor's shingle hung. He knocked urgently on the door, the noise loud in the falling darkness.

After a moment the door opened and yellow light from interior candles spilled across the narrow boardwalk. Jelly pulled the tired wagon horses to a stop as Murdoch quickly touched the rim of his hat to acknowledge the middle age woman in the doorway. Without preamble, he began to explain his presence.

"Sorry for disturbing you, ma'am, but I need the doctor. There's five sick men in the wagon."

"Oh dear!" the woman gasped. "My husband's out on call. Let me take a look . . ."

Picking up her skirt as she stepped from the porch, the woman approached the wagon with Murdoch right behind. He passed the grizzled driver, noting his slow descent from the seat and attributing it to fatigue. Murdoch continued to the back. Once there, Jelly caught up and reached over, flipping back the canvas tarp.

The woman let's out a small gasp.

"Well aren't you the sorriest bunch I ever did see," Jelly said in a gently teasing voice. Murdoch knew he was trying to lighten the dire mood. Inside the wagon, Scott and four

other cowhands lay head to foot on the wagon floor in obvious misery.

The woman bustled forward, critically eyeing them for a moment before placing a firm hand on Scott's forehead. "Mercy, you're as cold as ice," she tisk'd.

Jelly nodded in silent agreement.

"We're drivin' a herd through outside of town and near as we can figure, they got hold of some bad water," Murdoch explained, his eyes wandering worriedly over the prone men.

"Let's not stand here talking! The sooner we get them in outta this night air, the . . ." Jelly's comment was cut off as the little color he did have in his face drained instantly away and he wobbled dangerously. Murdoch snared his arm before the old man collapsed.

"You too?" Murdoch accused.

Jelly started to deny his condition, but the look on his boss's face stopped him cold. Instead he clamped his mouth shut in a look of elegant chagrin.

"Why didn't you say something?" Murdoch growled

"What? That I hadn't the brains to boil that strange water before drinkin' it? Them you could excuse for ignorance but with my knowledge of medical science . . ." Obviously humiliated, Jelly let his statement trail off.

The doctor's wife stepped to his side and gently took Jelly's arm freeing Murdoch to help Scott from the wagon. "Now hush and come along with me," she said.

"But I ain't that sick. Will you let go of me, woman? I never took to my bed in an emergency, and I don't intend to start . . ." The

doctor's wife patted Jelly's arm in understanding but didn't let him go.

Scott, leaning heavily on his father's arm, smiled wanly at the woman. "We'll be okay." He looked up to Murdoch. "You've got to round up some drovers and get back to Johnny and the herd."

Reluctantly, Murdoch agreed and Scott gently brushed away the helping hand. Murdoch took a half step back and agreed solemnly. "All right. You take care." As Scott ducked his head in reply, Murdoch reached out and touched his son's shoulder with affection and concern. Scott offered a weak smile before starting to help the other drovers. Murdoch returned the smile, then reluctantly turned and walked away.

Feeling somewhat relieved that the sick men were now getting proper care, Murdoch squared his shoulders and rolled his head to try and loosen the tightness he felt along his back and neck. The cool of the evening felt good and he stopped a moment to fully gather himself and decide his next step.

Quartzite was a small town, obviously built and running based on the mining trade. People were scarce on the street but the somewhat cheery sound of a piano, clinking glass and voices emitted from one well-lit establishment proudly labeled "The Lucky Nugget Saloon." Murdoch sighed, knowing he had to get men fast, and took a step toward the saloon when he was stopped by a low growl behind him.

Slowly, Murdoch turned to see a scraggly dog standing at the edge of the boardwalk. Murdoch glanced at the building he was standing in front of and noticed the gold leaf wording "Sheriff" on the door. He turned his gaze back to the dog, who emitted a half hearted growl that ended in a small yip. Murdoch couldn't help but smile a little. The

animal was too tentative to be truly vicious. "Hey, boy," the big man said gently. "Sure don't look like you been eating regular."

The dog's head cocked sideways, his tail sweeping a slow arc.

Murdoch patted his shirt pocket and felt a lump. Reaching inside, he pulled out a small piece of dried beef.

"How about some beef jerky?" he asked, part of his mind telling him to stop wasting time with a mongrel dog. Still, he found himself squatting down and offering the tidbit with an outstretched arm. The dog's attention was immediately focused. Every so cautiously, the animal dropped his head and slowly came forward, his body crouched and tense. His eyes, however, were locked on the piece of meat. The quivering, black nose paused within an inch of the food, his neck extended as far as it could go.

"Come on. It's good," Murdoch urged softly, being careful not to move.

Suddenly, the offering was snatched from Murdoch's fingertips and the dog was running away like a thief in the night. Chuckling, Murdoch straightened up and turned back to his original goal.

Just as Murdoch reached the other side of the street, a ruckus in the street made him glance back. A boxy prisoner wagon with a shotgun guard next to the driver turned the corner and pulled to a stop in front of the Sheriff's Office. Murdoch returned to his duty and pushed on the batwing doors.

Murdoch immediately noticed that this was a mining town saloon. The near dozen patrons wore the loose, baggy clothing and heeled boots of a typical miner, and no one wore a gun. The room fell silent as all eyes turned toward the large Scot. A matronly woman

with a no nonsense style immediately made her way toward him. Her hair was grey streaked and swept up in a neat chignon. Her chin tilted up in a defiant angle as she boldly and firmly placed herself between Murdoch and the bar, hands on hips. Murdoch noticed that the bartender behind her casually pulled a shotgun into view.

“Bar’s closed, cowman,” the woman snapped.

“Didn’t come for a drink,” Murdoch replied, the hostile atmosphere thick and obvious.

“I don’t cater to no other vices,” the matron stated.

“Well, Ma’am, that’s fine with me,” Murdoch noted politely. “All I want is to hire five or six men to replace some cattle drovers that took sick.”

The woman snorted. “You won’t find no cowboys around here. Everybody’s miners. Try down around Casitas.”

“That’s forty miles!” Murdoch protested, turning his appeal to the on looking miners. He did see one man with spurred, booted feet up on a corner table that didn’t look like a miner and spoke to him instead. “Look, I got three hundred steers out by Gunnison’s Mesa and no way of pushing them on to Fort Bowie without help. Now, who’ll be the first to sign up?”

The miners passed a look among themselves but no one responded.

“I’m paying top wages,” Murdoch added.

“They get top wages in the mines. And a thirty dollar bonus,” the woman trumped. “You’re wasting your time, cowman.”

Reading that conclusion in the miner’s hostile faces, Murdoch turned back to the woman in

frustration. “Ma’am, that’s the third time you said ‘cowman’ like it dirtied your mouth. Now, how come?”

“I got no fondness for saddle tramps, Mister! Like them two who come into town last Sunday – rode their horses right through my batwings and up to the bar, hollerin’ for whiskey and girls!”

Keeping his voice level, Murdoch tried again. “I’m sorry about that but not as sorry as the folks in Fort Bowie are going to be if they don’t get that beef.”

The woman’s stance softened a bit, as did her tone. “You still won’t find anybody here that knows about herdin’ cows.”

Hesitating a moment, Murdoch conceded with a sharp nod. Then his faced brightened a little. “Those two punchers – you know where they went?”

A smug look crossed the woman’s face as she turned back to the bar. “Straight to jail.”

As Murdoch turned to the door to follow thorough with his idea, he found his path blocked by the spurred cowboy from the corner table. “Name’s Tapadero. I might just be willin’ to help you punch that herd.”

Tapadero’s eyes were full of trouble, Murdoch thought. The man held Murdoch’s gaze with a challenging edge. “Course I got one rule,” he drawled. “I don’t take orders from a man unless he can whip me.” The statement was followed up with a roundhouse swing. Murdoch ducked, the blow whistling by his ear. Instinctively, his fist came up with his body into Tapadero’s gut. The miners began to whoop and holler, egging on their unexpected entertainment.

“Careful! My furniture!” The matronly woman cried out amongst the cheering. Tapadero



crashed into the table closest to the bar, splintering it to bits. "Oh! My table!"

Gaining his feet quickly, Tapadero picked up a chair and swung.



Wyoming didn't see any way out of this. In all his time as a gunfighter, this was the first and only time he'd given up all hope. The feel of cold steel on his wrists and ankles made sure that hope wouldn't return. As the prison guard and driver checked the manacles for the last time, Wyoming dropped his head in defeat. *'Two years,'* he thought miserably. *'Two years for a bungled robbery. I shoulda known better.'*

"Come on, then." The armed guard gave the prisoner a shove from behind. "Let's move it."

"Glad to have him outta here," the sheriff mumbled as he opened the door. The sound of cheering and breaking bottles somewhere across the street caught his attention. "Sounds like I'll need the space sooner than I thought."

The sheriff stepped out and to the side, allowing the prison wagon driver to pass. The driver was followed by the shuffling prisoner and the guard, who paused on the boardwalk as the sounds of the saloon brawl grew louder.

A whine caused Wyoming to turn slightly and he was greeted with the sight of a scruffy dog bounding toward him. Grinning, he dropped to one knee before the guard could protest and found himself with a wiggling armful of fur licking his face.

"Oh, dog, dog. What's gonna become of you now?"

Out of the corner of his eye, the prisoner saw the guard wind back to deliver a kick at the mongrel dog. Roaring in anger, Wyoming

leaped at the guard as the dog adroitly jumps aside. "Nobody kicks my dog! Nobody!" Before he can connect with the guard, the sheriff and driver grab the snarling man and drag him to the back of the wagon where the guard opened the door. It took the three of them to shove Wyoming inside and slam the door.

Within seconds, the gunfighter's face appeared in the small, barred window. "Who's gonna look after my dog?" he asked the sheriff, the anger gone.

"You shoulda thought of that before you bought yourself two years on a rock pile!"

"But he could starve unless . . . unless somebody looks after him! You could find somebody, couldn't you? A kid, maybe? Please?"

The sheriff shook his head in disbelief as he turned his full attention to the sounds of destruction across the street. He started toward the commotion as the driver and guard moved to the front of the wagon.

"Then shoot him . . . please?" Wyoming begged. "Kill him quick and merciful?"

His plea went unanswered as the wagon started off with a lurch. Holding the bars tightly to keep his feet, the prisoner watched helplessly as his beloved friend stood in the dark street and grew smaller and smaller. Finally, the wagon turned the corner and the dog disappeared from his sight.



A chair crashed through the front window just as the sheriff reached the saloon doors. When he pushed them open his eyes fell immediately on a man sliding down the bar to the floor immediately below Mother James's keg of beer. Breathing heavily but still on his feet, a very large man reached over and opened

the spigot. Beer drizzled down on the stunned fighter, shocking him into wakefulness. Sputtering, he shook his head but didn't try to rise.

"Anybody else?" the big man growled, turning to the cheering crowd.

"All right! Whose fault?" the sheriff yelled over the din.

After a slight pause, Mother James pointed at the dripping Tapadero. "The drifter," she said.

She sheriff sighed heavily and moved to Tapadero's side. Bending over, he grabbed his arm and unsuccessfully tried to drag the muscled man to his feet. Standing, he looks over to the crowd where a miner is handing the large cowboy his hat. "Charlie!" he ordered the miner. "You and Jake haul him over to the lockup."

"Now hold on, Sheriff," Murdoch protested. "I got first claim on him to work for me if I whipped him." He turned to the crowd. "Isn't that right?" General nods from the bunch agreed with him.

"What about my front window?" Mother James demanded.

"I'll pay you and take it outta his wages." Catching his breath, Murdoch flipped his hand toward the front door as he looked at Charlie and Jake, who now had Tapadero slung between them. "Put him in the wagon over at the Doc's place."

As soon as the trio left, Mother James announced, "Come on, boys! Belly up to the bar! Next drink's on Mother!"

Murdoch and the sheriff wended their way toward the front door through the minor stampede hitting the bar. As the pair reached the batwings, Murdoch laid a hand on the

sheriff's shoulder. "Sheriff," he said, "I'd like to talk to you for a moment about a proposition that'll save your taxpayers money. . ."



The jailhouse was smaller than he expected. When Murdoch followed the sheriff into the office, he immediately found the two cowboys that shared one cell.

"All right, Mr. Lancer, I'll let you put the deal to them," the sheriff said.

The confined pair eyed Murdoch warily.

"You want out?" Murdoch bluntly asked.

One of the men snorted. "Would a cold beer go good in the scorchin' desert sun?" Boone Frazier quipped.

"What's the catch?" Frazier's sidekick, Rob Roy Tilford, asked.

Frazier was the one that struck Murdoch as the leader of the pair so he directed his offer to him. "No catch. The Sheriff and I have it worked out so that I bail you out and you work off the money."

"Honest work?" Frazier asked flatly.

"Droving," Murdoch said. "Well?"

Rob Roy spoke up. "How long?"

"Long as it takes to get my herd to Fort Bowie. Then we're square and you're free to go."

Frazier pursed his lips a moment, then nodded. "Sounds fair enough. But there's one hitch – the Sheriff sold our horses for damages."

"Our guns, too," Rob Roy piped in.

Murdoch frowned slightly at that comment and answered evasively. "You'll get what you need."

"Then you got yourself a deal," Frazier confirmed.

Nodding to the pair, Murdoch pointed at the cell door and the Sheriff reached for the hanging keys. Backing away, Murdoch placed himself in front of the Sheriff's gun rack so they could watch the pair and get some sort of feel for them. "Let's have your names."

The one that seems only slightly older but much more confident was first to step forward. "Boone Frazier. One of the Texas Fraziers, Arizona branch."

The other stood slightly behind Frazier. "Rob Roy Tilford," he said.

Frazier tilted his head cockily and captured Murdoch's eyes. "What's to stop us from just taking off after we get to yer herd?" His eyes sparkled with something that put Murdoch's senses on edge. He held the challenging gaze.

"That would make me very unhappy. But more important, it would make my son very unhappy." He paused briefly. "You may have heard of him when he used to use the name Johnny Madrid." Both men's reactions made it very clear that they had, indeed, heard the name before. "Do your jobs and we all stay happy. Cross me, and you're going to have some bad problems." Murdoch let the statement sink in. "Now let's go."

Frazier and Rob Roy shuffled their way out the front door. Murdoch paused in the doorway to turn and touch the edge of his hat at the lawman. "Thanks, Sheriff."

The Sheriff leaned back on his desk and held his hands up in surrender. "They're your responsibility now . . . and welcome to it!"



Dawn finally broke along with the chuck wagon wheel. Murdoch, tightlipped and obviously anxious, was not happy with the delay and stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I never said I could drive not chuck wagon," Tapadero said. He glanced at the lightening horizon, white puffs of distant smoke against the dark blue sky. It made him nervous to be unarmed. "Besides, how you expect me to watch the trail with that Apache smoke sign hangin' out there?"

"You better get used to it," Murdoch growled. "There's gonna be a lot more where we're headed."

"I don't see how we're headed anywhere," the cowboy said lazily. "With no wheels we might just as well split out right now and go our ways. . ."

Murdoch threw a disgusted glance at him and moved to his horse. "I'm getting you back to that herd if we all wind up crawling." He stuck his foot in the stirrup and pulled himself up. Gathering up the reins, he informed Tapadero of his decision. "I'm going to ride ahead to our camp. You stay put."

"Hey!" Rob Roy, who had been relaxing on a rock with Frazier, was on his feet in an instant. "You ain't gonna leave us here without guns or nothin'?"

Not bothering to give an answer, Murdoch reined around and galloped away.



Tapadero watched him, hands on hips, until the large man was out of sight. Then he turned around and smiled. "Well, what're you

waitin' for?" The other two gathered around. "Let's take the horses and get back to town!"

Frazier raised a brow. "Sorry, friend, but you see, me and Rob Roy got our reasons for not wanting to go anywhere but South to Mexico."

Suspiciously, Tapadero looks over the pair before him. "Yeah?" he said slowly. "I been looking back over my shoulder lately, too. There's this bounty hunter been after me with a Kansas warrant."

"Is that a fact?" Frazier asked, moving slowly to the side of the wagon.

"You could come along to Durango with us," Rob Roy suggested. "Except there ain't but the two horses."

The motion was so quick that Rob Roy didn't have a chance to react. Tapadero had cuffed him painfully, spun him around and had him in a choke hold before he even knew something had happened. He gasped, and felt warm breath on his ear as the older man spoke lowly in his ear. "Guess who rides one of 'em?"

Frazier broke into a big smile and raised his hands in surrender for his partner. "Easy! Easy! How far you think we'd get without guns? Why, we'd find ourselves hangin' head first over an Apache fire! Now don't it make more sense to play along with Johnny a while? At least 'till his back's turned?" He leaned back, hands on the wagon, one hand slipping below the seat.

Tapadero held his position, but eased his grip. "It's still risky."

"Now, why don't you quit choking poor Rob Roy and try to look at the sunny side?" Frazier said with an amused grin. With subdued bravado, Frazier revealed a branding iron

pulled from under the wagon seat and slaps in against his other palm, the threat clear.

Tapadero eyed the iron a second then slowly repositioned his hands onto Rob Roy's shoulders. He gave the wary cowboy an affectionate shake. "Well now," he said, grinning. "I guess I'm in favor of anythin' you say . . . Partners."

Realizing an odd sort of alliance had been reached, Rob Roy stumbled aside rubbing his bruised throat in relief.



Johnny closely watched his father's face as Murdoch gave him his orders, instinctively picking up on his urgency. Fiddling with the two pairs of reins in his hands, Johnny wondered for a moment what his father had gotten them into.

"You'll find them in an arroyo maybe five miles due south of here. Don't waste any time with the wagon – we'll have to go on without it."

"Okay," Johnny replied, mounting Barranca. He looped the extra reins around the saddle horn, pulling the second horse into line. "Anything else?"

Murdoch was obviously tired, but managed a slight grin as he tilted his face toward his son. "One thing," he said. "You won't have to introduce yourself. I've already done that."

Grinning back, Johnny reined around and jogged away.

Riding south for almost an hour, Johnny pulled up abruptly at the sound of gunfire. Unable to exactly locate the source for a moment, he quickly secured the reins of the trailing horse and jerked his rifle from its scabbard. Kneeing Barranca to the safety of a nearby cluster of rocks, he got as close as he

dared to where he thought the noise came from and dismounted.

"I'll be right back, amigo," he said softly to the palomino as he tied both horses to a sturdy stand of brush and slipped from sight.



Wyoming was worried. It was getting dark, his head throbbed, and he had no idea what was out there. The prison van had careened sideways in the midst of a vicious firefight, and now it was too quiet out there. Carefully, he scooted to the door and dared to peek out the barred window only to duck immediately as a bullet winged off the wood near his head. Shifting position slightly, he peeked out again and dropped to the floor. Indians!

As he was trying to figure out a plan, a rifle barrel was thrust in the window, its owner seeking a target. Without thinking, Wyoming grabbed it with both hands, the chains binding him and making it awkward to keep any semblance of balance. An Apache's face appeared in the window for a moment, then the sound of a distant rifle shot made the Indian grunt and drop away, dragging the rifle from Wyoming's grip.

The prisoner pulled himself up to the window in time to see his attacker collapse and the remaining braves beating a hasty retreat. In the failing light, Wyoming saw a familiar figure coming his way with a raised rifle. Anger began to burn in his gut.

"Johnny Madrid," he snarled quietly.

Wondering what to do about it, Johnny's voice disrupted his thoughts.

"Hey? Anyone alive in there?"

Wyoming ducked out of sight into a corner and spoke in a plaintive voice. "Help me,

Mister! Please help me!" He readied himself for a fight, gripping the chain that linked his hands tightly. A gunshot, followed by the metallic ping of the lock being shattered, made him jump. After a few quiet moments, the door slowly opened. Johnny entered the wagon cautiously. Wyoming sprang from the darkened corner and snared Johnny's neck with the chain. Pulling Johnny in tight with a jerk, both Wyoming and his victim rolled on the floor in a deadly struggle for dominance.

## ACT TWO

Johnny fought vainly for any kind of grip. Wyoming, whose grip had been loosened in the fall, worked to re-establish his grip when he heard a barking outside. Before he knew it, a familiar, shaggy form leaped into the wagon and onto Wyoming's back. Surprised, he jerked aside and gave Johnny the opening he needed to break free.

After knocking his attacker aside, Johnny rolled to his feet, his gun appearing in hand in a fluid movement. Fear crossed Wyoming's heart and he grabbed the wriggling dog into a protective hug. "No, Johnny! Don't!" he yelled.

Johnny's finger hesitated on the trigger at the sound of his name. Panting heavily, he squinted into the dark at his target. If he was surprised, he didn't show it; the gunfighter's expression didn't change.

"You know me, Wyoming," Johnny said evenly. "When was I ever a dog shooter?"

"You were other things," Wyoming said somewhat petulantly, obviously angry.

"Not what you think," Johnny replied.

Wyoming glowered at his past acquaintance, dark accusation lurking in his eyes. Suddenly, he gave a noncommittal shrug.

"We can settle that later," Johnny said. "Come on, let's get outta here." Waving his gun toward the open wagon door enlisted a menacing growl from the dog.

"Hush, dog," Wyoming crooned. "Johnny, the keys..."

The prisoner held up his manacled hands. He and Johnny held each other's gaze as Johnny considered the request. Wyoming saw a motion just outside the open door behind Johnny and realized that there was an Apache working his way into the open door, knife poised to strike at Johnny's back. Momentary indecision makes him hesitate, but then he yelled, "Johnny!"

Instantly, Johnny rolled aside as the Apache's knife arced past his shoulder. A single shot knocked the Indian sprawling. As the puff of gun smoke dissipated, Johnny studied Wyoming with a calculating expression. Finally, he approached. Wyoming extended his hands expectantly.

"Don't bother thanking' me, Johnny. Getting' these off will square things fine."

Sparing an annoyed glance, Johnny shook his head. "I'm not that grateful. And why'd you wait so long?"

Wyoming shrugged innocently. "I was waitin' to see if Johnny Madrid was as quick as he used to be." He wiggled his hands to remind Johnny about the shackles. "Come on, Johnny, it ain't the first time I saved your bacon. Or don't you remember how we rode as partners durin' the border troubles?"

"I remember Tascosa three years ago – how you swore you'd kill me for what happened."

Dark anger crossed Wyoming's face for a second before he controlled his expression.

"That's how I felt then. But no more. It's done and forgot."

Unconvinced but obviously turning the words over in his mind, Johnny took a moment to retrieve a canteen from outside and tossed it to the chained man. Before taking a drink himself, however, he uncorked the container and poured some of the liquid into his cupped palm for the dog who lapped it up thirstily.

"'Forgot', huh?" Johnny said, watching the dog drink. "Then how come I can still feel that chain of yours diggin' into my throat?"

"Well," Wyoming drawled slowly but thinking fast. "How was I to know it was you? I figured it coulda been an Apache comin' to finish me!"

Johnny studied him for a moment. "What were they takin' you in for?"

"I kinda hate to tell you," Wyoming said, taking his turn with the canteen.

"Kill somebody?"

Wyoming shook his head. "Johnny, it's shameful for a man like me to admit. But I was short of money, and not wantin' to hurt nobody, one night I broke into the Assay Office. Getting' caught serves me right! But you know I ain't a common burglar, don't you Johnny? I got more style than that."

Johnny nodded, admitting Wyoming was right. "What did you get?"

"Only seventy dollars."

"I meant how long in prison."

"Two years. Two years on the rock pile down at Yuma."

Johnny ducked his head. "They went hard on you."

"You know what that hellhole's like, Johnny. They don't stop at breakin' a man's back. They break his spirit, too."

Johnny took a thoughtful pull on the canteen, his eyes taking in Wyoming and the dog. With his free hand, he pulled a piece of jerky from his shirt pocket, squatted down, and with a few coaxing noises, offered it to the mangy animal.

Wyoming straightened up and frowned. "My dog don't take nothin' from strangers, only me."

The dog, however, had other plans and quickly accepted the snack. He even allowed Johnny to scratch his ears as he chewed happily on the treat.

"Who said we were strangers?" Johnny said lightly.

"Come here, dog!" Wyoming ordered.

The dog ignored him, enjoying the attention from Johnny, who smiled at his friendliness. "He musta been travelin' on pure heart, followin' that wagon all the way out here."

"Got more heart than any human I ever know. Exceptin' one." Bitterness edged the words. Wyoming glared at Johnny. "And we both know who that was."

Johnny's eyes narrowed and he started to reply, but instead, clamped his mouth shut and stood. After a moment, he left the wagon and surveyed the destruction around him. Wyoming clambered awkwardly from the wagon on Johnny's heels.

Outside, the landscape was littered with the bodies of the driver and his partner, as well as several Indians.

"C'mon, Johnny. Lemme go. What're you gonna do with me anyway?"

As Wyoming spoke, Johnny had been thoughtfully spinning the wheel of the upshot wagon. "Right now I can tell you this. You're gonna give me a hand righting this wagon."



"The best trail leads due east through Pocos Canyons, then we follow the dry river southeast about fifteen miles to Hualapai Gap. That's where a patrol's waitin' to escort us on to the Fort."

Vandegrift's stick-drawn map in the dirt was easy enough to read, but it still didn't set well with the Lancers. Murdoch pointed at one section of the map.

"Those canyons sound like they could be good ambush country. I won't move the herd into there until somebody scouts it."

Johnny straightened. "Better let me, Sarge," he said softly.

Vandegrift's eyes automatically shifted over Johnny's shoulder where he could see the herd moving slowly forward. His gaze found Frazier, Rob Roy and Tapadero working the edges of the herd and actually doing an adequate job. Still, he did not trust those men for a second. He shifted he look back to Johnny, his mind set. "It's my job. Yours is keepin' those three curly wolfs from runnin' out on us now that they got guns and horses."

"He's right, Johnny," Murdoch murmured as the military man mounted up.

Fishing a small mirror from his pocket, Vandergift flashed it in the sun. "I'll flash if things're clear. I'll check the men before I leave." With that, he spurred off leaving Johnny and his father to observe the men moving the herd.

"They the best you could find?" Johnny asked.

"That was it."

The pair mounted up and continued to watch the herd.

"I ain't gonna be shuttin' my eyes at night till this herd's delivered and we're rid of them," the younger Lancer commented.

"We'll keep them apart as much as possible. Just for precaution." Johnny nodded at Murdoch's plan, then their attention was drawn aside by the sound of a dog whining.

"What about the convict?" Murdoch inquired. "Where do you know him from?"

Johnny's voice was neutral. "Good friends. But no more. He thinks he's got reason for hatin' me. I don't know, Murdoch, I don't trust him enough to unlock those chains but I can't help feelin' sorry for him. Wyoming, well, he's always first in line when they hand out raw deals." After a thoughtful moment, Johnny reined Barranca around and loped toward the herd.

Murdoch, however, jogged to the prison wagon and stopped. From inside he heard the occupant talking with the mangy dog.

"It's just the two of us against the world," he heard Wyoming tell his fuzzy friend.



The night held a full moon. From his position Vandergift, who was standing guard, could

easily see the milling herd below. Frazier's eyes darted quickly around as he approached the cavalryman, making sure they were alone. His footsteps on the hard ground caused the military man to turn and acknowledge his arrival.

Frazier stood silently next to him for a few moments and wondered how to proceed, then spoke. "The Lancers sure are determined not to lose this herd . . . I guess that's 'cause you're payin' them sky-high prices for takin' on a job this dangerous?"

"Regular market," Vandergift said shortly, his gaze sweeping the herd.

"Only twenty dollars a head? Why, that won't amount to more'n four thousand all told."

"Closer to five."

Frazier rubbed his chin. "Well, Johnny and his Pa must have friends at the fort to be willin' to take this kinda risk?"

"They've never been there. That's why I'm along as a guide."

Nodding, Frazier tried to keep the grin from his face. "Almost like the Bible, ain't it? Strangers helpin' strangers without thought of reward . . ." Satisfied, he said his good night and departed the way he came.



Johnny loped up to the campfire, nodding at Vandergift as he passed. He reined in near the campfire, where he saw Murdoch standing a short distance away watching something by the fire. Johnny refocused his attention and saw Wyoming squatting by the campfire, eating. About every third bite was shared with the scruffy dog giving him his full attention.



As he dismounted, Murdoch moved closer to him. "Everything quiet out there?" his father asked.

"Yup," Johnny nodded. "Is Wyoming behaving himself?"

"Hasn't said three words. I get the feeling he's . . . well, holding all his emotions inside. Hate, resentment, outrage. Everything but his love for that dog."

Johnny chuckled quietly. "I'll tell you about him. Come on while I put up my horse."

Murdoch fell into step next to his son.



As soon as the pair dissolved into the darkness, Frazier stepped into the campfire light and began to pour himself a cup of coffee. He glanced at Wyoming, put down the pot, and took a step toward the man and dog.

He was greeted with a menacing growl.

"You keep holdin' him, friend, or he's one dead dog."

"Ain't no friend of yours," Wyoming said lowly, one hand on the dog's back.

"Well, we was locked up together, wasn't we? Scratchin' the same fleas in that rotten jail?" Frazier took another step and was stopped by another threatening growl.

"Hush down!" Wyoming soothed.

"Mean one, ain't he?"

Wyoming tilted his head toward Frazier. "Just smart. Dogs know things – like who their friends is, and who can be trusted."

"Don't go by his opinion, friend – not if you want them chains off?"

Fondling the dog's ears, Wyoming eyed Frazier appraisingly. Then he spoke carefully. "That's one thing I want . . ."

"What else?" Frazier inquired.

"Johnny Madrid lyin' dead, with the buzzards pickin' his bones!"

Frazier broke into a toothy smile. "See? We're friends after all. I got a plan workin', and I'll fill you in later tonight." With that he took a swig of coffee, then dumped the rest onto the campfire and put the cup down. Frazier disappeared into the night after giving Wyoming a conspiratorial wink.

The dog growled as the cowboy left his sight. Wyoming tried to calm him, but instead, the mangy mutt wiggled free and ran in the direction of the remuda. Watching the dog dart off, Wyoming turned his angry gaze to the manacles encircling his wrists and gave them a disgusted tug.



"And you don't believe Wyoming's changed his mind about wanting to kill you?" Murdoch posed the question as Johnny groomed horse, the vigor of the effort making it clear that the subject was starting to tread on touchy territory.

"I'd like to think so," Johnny breathed, leaning into the job. His thought ended with a shrug.

"So, what did you do that he should want revenge?" Murdoch sensed he was pushing the subject, and with Johnny's weariness, that could result in an explosion.

"Nothin'," Johnny snapped. "Well, not what he thinks, anyway."

“And what’s that?” Murdoch pushed carefully.

With that, Johnny turned in exasperation. “Look, Murdoch . . .”

Murdoch threw up his hands in surrender and physically took a step back, not really surprised. “I’m sorry, son. I didn’t mean to pry . . . I’ll stand guard while you get a few hours sleep.” He turned to go, but was surprised when he was stopped by a gentle hand on his shoulder. As he turned to his son, a motion in the bushes caught his attention.

Wyoming’s scruffy dog bounded from the shadows to Johnny’s feet, wagging his tail so furiously his hindquarters joined in the action. Johnny dropped his hand from Murdoch’s shoulder with a grin and then dropped to one knee and began scratching behind the effervescent dog’s ears. After a few moments, the previous irritation ebbed. Murdoch heard Johnny sign.

“Murdoch. The trouble between me and Wyoming, it was a woman. A woman called Delores.”

“Delores,” Murdoch echoed. “It means ‘sorrows’.”

Johnny laughed shortly. “Yeah. She was a real grief, alright . . .”

“Hey Dog!” Wyoming’s voice called from the direction of the campfire, catching both Johnny and Murdoch’s attention. The convict broke from the brush and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Johnny scratching his pet. “You feedin’ my dog again?” he asked sharply.

“I guess that’s what he wants,” Johnny said calmly, reaching into his shirt pocket.

“Don’t!” Wyoming snapped.

Johnny froze for a moment, and then slowly withdrew his fingers. “Sure, amigo. It’s plain enough he’s a one-man dog.”

“Yeah,” Wyoming said sternly. “Yeah, you remember that.”

Johnny stood and waved the dog off. “That’s all, fella. Go on! If you’re hungry, go see Wyoming.”

Reluctantly, the dog turned as if to go, but instead stopped, looking back at Johnny with a sideways cock of his head, ears flat. Johnny gave him a shove.

“Come here, dog!” Wyoming ordered.

The animal hesitated, looking from Johnny to Wyoming, then suddenly his ears perked up and his body tensed. Instantly, he began to bark at an outcropping of rock in the shadows. Within a few seconds, his hackles spiked sharply and the barking became almost frantic. The three men first looked questioningly at each other, then turned their attention to the rocks.

Suddenly, an arrow sang through the air and cracked into a boulder behind Johnny. He drew and snapped off a pair of shots. Wyoming dove behind some rocks as the dog barked wildly. Murdoch pulled leather, but before he could take a shot, a hard shove followed by intense pain made him fall back. Dazed, he looked down to see an arrow dug deeply in his shoulder.

The rest of the attack seemed a blur. The horses pitched and snorted in fear, and Johnny’s gun rang out over and over.

“Johnny . . .” he called, the sound barely a whisper against the roar in his ears. Through the agony he heard his son and Wyoming trying to calm the horses.

"Don't let them get away!" Johnny yelled, his voice seeming so far away.

"Whoa, whoa there, settle down!" Wyoming's voice seemed just as distant. "You hush that barkin', Dog!"

Fearing he wouldn't hear them ever again, Murdoch spent his last energy, "JOHNNY!"

Was he heard? Would they find him? The anxiety mingled with the pain until he saw his son's horrified face hovering over him. Then everything faded away.

### ACT THREE

"Shoulder bone's the Clavicle . . . arm bone's the HUM-erus. Or is that said Hu-MER-us?" Jelly rolled the word over in his mind as his studious gaze swept from the book in one hand to the hand of the skeleton in the other. Wrinkling his nose to adjust the glasses perched on its tip, Jelly refocused his attention to his self-taught lesson. "Then the Ulna and the Radius . . . Ulna's the one Charlie Sawyer broke so awful back in the summer of fifty-seven."

Engrossed, he didn't hear the doctor's wife enter the room. "Mr. Hoskins?"

"Wrist bone's the Carpus . . ."

The woman cleared her throat and started again. "Mr. Hoskins, the Constable wants to talk to Scott, but that poor young man needs his sleep, and I thought . . ."

Jelly swiveled his head toward the woman. "You thought right! Anythin' he'd say to Scott he can say to me."

What apparently was the Constable entered the room behind the woman and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of a grizzled old man holding hands with a skeleton. Jelly regarded

him with impatience, unaware of the spectacle he presented.

"Come in, Sheriff . . . I was just brushin' up a bit on my medical knowledge," he said, ignoring the odd look directed at him.

"Not 'Sheriff' – Constable."

"You sit down and I'll fetch some coffee and pie on a plate," the Doctor's wife offered, bustling from the room.

The Constable stepped aside to let her pass as he pulled some folded papers from his pocket. Jelly finally released the bony hand as the law enforcement officer got down to business, speaking as he unfolded the papers. "You know them three saddle tramps the other Lancer bailed out of my jail yesterday evenin'?"

"I seen 'em when Murdoch stopped to say good-bye. Had a mighty scruffy look about 'em, if you want my opinion." Jelly pumped up his words by bouncing on his toes, thumbs hooked in his waistband.

"I found these in the mail that come in today's delivery." With a slight pause, the Constable handed over three wanted posters.

Jelly's eyes widened as he scanned the posters. "Wanted for . . . Oh, my gracious!"

The officer shook his head slowly. "Meanest kind of killin' . . . of a hostage they took durin' a bank robbery down in Tuscon! 'Course, I realize there's no way in the world you could carry a warnin' to the Lancers. But I figured you'd want to know anyway."

A baleful look crossed Jelly's face but was quickly replaced by one of optimism. "Johnny's a smart lad. He'll get onto them quick enough . . . and nobody pulls the wool over Murdoch Lancer's eyes!"

The Constable eyed the older man for a moment, then shook his head as he refolded the papers. "I sure hope you're right, Mr. Hoskins."



Quiet flames pulsed in the darkness, its warmth dissipating into the desert's cool air. Golden light threw itself over Johnny as he grimly tightened the bandages around his father's shoulder.

"I don't think the arrow . . hit anything vital, do you?" Murdoch rasped, trying not to cringe from Johnny's touch.

"Bleedin' shoulda stopped by now," Johnny said quietly. Murdoch tried to read his boy's face, but it was a stern mask.

"Then you have to cauterize it," Murdoch growled between teeth clenched in pain.

Johnny's gaze flicked from his father's eyes back to the dressed wound. "Maybe not . . . not yet," he said quietly.

"Johnny . . ."

The mask cracked with Johnny's plea. "After all the pain getting' that arrow out . . . Murdoch, I don't wanta hurt you more!"

Murdoch grasped Johnny's forearm in a firm grip, his point clear. "The iron's hot," he said lowly, holding his son's anguished eyes. "Don't wait, son."

A few moments later, Johnny tore his gaze from that of his father's and reached for the iron already glowing red as the embers. Even through a haze of pain, Murdoch could see the ever so slight tremble in his son's hand. Wishing to shield his son from any more sense of hurt, Murdoch set his jaw against what he knew would be a painful ordeal.

Johnny wrapped his hand in a thick cloth and lifted the crimson iron from the coals. He held it aloft, the glow burning brightly in the dark and paused, unable to meet his father's eyes. "Grit your teeth," he said quietly.

Murdoch nodded shortly and Johnny lifted the bandages from the bloody wound. After a moment's hesitation, Johnny applied the iron which sizzled as it touched Murdoch's flesh. He clenched his jaw against the pain, more to spare his son than to appease his own feelings. Still, he could see the agony in Johnny's eyes at having to be the bringer of such pain.

Above the sound of his sizzling flesh, Murdoch heard a heart-breaking whine off to one side. Frantic for any reason to tear his eyes from those of his tortured son, Murdoch found the source of the noise. Wyoming, barely visible in the shadows, was tightly gripping his wriggling, whining dog. The manacles on the man's wrists flashed in the golden light, the chain between them clattering darkly. Murdoch crazily wondered for a moment why the dog was so upset before he slipped into agonizing darkness.



"That's how I got it schemed out," Frazier explained to the two men huddled close in the night. "We kill the Lancers and the soldier boy, and deliver the herd. I say I'm Johnny Lancer, collect the money, and we head for Mexico 'fore anybody's the wiser."

Tapadero shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I don't usually go along with that kinda killin'. Still, it'd get back at Johnny for that whippin' – and the old man's good as dead anyways."

Encouraged, Frazier continued. "And soldier boys expect to get killed. See? It's all in how you look at a thing."

"Yeah," Tapadero agreed hesitantly. "But the Injuns . . ."

"Ain't five thousand dollars worth runnin' a little risk?" Rob Roy asked.

"Why, sure it is! Takin' a chance kinda puts the salt on the meat!" Frazier knew his idea was sold.

Tapadero frowned in thought for a second, then took on a look of acceptance. "When do we make our move?"

"Tomorrow," Frazier said. "We'll let Johnny and the Sarge help with those cattle 'till we're nearer the fort."

"What about Wyoming?" Rob Roy asked. "We still gonna cut him in?"

Frazier clapped Rob Roy on the shoulder. "We don't need him. That arrow tipped the odds in our favor – now, come on! Let's look after them cattle of ours!"

Rob Roy rubbed his hands together greedily as they all chuckled. It was a good plan.



Faint light on the horizon promised another hot dawn after a long, sleepless night for Johnny. He'd stayed by Murdoch's side the entire time, checking and rechecking the bandages and his father's breathing. It wasn't even daylight yet and both Lancers were already sweating.

Johnny barely acknowledged Vandegrift's arrival as he carefully wiped down Murdoch's face. There had been a little animation there earlier. Johnny knew he was finally waking up and wanted to be there when he did.

Eventually, Murdochs lids cracked open. He groaned weakly.

"Hey," Johnny said softly, dampening the cloth with canteen water. "Think you can travel by morning?"

Murdoch blinked a few times as his mind began to work. He nodded once. "Can't delay the drive," he croaked.

"Forget the drive. I'm getting' you back to that doctor that's takin' care of Scott."

"We're closer to the fort," Murdoch said weakly. "They must have a surgeon there."

"There's Apaches in between," Johnny pointed out before Vandegrift interrupted.

"Maybe only a few, Johnny. It's my guess what we've seen so far's the work of a small band."

Johnny shot him a look before turning back to his father. "That don't mean others won't be joinin' them tomorrow."

"If we push, we can get through these canyons first . . . and meet that escort patrol waitin' for us at Hualapai Gap," the soldier reasoned.

"You push!" Johnny snapped. "The herd's yours. Do anythin' you want with it, but I'm takin' Murdoch to a doctor."

"But I need you," Vandegrift said. "I can't handle those three jailbirds."

Frustrated, Johnny replied a little more angrily than he meant. "Look, this is my father!"

A gruff voice made the two men turn to Murdoch. "It's my decision, Johnny. I say we stick with this herd."

Johnny let out an explosive breath and shook his head, combing his fingers through his hair. He was tired, dog tired, and a little voice inside screamed that it was a bad idea.

Blaming his indecisiveness on his fatigue, Johnny mentally managed to silence the tiny voice using the logic that the fort was closer. He stood, decision made, and began to issue orders.

“All right, Sarge. Go relieve that Rob Roy kid and tell Frazier we’ll start the cattle movin’ an hour before sunup.”

Vandegrift nodded sharply. “Mr. Lancer . . . Luck to you.”

Johnny watched the soldier mount up. Then a noise beside him caught his attention, and he turned to see the ragamuffin dog sitting by him, watching him with bright eyes as his tail swept the ground. With a small smile, Johnny looked up at Wyoming standing a short distance away, also watching him.

“What am I gonna do with you?” Johnny said, half the man and half to the dog.

Wyoming answered by holding up his manacled wrists. “Somebody’s gotta drive the wagon,” he reasoned.

“Yeah, me,” Johnny snapped.

“You can’t do that and boss this trail drive, too.”

“He’s right, Johnny,” Murdoch said softly.

Johnny regarded his father for a moment, then slowly fished a set of keys from his pocket. He studied them a moment before moving closer to the convict. “Why should I trust you?” he asked warily.

“Cause helpin’ you out’s to my advantage, too.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I figure you’ll return the favor later – by givin’ me a horse and rifle and a head start? After all, stealin’ seventy dollars ain’t that big a crime.” Johnny didn’t reply immediately, which seemed to encourage Wyoming. “Please, Johnny? My dog’s feet are hurtin’ him from runnin’ all yesterday. If I drive the wagon, he can ride with me.”

Johnny sighed tiredly. “Yeah . . . yeah, you got a deal.”

As he unlocked the cuffs, he couldn’t help but notice the enigmatic expression on Wyoming’s face.



Wyoming rubbed his wrists as he walked back to the nearly dead fire. A single, lumpy blanket nearby told him he found what he was looking for and with a backward glance to make sure he was out of Johnny’s sight, he dropped to one knee next to the pile. Roughly shaking the slumbering Rob Roy out of his sleep, Wyoming quickly clamped his hand over the boy’s mouth to keep him from yelling out. He leaned in closer as the boy’s wide eyes told him the kid was awake.

“What’s the plan?” Wyoming said. He loosened his hand from Rob Roy’s mouth.

“What plan?” the kid said a bit too quickly.

“Frazier said you had something’ cookin’ and he’d tell me tonight but it’s almost mornin’ and he ain’t said a word.”

“N . . . not me, neither,” he stuttered. “If he’s got a plan, he ain’t told me!”

“Don’t lie!” Wyoming snarled, his nose nearly touching the kids. Then he leaned back and cuffed him hard. The dog, watching from the side, barked loudly at the action and Wyoming was distracted for a second. Rob

Roy took the slight advantage and broke away. Wyoming's arm swept the air in a vain attempt to snag the kid's shirt, but Rob Roy ducked the grab and stumbled off toward the remuda.

Wyoming watched the kid run away and knew the group was up to something.



Full daylight broke hotly as Johnny made a final check of his father's traveling bed. Murdoch was as comfortable as humanly possible for the circumstances he knew, but still, he was uneasy. They'd knocked out the bars of the prison wagon, which now acted as the chuck wagon. Finally, Johnny checked the last item – Murdoch's revolver. He made sure it was loaded and clean enough to function properly.

"I still ain't sure of Wyoming," Johnny said quietly. He snapped the cylinder shut. "Any false moves, shoot him."

Murdoch nodded weakly as Johnny tucked the gun under the blankets within his father's reach. He studied Murdoch for a few seconds, then sighed. "Well," as he turned to leave the wagon.

"Johnny."

Johnny paused and looked back. "Yeah?"

Murdoch looked like he had something to say, but instead said, "Nothing."

"It ain't gonna be easy on you," Johnny said softly.

"Or you either," Murdoch replied. "You haven't had any sleep for two nights."

Johnny turned back to his father. "I'll get by," he said.

"Me, too."

Murdoch raised his hand and Johnny grasped it firmly in a loving shake. It was the best he could do for now, his eyes saying just that. Murdoch returned the look with complete understanding. That one grip confirmed the trust and confidence they had in each other – a bond of father and son.

When Johnny left the wagon, he knew how rough the trip would be for his father, but he had to push that thought aside for now. Wyoming joined him as soon as he was outside.

"Ready to move out?" Johnny asked tiredly.

"Remember how I used to say you had eyes in the backa your head?" Wyoming said lowly. "Use 'em today, Johnny."

Johnny pulled up sharp and quickly turned. The tiredness was suddenly gone – his eyes were cold and dangerous. "You threatenin' me?" he said tightly.

Wyoming shook his head. "Warnin' you. About them three. They're up to somethin' . . ."

Johnny cool a bit. "What?" he asked.

"I ain't sure. All I know's they was gonna deal me in, then changed their minds. I'm only tellin' you 'cause it don't look good for me neither."

"Yeah," Johnny agreed. "That . . . or maybe you're pointin' at them to keep me from watchin' you?" He continued to walk, hearing Wyoming following.

Reaching the horses, Johnny snatched Barranca's reins and quickly swung into the saddle. Wyoming caught the bridle and spoke sharply as he looked up at Johnny. "I spent three days in the same jail with them – long

enough to know they ain't chuckleheaded rannies! Or maybe I just dreamed them whisperin' about how they robbed a bank down in Tuscon?"

Johnny considered for a moment. "If that's true, why didn't they clear out tonight while they had the chance?"

"Must be after somethin'."

"Only one thing we got worth the stealin'," Johnny said, pointing toward the cattle. "That herd!"

He tried to rein Barranca away, but Wyoming did not yield his grip.

"Who's your amigo, Johnny?" Wyoming asked desperately.

Johnny met his old friend's gaze for a moment. "You," he finally replied, a small smile smoothing some of the tired lines from his face.

Wyoming released the bridle, and Johnny kneed the palomino into a lope. Thoughts tumbled wildly in his mind, a picture eventually coming to the fore. He knew what the others were going to do, he was sure of it. The only way to stop them was with reinforcements. Looking to the front of the now milling herd, Johnny pointed Barranca's nose in the same direction and moved off to find Vandegrift.

Sounds of the cattle being urged forward was quickly drowned out by the thunder of many hooves. The early morning's hot light was soon hazy with dust as the men drove the herd toward the foothills that would funnel them in the direction of the fort.

Finally, Johnny found the cavalryman at the mouth of the canyon and told him what he suspected.

"Steal the herd?" Vandegrift said with surprise. "But how could they get away with that?"

"Wouldn't be too hard," Johnny reasoned as he patted Barranca's already sweaty neck. "Kill the rest of us, pass themselves off as Lancers, and collect the money before anybody caught on."

"But you can't be sure that's what they're thinkin' of?"

Johnny snorted. "I'd take bets," he said.

"Well, how do we stop them?"

Johnny tilted his head in the direction of the fort. "How you feel? Up to ridin' and bringin' back that patrol that's waitin' at Hualapai Gap?"

Vandegrift nodded sharply. "And in the meantime?"

"I'll keep the lid on things here. Now, get goin'."

The sergeant lifted his reins. "Just pray I don't run into them Apache reinforcements." Then he touched his spurs to his horse's sides and leaped away. Johnny watched until he was out of sight, then turned his attention to the herd.

He didn't see Rob Roy soon follow the soldier.

## ACT FOUR

Johnny squinted into the sun, not at all pleased with what he saw in the distance. Satisfied with the speed and direction of the herd, he reined around and rode harder than he wanted to back to the wagon. Wyoming pulled the team to a stop on Johnny's arrival.



"Seen that?" Johnny pointed to the visible smoke signals rising above the canyon walls. Wyoming glanced up and nodded, his expression unreadable. "You can read smoke talk. What're those Apache sayin'?"

"A warnin' to lie low. There's a soldier patrol around . . ."

"Good," Johnny breathed, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "I sent the Sarge to fetch them. That should make Frazier's bunch think twice before they try anythin'!"

Wyoming squinted at Johnny with a sideways tilt of his head. "If they do make trouble, I can't help much without a gun."

"I don't plan needin' help," Johnny said firmly.

"Your Pa might."

Their eyes met for a moment, and then Johnny reined around to look in the prison van window. For a brief second, Murdoch's face reflected his incredible pain. "You all right?" Johnny asked.

The expression immediately softened as Murdoch nodded.

"Want a drink of water?"

Murdoch shook his head. "Keep the drive moving . . ."

Not at all surprised, Johnny nodded and returned to Wyoming's side. The scruffy dog's body wiggled in time with his tail at his arrival. Smiling slightly at the animal, Johnny reached down and pulled his rifle from the saddle scabbard, turning it over to Wyoming with a stern look.

"Be good to use this," Wyoming said, accepting the weapon.

Johnny's eyes narrowed.

"That is, good to fight beside you again . . . just to prove I don't bear no grudge."

After a moment, Johnny nodded slowly, then indicated the wagon with a tilt of his head. "He's hurtin' bad . . . don't take any extra bumps, huh?" he said softly.

Wyoming agreed. Reluctantly, Johnny turned back to the herd.



**E**merging from a heavy cloud of dust and the crowd of cows, Frazier weaved through the brush and found Tapadero away from the milling herd.

"Rob Roy got the soldier," Frazier announced as he pulled up next to his friend.

"When do we go after Johnny?"

"Pretty quick," Frazier said, indicating a spot further down the trail with a flick of his wrist. "There's a narrow place about a mile ahead. Good spot for an ambush."

Tapadero grinned. "Fish in a barrel, huh?"

"Yeah. Your job's to stay behind Johnny and the wagon. Cut 'em off in they try turnin' back." Frazier grinned. They couldn't lose.

Orders given, Tapadero rode toward the back of the herd.



**T**apadero was surprised to find Johnny so quickly. Expecting him to be riding drag in the heavy dust nearest the wagon, he instead found him above the herd on a small rise standing still and searching the canyon

behind them. The ex-gunslinger was thick with dust, the area around his lower face cleaner from the bandanna he'd had pulled off just a few moments before. Johnny gave Tapadero a dismissive glance before going back to studying where they'd come from with a puzzled expression.

"The wagon up ahead?" Johnny asked worriedly.

"It's supposed to be back here." Tapadero frowned at this turn of events. He was supposed to have both Johnny and the wagon under his guard.

"Well, look for yourself," Johnny snapped. "It ain't! It's gone."

"Maybe broke down or somethin'?" The drifter suggested, wondering what he was supposed to do now.

"Yeah. Maybe . . . I'll find out." He gave a sharp look to Tapadero. "You keep that beef movin'!" With that, he wheeled the dusty palomino around and headed back down the canyon.

Tapadero was now confused. What should he do? Pulling his rifle clear, he drew a bead on Johnny's retreating back but hesitated. This wasn't the plan, and Frazier could be pretty difficult when the plan wasn't followed. Soon, his choice was made as Johnny disappeared from his sight. With a sigh, Tapadero replaced the weapon, sighed heavily, then loped after the retreating cattle.

It took longer than he expected to work his way along the milling mass, and by the time he did, they were at the ambush point. Tapadero moved to the edge of the herd, searching the hills above until the last of the cattle were past him. He moved forward slowly, then finally spotted Frazier in the rocks. He waved his arm and shouted.

"Johnny ain't comin'! He's gone huntin' after that wagon!"

Frazier spat a vague expletive and stood, signaling Rob Roy to show himself. The two of them disappeared from Tapadero's sight, then reappeared mounted up on their horses. They stopped next to him.

"But the cattle!" Rob Roy said.

"First things first!" Frazier ordered. "Come on!"

The trio turned back and galloped into the canyon.



Murdoch was sure he'd never felt this kind of pain before. It was both sharp and aching at the same time, and incredibly merciless. He also knew he had a fever due to the swimming, disjointed way his thoughts tumbled about. When the wagon stopped moving he was both joyous and annoyed – he welcomed the break in his torture but the nagging of responsibility couldn't be put aside.

His jumbled line of thought was interrupted when the door of the wagon swung open. Squinting against the brightness outside, Murdoch made out the outline of Wyoming as he made his way inside to Murdoch's side. The man knelt down and offered him a canteen. Murdoch gratefully accepted it, the tepid water feeling incredibly cool in his throat.

With one arm wrapped tightly and the other holding the canteen, Murdoch was unable to stop Wyoming when his hand dipped under the blankets and he came up with Murdoch's gun.

"Go on. Drink your fill . . ." Wyoming said.

Murdoch glanced down at the gun, then regarded Wyoming with contempt. "Why?" he managed to croak.

"No point makin' you suffer. I mean, I don't hold with blood-feudin' – blamin' a father for his son's guilt." With that, he pushed the canteen back toward Murdoch's dry lips.

Murdoch pushed back, releasing the canteen. "What . . . What did Johnny do?" His voice sounded weak to his ears.

"Somethin' so low I can't never forgive him. He's gotta die."

"I can't . . . I *won't* believe that." Murdoch held the man's gaze as he furiously tried to think of a way out of this.

"You wouldn't. You love him like he loves you. That's how come I'm usin' you for bait."

Seeing both his low chance of escaping and the desperation of Wyoming's soul, Murdoch sighed.

"Revenge," he stated simply. "It's a futile thing. It'll leave you empty."

"I am already," Wyoming said quietly. "Have been since . . ." His voice trailed off and he reached inside the top of his right boot and pulled out a small locket. "That lawman back in Quartzite, he let me keep this. . ."

Extending the item to Murdoch he saw that inside the small frame, there was a photograph of a plain and unremarkable dark-haired girl.

"Ain't she beautiful?" Wyoming's voice was nearly a whisper.

"Dolores?" Murdoch guessed.

Wyoming nodded. "She died 'cause of Johnny, but she'll rest easier – after I put Johnny in his grave."

Fear clutched Murdoch's heart; he has never felt so helpless in his life.



**T**racking the wagon wasn't that difficult. The rocky terrain made some sections a little less clear but picking up the trail on the other side was easy enough. Johnny pulled off his hat and wiped the sweat from his eyes before squinting into the hot sun. Replacing the hat with a resolute tug, he pushed on knowing that what he sought was not what he was looking for. He knew he'd find his father, but also knew this was leading to a trap set by an old friend. His heart was heavy with dread.

Twisting through a stand of rocks, he found himself at the edge of an open area. The wagon was stopped at the far edge and in its shadow, Murdoch lay, unmoving, on the ground. Johnny jumped from Barranca, his first instinct to run to his father's side. Instead, he forced himself to take cover behind a boulder before rushing in. Still, his concern overrode all and he stepped into the open.

A rifle shot passed close by his face, the wind of it sharp. It struck a rock behind him and he felt the sting of shrapnel on the back of his neck. Johnny dove behind a boulder. Wyoming called out.

"You wanta help him, Johnny . . . throw out your gunbelt!"

Johnny obeyed without further thought, the belt landing in the dust with a thud. Johnny could see that Murdoch was barely conscious and unable to help. He was a pawn, clear and plain, and there was only one thing to do. With his empty hands held out from his sides,

Johnny stepped into the clear. He saw Wyoming to Murdoch's right among the scattered rocks, his hand holding the dog back from racing to greet his newest pal.

Johnny took a step toward Murdoch and the dog whined in eagerness, his little tail swaying furiously although he obeyed Wyoming and stood still. Johnny took another step toward his father and another crack from the rifle sent dirt flying on his boots as it hit the ground in front of him.

"That's far enough!" Wyoming yelled. Johnny noted that his voice had a slight tremble.

"Look, Amigo . . ."

"Don't! Don't call me friend!" Wyoming cut in.

"Does it hafta be right now?" Johnny was working hard to keep his voice even. "Wait 'till I get Murdoch to the fort, and we'll settle this any way you like."

Gambling, he took another step. The next shot was much closer to his feet.

"The next one's through your head."

That did it – too tired to keep under control, Johnny yelled angrily. "This don't hafta happen! If you'll just put up that rifle and listen to the truth . . ."

"Delores told me!" The quaver in Wyoming's words spoke of the same anger and weariness. "Why? Why her? You always had your pick of woman. Why did you hafta go after the one that meant anythin' to me?"

Seeing his old friend's anguish gave Johnny something to work with: The truth. As he spoke, one hand slowly moved toward his shirtfront pocket for the treat he knew was there. "You got it backwards . . . It was Dolores come after me."

"You're a liar!" Wyoming shouted, the rifle wavering dangerously.

In Wyoming's moment of distraction, Johnny pulled out a piece of jerky from his pocket and the dog leaped happily forward. Johnny dropped to one knee and wrapped one arm around the dog as the animal eagerly accepted the treat from his other hand. He hated using the dog as a shield, but it was the only way out he could see.

"Leave go my dog!" Wyoming shouted as he again aligned the rifle.

"Not 'till you listen!" The uneventful pause was what Johnny had hoped for. "You . . . you got a blind spot, Wyoming. You can't see faults in things you love. This dog's the finest dog ever lived, and Dolores . . . Well, you thought she was perfect. Only she wasn't."

"Don't lie!"

Wyoming shook his head in denial, but the fact that he hadn't shot yet told Johnny more.

"She was mean and selfish! She got it into her head she loved me and kept goin' at me behind your back. I couldn't put a stop to it without hurtin' you, so finally I just left for Mexico."

"You took her with you!"

Johnny blinked in surprise. "I what?" he said, confused.

The rifle sagged as Wyoming vented. "Don't deny it! You see, I went after you . . . I found Dolores six months later. Down in Sonora – behind a cantina. Sick. Alone. She told me what you done and made me promise I'd pay you back. I wouldn't at first. I didn't wanta believe it. But she swore it was true . . . with her last breath. Right before she closed her eyes and died!"

Johnny shook his head slowly in sorrow and helplessness. "She musta tried to follow me . . . But I never saw her after I left you both in Tascosa."

The sharp sound of a bullet being levered into a chamber got his full attention. Wyoming glared at Johnny, his resolve apparently rebuilt.

"Leave go my dog, Johnny," he demanded lowly. When Johnny didn't respond, he found his old friend's forehead in the sights.

Johnny read his body language and knew he'd lost. Reluctantly, he let go of the dog and stood. "Amigo . . . Believe me!" he tried.

The words made Wyoming hesitate. Johnny saw indecision in his eyes. Caught in the moment, they both jumped when the dog began to bark furiously at something behind Johnny. Before Johnny could move, Wyoming lifted the rifle higher and squeezed off a shot.

Johnny spun and dropped. Behind him, Rob Roy flew backward from the shot as Frazier and Tapadero lifted their own weapons. Johnny crawled toward his father, still in the open.

The dog stood fast, barking rabidly as Wyoming took cover and continued to shoot. Ignoring it all, Johnny made it to Murdoch's side and dragged him to cover behind the wagon. That done, Johnny peered around the corner.

"Johnny!"

Wyoming's shout alerted Johnny, and he tossed Murdoch's revolver to him. Johnny snatched the gun from the air as a bullet near his head sent splinters flying.

The gunfire was fast and furious, the frenzied dog's barking adding to the ruckus. A scream

from the rocks verified a hit, and Tapadero stood shakily, clenching one arm with the other.

"I'm hit!" he shouted, terrified. "Don't shoot! Please, Johnny, I ain't parta this!" To confirm his plea, Tapadero dropped his rifle.

Johnny and Wyoming hesitate, glancing quickly at each other to gage what to do next. Before they can fully react to the surrender, another shot rings out from Frazier's weapon and it met with a heart wrenching yelp.

The dog was instantly silent.

Wyoming froze in horror, his eyes on his unusually still friend. Johnny, gun aimed, bolted from his cover realizing, too late, that Frazier was gone. The sound of frantic horses told him where his nemesis has gone.

Running through the brush and following the noise, Johnny found Frazier trying to calm his horse enough to mount. Finally, he managed to do so, but before he could fully gather his reins, Johnny yanked to the ground. Hitting hard, Frazier was momentarily stunned. Johnny stuck his gun in the man's face, and Frazier wisely lay still.

Johnny roughly grabbed him by his collar and practically dragged him back to the wagon where he found Wyoming cradling the still dog in his arms.

"Dog? Oh, Dog . . ."

When the man buried his face in the animal's fur, Johnny dropped his eyes and turned his attention to securing the prisoners, giving his old friend privacy to grieve.



Exhausted beyond belief, Johnny dug down deep and managed to find a resource to keep

him going for just a little while longer. Now that Murdoch was back in the wagon and they were ready to go, he felt his worry lessen just a bit. He reached down and adjusted the blanket under his father and found himself the recipient of a pained expression. Murdoch was finally awake, his eyes open.

"You rest easy, now," he said to his father. "There's a doctor at the fort, and we'll have you there by nightfall."

"What about the herd?" Murdoch asked weakly.

Johnny chuckled. "The soldiers're havin' a round-up. They think it's a game."

Murdoch smiled haggardly.

"Yeah . . . smile again." Johnny laughed. He picked up the manacles and ring of keys from the floor of the wagon and turned serious. "See you later. Right after I tend to this."

"Johnny," Murdoch breathed softly. "Compassion . . ."

Johnny hesitated and dropped his eyes for a moment before climbing from the wagon without replying. Two soldiers were waiting for him outside.

"Move out anytime," he said. "Just leave my horse and one other."

They nod in unison, and Johnny walked away, a man with a mission. Johnny found Wyoming placing a final rock on the dog's grave and walked around to meet him face on. The manacles dangled significantly from his hand. Johnny stood before the kneeling man, his expression hard. Wyoming kept his focus on the pile of rocks and didn't move.

"Murdoch wants me to forgive you," Johnny said flatly.

Neither man moved for several long seconds. Then in an explosion of motion, Johnny swung the chains and the raked them across Wyoming's back.

"Look at me!" Johnny yelled.

Wyoming looked up through his lashes, defeated. "What do you want. I don't care . . ."

"I figure Yuma Prison's got first claim on you right now," Johnny growled.

"Don't matter," Wyoming whispered. "Nothin' matters . . ."

Johnny flung the manacles to the ground at his feet.

"Yes, it does!" he snapped. Reaching down, he yanked the bigger man to his feet and shoved him backward until he could slam him back against a boulder, where he got in Wyoming's face. "You gotta live through the next two years! You gotta stand up under hard work . . ." he cuffed the man's chin to accent the words. ". . . And hot sun . . ." another whack, ". . . and rotten food," another backhand, ". . . and beatin's!" The final cuff ended with Johnny pushing himself off the man. "And more beatin's! Amigo, you gotta take the worst treatment they can hand out . . . and you can't do that if you don't care enough to hang onto your soul – 'cause that's the only thing you'll have to call your own!"

Miserably, Wyoming lifted his chin. "Why, Johnny? What for?"

Johnny raised a finger and shook it in Wyoming's face as he spoke. "For a day two years from now – when the gates swing open and you're a free man! Know the first thing you'll see? Me . . . I'll be there outside the walls and I'll have forgotten all this."

With those final words, Johnny swept his hand to indicate all the events that had taken place in this small clearing. Wyoming was looking at him intently, his eyes lightened by hope.

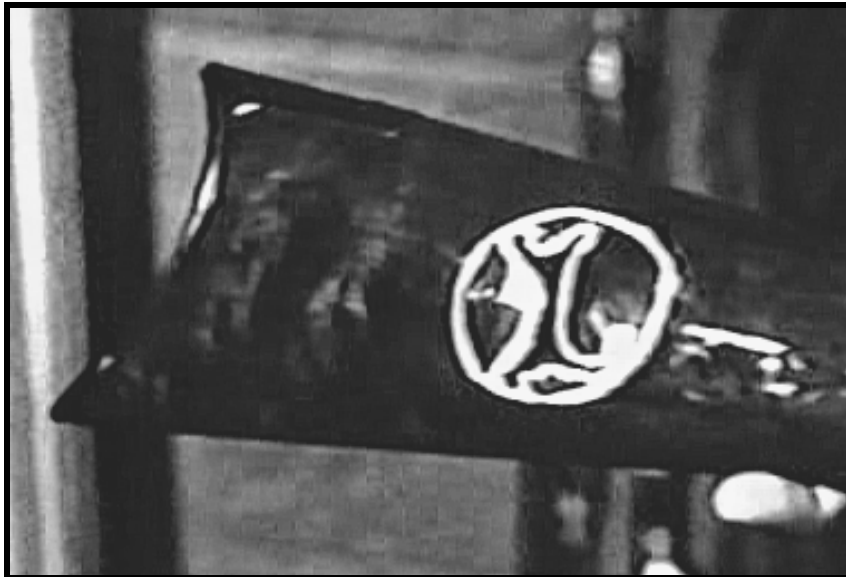
“You believe me? Or do I hafta pound on you some more?”

Wyoming shook his head in wonder and gratitude. He pushed himself off the boulder and squared his shoulders, standing straight and tall for the first time in a long while. After nodding shortly to his old friend, he looked

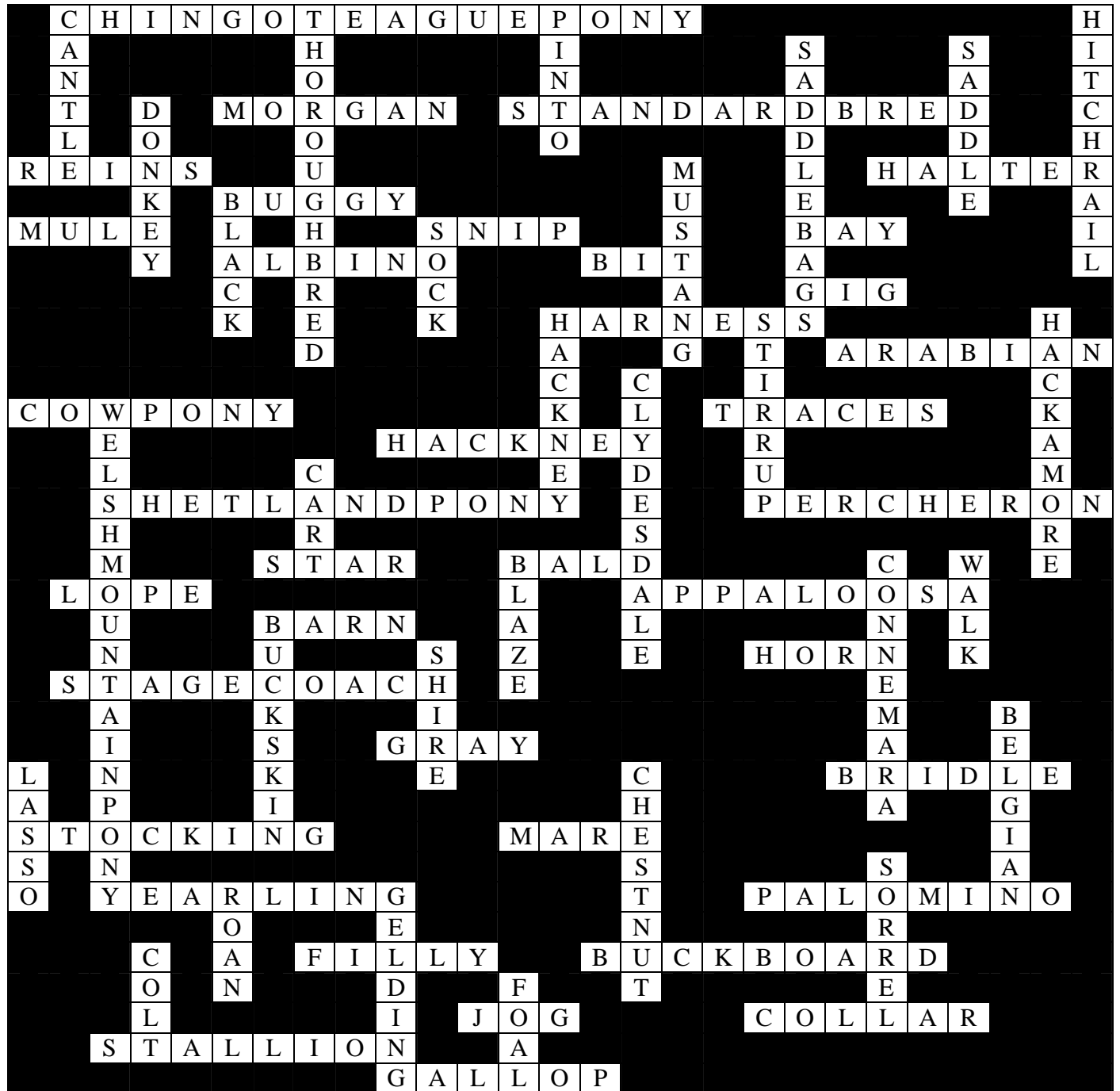
past Johnny to the rocky grave. “And I thought . . .” he swallowed hard, and then spoke clearly. “I thought I’d buried my only friend.”

He looked back at Johnny, who gave him a reassuring clap on the shoulder. Johnny stood back to allow Wyoming to step forward, and the two of them walked side by side from the clearing to the waiting horses.

The manacles were left, forgotten, in the dust.



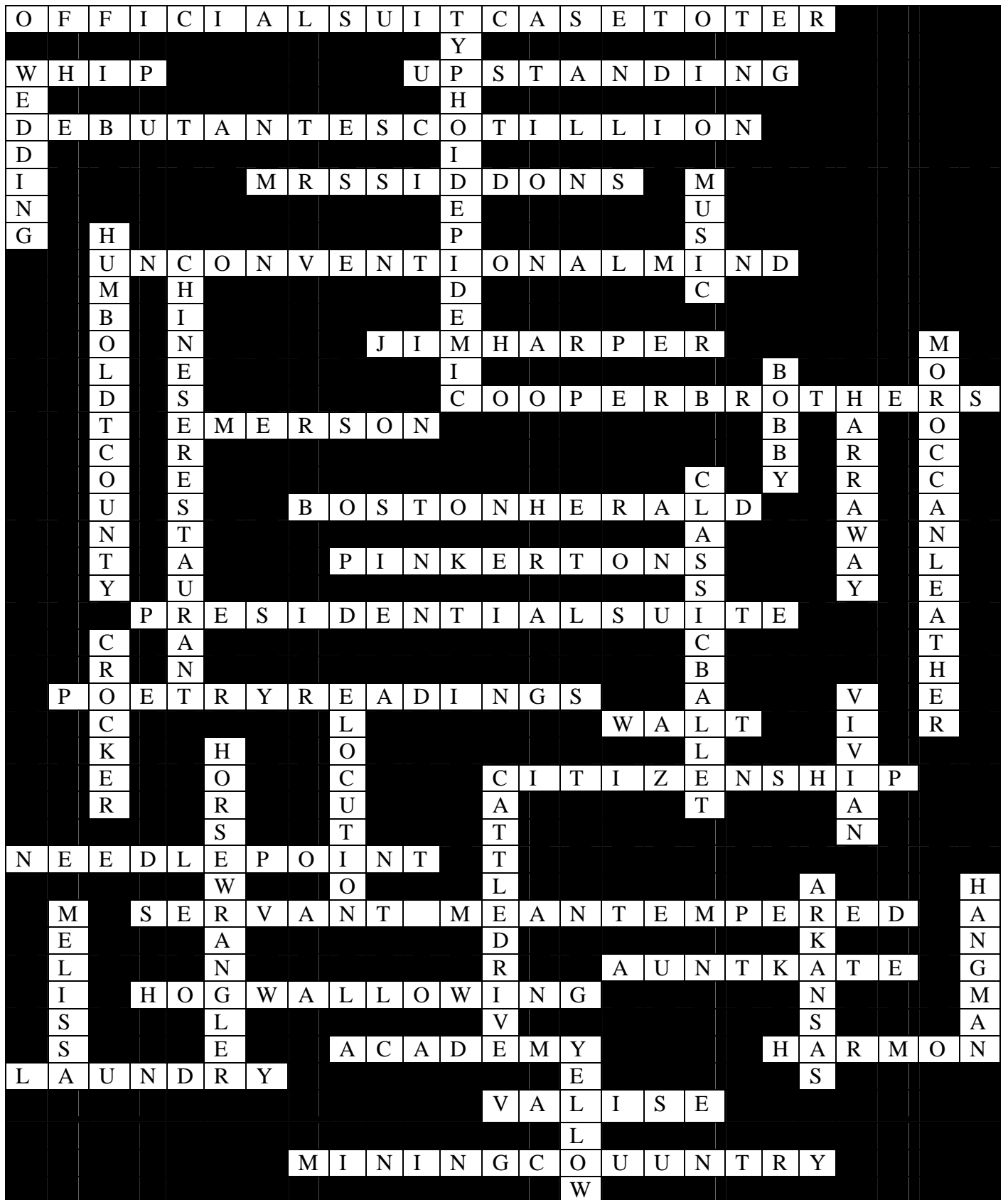
## Horses Fill In Puzzle From Page 44



## PUZZLE SOLUTIONS



## Camp Juniper Fill In Puzzle From Page 104



## PUZZLE SOLUTIONS

# THE GAME ANSWERS



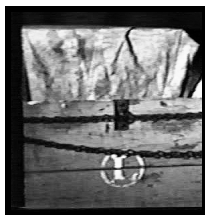
Inside cover  
The saddle fender in this photo is from  
Shadow of a Dead Man

- 0 -



Page 8  
The saddle fender in this photo is from  
... Good Lord, I forgot!!!

- 0 -



Page 36  
The wagon tailgate in this photo is from  
The Gifts

- 0 -



Page 43  
The over the fireplace photo is from  
Rivals

- 0 -



Page 97  
The metal ring photo is from  
The Gifts

- 0 -



Page 184  
The rifle stock photo is from  
The Gifts



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Be sure to leave author feedback at

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This page is also intentionally blank. Sigh.