

HOME COMING 2005

LANCER CONVENTION SOUVENIR FANZINE



LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
JULY 29 - 31

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HOMECOMING 2005 LANCER SOUVENIR FANZINE

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Greetings Homecomers!

Here we are again Lancer fans! Fans from all over the world are once more gathered in Los Angeles, California, to meet, greet and discuss a television show that binds all of us. Incredible – especially since some of us haven't seen the show in 30 years!

What makes a Lancer fan loyal enough to re-arrange schedules, put things on hold, throw ours hands in the air hollering, 'Let 'er buck!' and come together for three days in July in Los Angeles? It's a combination of things, but basically when a bunch of like-minded, energetic and creative women get together it can only be fun and memorable; that is, an event! Since the first ever Homecoming in 2004 friendships have only grown tighter and the interest in meeting again in a place where cowboys, the old west and Lancer are the topics of the weekend multiplied.

These pages abound with creativity, imagination and hard work. In here find puzzles, facts, stories and all sorts of other visual feasts. Dive in and enjoy when you have time between the meetings, greetings, outings and gigglings that are inevitable at this gathering, not to mention the challenges, viewings and other activities that are planned. So much to do and see and only three days in which to do it all! But in the end you'll have lots of memories, a grab bag of gifts and new friends.

I am trying something new aimed at getting feedback to the authors in a more efficient and easy manner. When you are finished perusing this zine, please go to the Souvenir Zine web page at <http://burfield.org/YuccaFlowerPress> and find links to all the authors' and contributors' email addresses handily in one spot! Feedback is important to authors - it compels them to submit to zines like this in the first place, so please visit the site and let them know you are reading their work. It's the one proven way to guarantee more zines in the future.


It's been a long year of fundraising and organizing and I, for one, am exhausted. But I am also pleased because this has only been a success because of you, the Lancer fan. There are more of us out there that were unable to make this affair and the amazing results of the Homecoming Auction highlighted their enthusiastic approval. I received many, many grievous wails of "I can't go, but I'll be there in spirit!" To them, we owe heartfelt thanks and a boisterous "We wish you were here!" as we clink our Lancer brand shot glasses in a toast to absent friends.

So, let 'er buck and pass the M&M's!

AJ Burfield
Poway, California
July 2005



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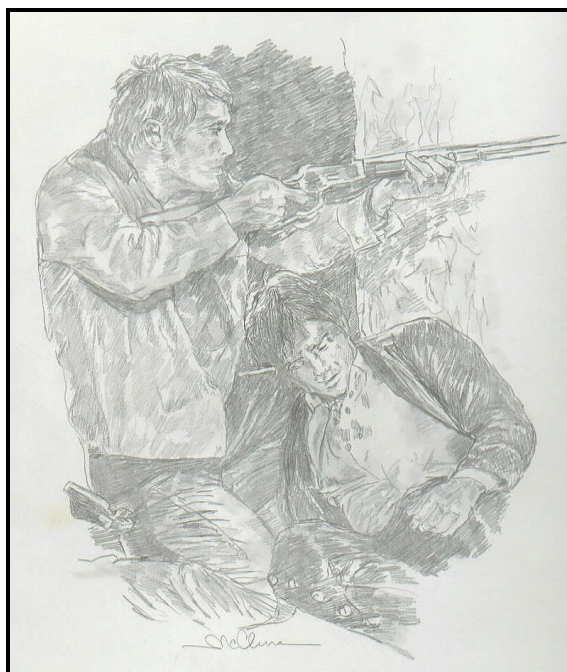
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BROTHERS AND FRIENDSHIP

BY FAITH BRAYDEN



Brothers kept apart for many years
 Now bonded together as friends
 Learning from each other life's joys and fears
 Gaining respect as they learn to see
 How important it is to have family.
 Scott, the elder, blond and fair
 Johnny, the younger, dark with a flair
 Both totally different and yet alike
 Both men of honor sharing through their life
 As they deal with sorrows as well as strife
 Friendship and family, helping each other
 That's what it means to be a brother



HIGH RIDERS BY JEANNE MCCLURE



BROTHERS AND FRIENDSHIP BY FAITH BRAYDEN

JOHNNY LEANING

BY CATPETAL



My brother. I still can't quite get that idea into my mind. I've tried just to accept that the man who looks nothing like me carries some of the same blood as I do. It's only just beginning to seem – well, possible.

After Pardee shot him, he had three weeks on his back, two weeks out of bed for a few minutes longer each day and this week he's up and around for an hour or two. I helped him down the stairs but he walked on

his own over to the corral and he's leaning on the fence now, watching the three new fillies prance around in there as if they're showing off to him. He chooses one and calls her over to him, and now he's fussing over her, rubbing her nose and giving her something sweet from his pocket. She'll be following him around like a puppy before we know where we are.

The first dance should be interesting. I'll have to look to my laurels.

I settle on the new chair in the porch, the one Murdoch brought home from town one day, saying we needed more chairs so that the family could sit together. Not that we have had much chance yet but last night, Murdoch and I had coffee and brandy out here. In my mind's eye I watch as Johnny leans back in the well padded seat, still a bit awkwardly as if he isn't quite sure of being whole again. We nearly lost him. I'm not quite sure how he hung on. But he did, and I am grateful he did.

Yesterday, he drove me more than half mad with some wild scheme he had. I couldn't make head or tail of it but he explained it so fast, with such enthusiasm that I was carried away and I think I said yes to something, but I am still not sure what. No doubt I can work it out in due course. I suppose he's had some time to think it through, while he was lying ill. But then, when he finished speaking he seemed, I don't know, tired perhaps, or disappointed, just for a while.

I've heard that getting over a gunshot wound can make you feel low. He was telling me it'd happened before, he'd been shot and spent a long while getting well. Then he said this time, it had been different. He wouldn't say what kind of difference, though. I am not sure he altogether likes having us around and there was some disagreement about the amount of "fussing" he could stand. I had to walk out of his room a couple of times, and Murdoch disappeared for a whole day once. But we weathered the storms and now here he is, and a young man, one of the ranch hands, has brought Barranca out for his inspection. He can't groom him yet but it won't be long. I can see he wants to in the way his hand is smoothing Barranca's shoulder. There – he bent down too far. That'll teach you, Johnny. I wonder whether to go and rescue him but his good sense prevails. He's letting the hand lead Barranca away. Stubborn but not stupidly so. No, nothing stupid about my brother.

It hasn't all been bad, while he was recovering. When I went in to talk him through some of the long hours, I was wearing my new clothes, picked out for me by the charming and forward young lady who is to be my sister. Odd to acquire so much family all at once. Well, when he looked at me his eyes narrowed and I looked back at him lying there, and we laughed. First, honest to goodness laugh we had shared, I think. He said something about the gunbelt I was wearing incorrectly, and I said he needed a shave, and he tried to hit me but it was too soon, and he was pale again by the time I got him settled.

But here he is now, heading back to the house, leaving the filly nodding her head at him over the gate. I don't know what to say this time, so I say nothing, and he comes and eases himself into the oldest chair.

He stays quiet himself a while, then says, "She'll make a nice little horse for Teresa. That old mare she's riding needs to be put out to pasture."

I hadn't even noticed what horse Teresa had been riding, but I agree with him as if I had. Then we're silent again.

"You forgiven me?" he asks quietly, unexpectedly and without looking at me.

"For what?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"For just sitting that time, when you were feeling just how hard those guys could hit," he clarifies, turning to me and leaving me no room to ignore the sensitive subject.

"It's not a question of forgiving. It was a tactic, that was all. It was war."

He grunts, I suppose acknowledging the truth of the statement. But he hadn't finished and he leaned over the arm of the chair to make his point. "And later, by the water. I'd almost forgotten the way you hit me, what with Teresa trying to beat some sense into me about Murdoch. She took a big chance, standing right by Barranca like that. You hit hard, the two of you."

I glance over at him. He isn't grinning exactly, and he's somewhat flushed but his eyes are calm. After the fevers of the last few weeks, that's good to see in anyone, but especially in a brother. "You do seem to be on the receiving end rather often, brother."

"Yeah." Now he's grinning properly. "Never did know when to back down."

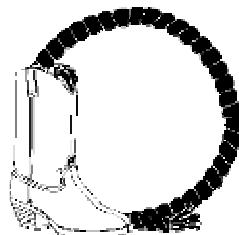
I wonder if he's going to back down this time but he doesn't. He wants this finished with and he'll wait until I can find the right words. "I didn't know you then," I offer under his intense scrutiny.

There is a pause, then he nods and relaxes back into his chair. The grin has gone but he's satisfied with my answer and that's an end to that. The incidents will become no more than family stories, to laugh over and tell to the children.

We talk until Murdoch comes home, and his opinion is that Johnny is looking tired, so in deference to the man Johnny still insists on calling old, my brother stands, then leans for a

moment against the stone pillar, maybe getting his balance, maybe feeling a momentary twinge. And there he is, leaning again, as he's leaned on me for a few weeks now, and he's just getting his independence back. He lifts a hand in farewell and walks off, heading back to bed with a resigned air and head held high. He is going, but only because it is his decision.

At the end of the day, I remember him at the paddock, leaning.



JOHNNY, LEANING BY CATPETAL

THE BOY LOST

BY LINDA BORCHERS



Murdoch closed the ledger, content that the figures had balanced, at last. He chuckled as he remembered the look on Scott's face as Johnny leaned over his shoulder and quickly scanned the row of invoices meticulously entered in the ledger, nonchalantly pointing to the middle of the column of numbers and tapping his finger on the offending numbers.

"Here ya go, Boston, this twenty three should be thirty two..." he said, pointing to the corresponding invoice.

Scott had hurriedly pushed Johnny aside and refigured the column. "How...?" he asked. "Murdoch and I have been working on this all morning."

Johnny shrugged. "I don't know much about numbers...but I know when something doesn't look right."

"Well, little brother," Scott grinned as he stood up and tried to force Johnny into the chair, "maybe we should put you in charge of the books from now on."

Johnny raised his arms in protest, backing up toward the French doors leading out of the great room. "I promise, I'll never fix a mistake of yours again."

Murdoch basked in the easy banter between his two sons, so different yet so much a part of each other. "That's alright, Johnny, you point out our mistakes anytime." He quickly raised a precautionary hand..." Within limits," he clarified.

Johnny settled his hat atop his unruly black hair, his eyes twinkling. "Anytime you need my help, just holler," he drawled as he sauntered out the door.

The sound of his spurs faded away, leaving Murdoch and Scott to stare at each other in bewilderment.

"I don't think," Scott said softly, "that boy will ever stop surprising us."

"I have a feeling you're right."

The memory receded as the sound of a horse and buggy caught Murdoch's attention and he swiveled his chair around to look out the great window, recognizing Padre Emiliano pulling to a stop in the courtyard.

Curious by the unexpected visit, Murdoch hurried out to greet the priest.



“Father Emiliano, welcome to Lancer.”

“Gracias, my son.” Father Emiliano smiled as he struggled to get down from the buggy with his long robe. No one knew exactly how old the priest was, but he had been presiding over the church when Murdoch first arrived in Moro Coyo more than thirty years ago. “It is always a pleasure to visit your estancia...it is a tribute to both the will of man and the beauty of nature.”

“And a lot of gray hair.” Murdoch chuckled. “Come inside, Father, I’m sure Maria has some cool lemonade and her famous cookies.”

“Ah, it is not easy to be a man of the cloth with such temptations.” Father Emiliano crossed himself and said a silent prayer to the heavens. “But I find that I cannot resist.”

Murdoch nodded. “I don’t think there is a man alive who could resist Maria’s butter cookies. Come...it’s almost time for lunch. You’ll join us, of course.”

Father Emiliano shook his head. “I did not come at this time to intrude. Truthfully, I thought I would make it here much faster. But my old mare is getting on in years and it takes her a little longer than it used to.”

“Then it is set, you will have lunch with us. The boys should be in any minute now. I know Scott keeps an eye on that pocket watch of his, and Johnny...well, Johnny can smell food a hundred miles away.”

Father Emiliano laughed and allowed Murdoch to shepherd him into the house.



Johnny spotted Scott heading toward the house and slowed Barranca to a gentle trot until his brother caught up to him.

“Get that stream cleared out?” Johnny grinned, noticing the mud that caked his brother’s pants up to his waist.

Scott snorted. “No thanks to you, Brother. I thought you were going to stop by and give us a hand.”

“Couldn’t. Found a dozen cows stuck in a gulley beneath Cutter’s Bridge. Ah...I think we better take a crew out tomorrow and check that bridge, ‘specially after them cows crossed it.”

“You herded a dozen cows across a bridge?” Scott asked unbelievably.

Johnny nodded. “Was that or drive them clear around...that would of taken more than a day.”

“Well, I don’t envy you telling Murdoch. Good thing you’re on his good side after this morning.”

“Yeah.” Johnny grinned. “Amazing how happy the old man is when them figures come together.”

“Yes.” Scott agreed, setting Charley into an easy trot next to Barranca, as the brothers rode side by side. He would be sure to be there when Johnny told Murdoch about that bridge.



Johnny was the first to notice the buggy sitting in the courtyard. “I wonder why Father Emiliano is here.”

Scott shrugged. “That’s his buggy all right. Guess the best way to find out is to go inside.”

“That Harvard education sure does come in handy at times, Boston.” Johnny grinned.

Scott raised an eyebrow. “One of the courses I took taught older brothers how to handle younger, smart-mouthed siblings.”

“That a fact?”

“Yep,” Scott drawled in his best imitation of Johnny. “That’s a fact.”

Joe took their horses, leaving Johnny and Scott to look over the buggy, old as the priest who drove it. Johnny had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Father Emiliano didn’t pay social calls, just to be social. As they stepped into the house and the heavy door closed behind them they felt relief from the heat outside. Scott still found it hard to get used to the weather here in the San Joaquin Valley. As hot as the days got, the nights still cooled down enough to require a jacket. Thankful for the thick adobe walls, the Spanish style house kept the heat out in the summer and the warmth of the fire burning in the hearth during the winter.

“Boys,” Murdoch called as they entered the great room, “you’re right on time. Lunch will be ready in ten minutes, just enough time to get cleaned up.”

Father Emiliano sat in the high-backed leather chair looking out over the huge window behind Murdoch’s desk. A living, breathing picture of a land nurtured by one man’s dream and now cultivated by his two sons.

As he looked toward Johnny and Scott, Johnny saw a reflective sadness in his eyes...a heaviness to his shoulders.

“We’ll be right down,” Scott said, pulling Johnny back out the door to take the outside stairs to their rooms.

“You were staring, Brother,” he chided.

Johnny nodded. “Father Emiliano has something on his mind. I’m just not sure I want to know what it is.”



Lunch was an amicable affair with Murdoch and Father Emiliano carrying most of the conversation. Scott jumped in when the discussion turned to politics. When the plates were cleared from the table and the coffee was served, Murdoch sat back and looked at Father Emiliano. “So, Father, what brings you all the way out here?”

“I have to admit I don’t visit my parishioners as often as I should, but there never seems to be enough time in the day to do all that has to be done.”

“But you made time to see us today,” Johnny said softly. “Which means it has to be something important.”

“Sí, it is. I have a very big favor to ask of you, John.”

Johnny imperceptibly stiffened. Only Scott noticed. “What kind of favor?”

Murdoch set his napkin on the table and made to stand up. “Perhaps you two would like some privacy...”

“No.” Father Emiliano motioned for Murdoch to stay as he was. “If John agrees to help, then it will affect all of you.” He turned to Johnny, folding his arms against his chest, his hands disappearing into the large sleeves of his vestments. “I need your help, John. I need Johnny Madrid’s help.”

A palpable silence hung over the table. Murdoch looked at the padre in stunned disbelief. Scott looked from Father Emiliano to Johnny. His brother’s face had paled.

“I don’t do that kind of work anymore,” Johnny said tersely.

Father Emiliano stared at Johnny for a long moment until realization dawned on his face. “No, no my son, I did not mean that. Forgive me, I have not made myself clear.”

“Why don’t you start from the beginning,” Murdoch suggested.

Johnny’s vivid blue eyes bore into the priest. He had tried so hard to put the past behind him, to take the title of rancher, not gunslinger. But there was always someone...something...and now even a priest was drawing Johnny Madrid out again.

Father Emiliano leaned back in his chair, looking very tired and very old. “I’m afraid I am at a crossroads, gentlemen. Six weeks ago a thirteen-year-old boy was brought to the orphanage...Thomas is his name,” Father Emiliano used the Spanish pronunciation. “Thomas Gregory. His parents were killed by robbers. They lived on an isolated farm...a couple of drifters found him sitting in the kitchen, his mother and father lying dead on the floor for several days. He has no other family. At first he was quiet...but of late he has been acting out. Yesterday he took a knife to another boy. Thank God it was only a minor wound. But I am afraid of what Thomas may do. He is an angry young man. Now he only speaks of revenge, of killing the men who killed his parents. I don’t want to send him away, I feel there is still hope for him...but I can not keep him

there with the other children. I was hoping..."

"You were hoping Johnny Madrid could set him straight," Johnny said softly, his head lowered, his fingers worrying a loose thread on the tablecloth.

Father Emiliano leaned forward, laying his hand, gnarled by age and arthritis, atop Johnny's fidgeting fingers. "I know it is a lot to ask of you, John, but I know of no one who knows better what this boy is going through. Perhaps if you spoke to him..."

"And told him what?" Johnny snapped. "How I handled the murder of my own mother...by picking up a gun and turning killer?!"

"Johnny..." Murdoch tried to keep his voice calm. "You did what you had to do to survive."

"If that makes you feel better, old man, then go on thinking it. But it ain't the truth. I could have done something...anything but what I did."

"Maybe," Scott said, "and maybe you would have chosen another path if someone had been there at the time to offer you one."

"John," Father Emiliano spoke softly. "I believe there is a reason for everything that happens to us under God's watchful eye. We do not always understand why, and sometimes we never know the reasons God sends us down a certain path...but I truly believe you and Thomas were destined to meet. I believe he needs you as much as you need him. If you have the power to stop one boy from following in Johnny Madrid's footsteps then you will have atoned for a host of sins."

"I'm not seeking absolution, Father. I know what I did, and I live with it everyday. Helping this boy won't bring back those dead men."

"No, but it might help ease the pain here." Father Emiliano placed his hand against Johnny's heart. "All I ask is that you talk with the boy...tell him you know exactly how he feels because you were in his shoes at one time. Help him to understand that revenge is not the answer...That the price is too high."

A palpable silence fell over the table. Long moments passed until Johnny looked up. "If it's all right with Murdoch and Scott, you can bring the boy out to Cutter's Bridge in the morning. It needs repairing. He'll get paid for his work...and we'll talk."

"Thank you, John."

"I won't promise you nothing. But he'll know what a hard day's work is."

"Do you want company?" Scott asked.

"Maybe, later in the day. I might need rescuing. I remember what I was like at thirteen."

Murdoch smiled sadly. No one could know what his son's life was like at thirteen.



Thomas Gregory sat next to Raul, the handyman for the orphanage, on the old buckboard, wondering if the wagon would make it all the way to Lancer.

It was just past dawn, the sun had barely risen over the Sierras to the east. Father Emiliano had ordered him to be ready before first light to spend the day working at the Lancer ranch. He would be paid a day's wages for a days work. He smiled inwardly. They couldn't know that they were forwarding his plans much quicker than he ever thought possible.

Thomas had only one thing on his mind - revenge. The men who killed his parents would pay. They would know what it felt like to feel a bullet slice through their bodies and lay in their own blood as they bled to death. And they would know it was the son of Mason and Anna Gregory who ended their miserable lives.

But first he needed money to buy a gun and a horse and supplies. He wouldn't steal what he wanted...he didn't want the law on him until he had finished his task...then they could send him to hell right along with his parent's killers.

So he would work for the Lancers...make as much money as he could. It was only a matter of time...and patience.

"Where we going?" Thomas asked as Raul pulled off the main road and started heading south across the open grasslands.

"Father Emiliano said you would be working at Cutter's Bridge with Johnny Lancer today."

"You just gonna drop me off and leave me there without a horse?"

"Sí. I'm sure Señor Johnny will have a way for you to get back."

They rode in silence for another hour. Just when Thomas thought that Raul had gotten them hopelessly lost, they came over a gentle rise to see a dried river bed below with a wooden bridge spanning the wide gulley.

A man sat on the edge of the bridge, his legs dangling over the side, idly waiting. Thomas wasn't sure what Johnny Lancer would look like, but he wasn't expecting to see the darkly tanned man not more than ten years older than himself. And he sure wasn't expecting to see him wearing a faded pink shirt or the studded leather pants that picked up the rays of the sun as it continued to rise behind Thomas. Johnny pushed his hat off his head to dangle against his back on stamper ties, and slowly climbed to his feet.

Thomas couldn't help but notice the gun belt buckled low around his hips, the holster slung low. The boys at the orphanage had told stories about Johnny Lancer; conjured up tales about him being a famous gunfighter...but now that he looked at him he wasn't so sure they were just stories. There was something about the man that felt...dangerous.

“Morning...” Johnny called. Thomas noticed that Johnny was squinting against the sun’s rays shining behind his back and moved until his view was clear. It had been such a small correction, but it spoke volumes to Thomas. Pa had talked about seeing a gunfight once. Never gave the gory details, just remembered the gunfighter, how he moved to make sure the sun was not in his eyes, his stance relaxed, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. Pa said it was like watching a big cat move...all power and grace. Johnny Lancer moved with that same grace.

Thomas nodded.

“Thanks for bringing him, Raul.” Johnny slowly walked over to the wagon. “Tell Father Emiliano that I will have him back day after tomorrow.”

“Sí, Señor Johnny. I will tell him. Mire su espalda, él tiene gran cólera.” (Watch your back, he has great anger.)

Johnny smiled. “Sí. Un lobo pequeño con dientes grandes. Yo me miraré.” (A little wolf with big teeth. I’ll watch myself.)

“Sí, pequeño lobo,” Raul grinned.

Johnny turned to Thomas. “Well, get on down. Ain’t gonna get any work done sitting up there.”

Thomas didn’t even have his second leg clear when Raul slapped the horses with the reins and pulled away. He watched the wagon disappear over the rise and found himself alone with only Johnny Lancer, a golden palomino ground tied beneath an oak tree, and miles and miles of open prairie. He felt scared and yet somehow safe at the same time.

“Father Emiliano said your name’s Thomas.” Johnny used the Spanish variation like the padre.

“I ain’t Mexican.” Thomas snapped. “It’s Thomas.”

“You got something against Mexicans?” Johnny asked.

“No. Just ain’t one.”

Johnny nodded. “Fair enough. Anybody ever call ya Tom or Tommy?”

“Only my friends and family. I ain’t got neither no more so it’s Thomas.”

Johnny studied the boy for a long moment. Saw the mistrust in his dark brown eyes. Life had been tough for the kid, he could see the pain setting in already. He would have to go slow with him, not spook him. Damn, if Thomas Gregory was two years younger he could be looking at himself.

“All right, Thomas, we’ve got two days to fix this bridge here. A hand will be by later this mornin’ with food and supplies. Until then we can start tearing away some of these loose boards.”

Thomas walked over to stand at the foot of the bridge, whistling at the cracked and splintered boards. “What happened to it?”

“A dozen or so cows.”

Thomas shook his head. “Cows wouldn’t cross that on their own. Who was the blame fool who herded them across?”

“Wellll...” Johnny grinned and lowered his head. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. Saved me two days pushing them ornery cows back the long way.”

Thomas couldn’t keep the smile from spreading across his face.

Johnny looked up toward the sky. “Let’s get started. It’s gonna be hotter than blazes today.”



For three hours they worked at tearing away the loose boards with the tools Johnny had packed in his saddlebags. Thomas worked hard, answered only when he was spoken to, and then only in monosyllable words.

It was nearly eleven before they heard the jingle of harnesses and the creak of a wagon before it crested the rise.

“Hola, Jelly,” Johnny called, dropping his hammer and sauntering over to meet the wagon. “I thought you’d never get here. I’m starving.”

Thomas followed behind cautiously. He wasn’t sure of the old whiskered man who drove the wagon.

“Well if ya had used the good sense God gave ya, you wouldn’t be mending this bridge in the first place. But noooo...Mr. Leaps Before He Thinks Lancer has ta push a bunch a cows ‘cross a bridge that won’t rightly hold a man up no more.”

“I know, Jelly, I know. And I’m paying for it, all right?”

“You and the poor boy here...you got him all tuckered out all ready. You all right boy?” Jelly jumped down from the wagon.

Thomas nodded.

“Good. But I know what’ll make ya feel even better. Some of Teresa’s famous fried chicken. You ain’t never tasted better chicken in your life boy, ain’t that right, Johnny?”

Johnny watched Thomas fade back toward the bridge. All the life seemed to have poured out of him. Johnny knew what it was, remembered when the simplest word, the most innocent remark could reawaken hurts so deep that they felt like they would crush a man...or boy...to death.

“Jelly, help me unload this lumber and then head back to the ranch. Thomas and I can handle

things all right.”

“But...” Jelly began to protest when he saw the look on Johnny’s face. Memories were flooding back on his boy as well as the Gregory kid. He just hoped the memories didn’t drown both of them.

“Ok, Johnny. You two sure you’ll be all right out here by yourselves?”

“We’ll be fine. We’re gonna sack out at the old line shack for the night and get an early start in the morning. Should be home by late evening tomorrow.”

“All right if ya say so. But ya best watch this heat, its gonna be a scorcher today.”

Johnny grinned. “We’ll be fine, Jelly. Especially with that barrel of sweet water ya got there.”

“Your Pa thought you’d appreciate that. Now, lets get this wagon unloaded so you two can get ta eatin’, then back ta work. That bridge ain’t gonna fix itself.”

It only took Johnny and Jelly half an hour to off-load the wood and supplies for the bridge and Jelly was slowly on his way back to Lancer.

Johnny grabbed the picnic basket Teresa had prepared and carefully slid his way down the bank of the dried creek bed and sat in the shade beneath the bridge.

“Come on, Thomas,” he called. “Get out of the sun for awhile before it bakes your brains.”

Ten minutes later Thomas made his way down the steep bank. Bone dry in summer, come winter and spring, this dried canal would be filled with rushing water making its way to the ocean.

Johnny opened the picnic basket and whistled. “Leave it to Teresa to prepare enough food to feed an army.” He looked up at Thomas. “Seems a shame to let all this good food go to waste.”

Thomas sat down across from Johnny, pulling his knees up to his chin and laying his head on his arms.

“Teresa worries about me and my brother all the time. She’s kinda like a sister to us...only not by blood.”

Johnny began pulling out plates covered with gingham napkins. “Let’s see...she’s got fried chicken, roast beef with bread and fixings to make a sandwich. Biscuits and strawberry jam and apple pie. You gonna help me eat any of this?”

Thomas shook his head. “Not hungry.”

“That don’t seem likely. After all the work we did this morning, you should be starving. You don’t have to eat the chicken...there’s plenty of other things.”

Thomas shook his head again.

“Ya know, Thomas, my mama died when I was just a couple years younger than you are now. Till this day I ain’t never tasted any Biscochitos better than hers. Probably never will.”

Thomas looked up slowly. “You lost your ma?”

Johnny nodded and began to put together a roast beef sandwich. “Here, eat this. I don’t want you passing out on me.”

“But you still had your brother and pa,” Thomas spat angrily, pushing the sandwich away.

“I didn’t grow up at Lancer. It was just me and my mama until she died. I didn’t meet my father until three years ago. Didn’t know I had a brother until then either.”

Thomas looked up intrigued. He accepted the sandwich. “Why?”

Johnny shrugged. “Does it matter?” he asked. “It’s in the past.”

Silence hovered in the hot shade beneath the bridge as they ate...Johnny devouring the fried chicken and Thomas picking at the roast beef sandwich.

“What are Biscochitos?” Thomas finally asked, breaking the silence.

Johnny smiled. “It’s a sugar cookie. My Mama would make it when we had enough money to spare for a special treat. I never forgot that taste. I’m betting that your mama’s fried chicken was just as special.”

Thomas nodded, looking over at the one piece of chicken still nestled in the gingham towel. “She made it every Thursday. Pa and me, we were never late ta dinner on Thursdays. Johnny,” Thomas looked over at Johnny, “Does it ever stop hurting?”

Johnny took a deep breath...this was what he didn’t want to happen, to have his old wounds exposed again. They had festered all these years, covered by a bandage of love and comfort from Murdoch and Scott, but they were still there, so deep that sometimes he forgot they were there. Now this boy was exposing them to the air again and he couldn’t believe how painful they were.

“The honest to God truth? The hurting never goes away, not completely. But it gets easier. You begin to remember only the good times and forget the bad. It gets so easy that one day you feel guilty that you aren’t hurting enough anymore.”

“How did she die...your mama. How...”

Johnny quickly collected everything uneaten and repacked the picnic basket. “We better get back to work. If we don’t get this bridge fixed it will be my hide Murdoch pins to the wall.”



As the sun reached its apex and started its long hot descent toward evening, Johnny shucked his sweat heavy shirt. He saw Thomas' startled look when he saw the scars on his torso. He knew the questions would start soon. They always did. But he didn't always answer. Today he would. Because today he was determined to turn a boy away from the same path he took...the one that brought him all those scars, both on the outside and on the inside.

"You didn't grow up on Lancer?" Thomas asked a few minutes later, breathing hard as he finished sawing another board for the bridge.

Johnny stopped hammering and looked back. Thomas had shucked his own shirt but his chest was starting to look decidedly pink. "You better put that shirt back on or you're gonna burn."

"A little sun won't hurt me."

"This ain't a little sun, and I don't want ta have to nurse you all night when your chest turns into one big blister. Now put the shirt on and bring me another board."

Thomas did as he was told, pulling his shirt back on with an angry tug, and swung the board over to Johnny, nearly hitting him in the head.

"Careful, you kill me and you'll be out here all alone 'til someone comes to see what's taking us so long. I figure that could be two, maybe three days. And..." Johnny looked up at the boy, "if ya think you can ride off on Barranca...think twice. That horse won't let anyone but me ride him."

The boy went to say something then thought twice about it, turning on his heels instead, and returned to sawing more boards.

It wasn't long before Thomas broached the same question again, just worded a bit differently. "Where did you grow up, if not here?"

"Along the Mexican border."

"How come? When you got a ranch like this..."

Johnny shrugged. "My Mamma decided to leave when I was two and she took me with her."

"Why didn't ya just come back here after she died?"

Johnny sat down on his haunches, squinting back up at Thomas. "You sure are full of questions, boy."

"Ma said the more questions you ask, the more you know."

Johnny nodded. "My mama told me my father didn't want anything to do with me. Told me he was ashamed to have a mestizo...a half-breed for a son. I thought he hated me, and I sure as hell hated him."

“Why would she do that?”

“Don’t know. Never will. I was too young to know it was a lie when she was alive and when I did find the truth she was already dead.”

“So you thought you were all alone after she was gone. How did she die?”

“Does it matter?”

Thomas thought about it then answered. “Yeah. It matters.”

Johnny stood up slowly, walking back to the stack of wood and the barrel of water. Dunking the ladle into the barrel, he gulped down the tepid water, then poured some over his head, relishing the feel of it cooling his hot skin. “She was killed.”

“How?” Thomas had not moved. He felt rooted to that spot, watching Johnny drink the water, seeing the emotions darken his blue eyes.

“She brought the wrong man home one night and they got into a fight. He stabbed her and then took off.” Johnny’s voice shook with the memory of that night. “There was nothing I could do. No one in town would help a woman like that, ‘specially with a mestizo for a son. She bled to death before morning.”

Silence filled the void between them until comprehension rattled Thomas to the bone. “You said you were just a couple years younger than me,” he said softly.” That made you ten...eleven years old.”

Johnny nodded. “Eleven.”

“What did you do?”

Johnny hung the ladle back on a hook on the outside of the water barrel and closed the lid. “I buried her and set out to find the man and kill him.”

“Did you? Did you find him?”

“Sí...”

“Well...?”

Johnny turned on the boy. “Well what? Did I kill him? Yes! I killed him. I tracked him for two years and finally found him in some two bit saloon in a town not big enough to have a name. I called him out. He was fast. I was faster. He died cursing himself for not killing me when he killed my mama.”

Stunned by the anger in Johnny’s voice, Thomas watched him walk away and soon the valley was filled with the sound of Johnny’s hammer pounding nails into the boards again.



"Johnny...?" Thomas carried an armful of planks over, still shaken by Johnny's outburst of anger. "Johnny...sorry if I upset ya."

Johnny laid down his hammer, looking up at the boy. "Sorry I lost my temper. Bad memories...ya know?"

Thomas nodded.

"Sit down," Johnny ordered, but his tone was gentle. "I know how much it hurts right now. I know what kind of anger you got inside."

Thomas dropped down next to Johnny, pulling his legs under him, his posture rigid. "You said you killed the man, the man that killed your ma. How did it feel?"

Johnny pulled his hat off and wiped the inside of the brim with his fingers. Resettling it back on his head he looked at the boy, knowing what he said now could change his life forever.

"Killing a man never feels good, Thomas. I thought it would. I thought once I saw him die, the nightmares would all end. I knew I had to avenge my mama's death. The man wasn't fit to walk the face of the earth.

"When I saw him laying there in the dirt, when I saw the blood spilling out of his chest, and I knew it was my bullet that had done it to him, I felt sick. The thing about killing, Thomas, is that ya can't ever take it back."

"But he deserved it. Just like the men who killed my ma and pa deserve it."

"They deserve to be punished. They deserve to hang by the neck...but you can't be the hangman...it will burn at your soul for the rest of your life."

"I made them a promise," Thomas said softly. "A promise I got to keep."

Johnny stood up slowly. His emotions were too close to the edge to continue. Later, maybe, when all the feelings were not swirling around in his head...when he couldn't smell the blood of his mama and the blood of her killer suffocating him. When the feelings of a boy's helpless outrage hadn't nearly brought him to tears. Somehow he had to stop Thomas from carrying out his plan for revenge. Father Emiliano was right, this was his to do. Perhaps stopping this boy would assuage the guilt that still ate at his insides. Perhaps Thomas was his salvation.

Johnny grabbed the hammer and nodded toward the saw laying on top of the stack of wood waiting to be cut. "That saw ain't gonna work by itself," he said brusquely.

The hurt he saw in Thomas' eyes pained him, but he could not go on now. Not without revealing more to this boy than he ever had to another living person, even Scott.

Thomas returned to his job and the sound of his saw joined Johnny's hammer and the sounds spoke of wounded hearts and simmering anger toward the men who had changed the destinies of two young men.



Johnny heard Scott's approach before he saw him appear over the rise. "Right on time," he thought.

He sauntered over to Thomas and tapped him on the shoulder. "Take a break, kid," he said. "My big brother is here to check up on us."

Thomas watched Scott, the mounted man's tan dark, but still shades lighter than Johnny's, and his blond hair sticking out from beneath his hat, then Thomas glanced over at Johnny. "Your brother? You two don't look nothing alike."

Johnny nodded. "Scott's ma was from Boston."

"Two wives at the same time? Ain't that illegal?"

"Guess it would be if Scott's ma hadn't died when he was born."

Thomas dropped his head. "Sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Don't worry about it. What was it your ma said, the more questions you ask the more you know? Sides, the question's been asked in a lot harder ways. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Scott swung down off the saddle, pushing his hat back. "One of these day, Brother," he grinned, "you're going to roast that hide of yours tougher than leather. Ever hear of wearing a shirt?"

"You're just jealous." Johnny grinned back. "That snow-white chest of yours could burn in a rainstorm."

"Long hours in the hot sun is known to addle the brain too," Scott shot back, noticing the smile twitching at Thomas Gregory's mouth. The boy had his own shirt open, but still on. Scott could just imagine the boy's desire to emulate Johnny, and his brother's stern warning about too much sun.

"You two look like you've made a little progress here," he said, untying a knapsack from Charley's saddle.

Johnny looked back at the half finished bridge. They had gotten more than he expected done. Thomas was a hard worker. "More'n a little," Johnny grouched. "Maybe you'd like to lend us a hand."

"I would," Scott said as he walked past them with the knapsack flung over his shoulder, carefully

making his way down the riverbank to the small camp Johnny and Thomas had set up for break times. “But I promised Teresa I’d help her get those chickens transferred over to their new coop. She wants them nice and calm by morning or there’ll be no eggs. But if you two don’t think you can handle the job, I can come by tomorrow.”

“No need, Boston, we got this under control. Only wish you’d wait ‘til we got there. I’d love to see ya chasing down them chickens.” Johnny broke out in a contagious fit of laughter that had them all sucking for air.

The brothers spent half an hour swapping stories, and Thomas found that the heavy heart he had carried with him for so long easing up. He felt a camaraderie between these two men he had never experienced before, and wondered if he would ever have a friend as close as they were. Then the thought of his parents pulled him back. He had a mission, a promise he had to keep. After that, he didn’t care what happened to him. Thomas Gregory was not destined to have a life like this. He was charted on a course of revenge...and nothing would deter him.



“You sure you’ll be all right tonight?” Scott looked over Johnny’s shoulder at Thomas sitting beneath the bridge. All the frivolity was gone. Once again he was quiet and sullen. “I could stay.”

Johnny shook his head. “I think I got through to him a little this morning. He’s got so much hate and he doesn’t know what to do with it. I think just him and me together...he might open up.”

“Well, little brother,” Scott clamped a strong hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “If anyone can get through to him, it’s you. Just remember...if after this is all over you need to talk, I’m here.”

“I know,” Johnny said honestly. “I know.”

Scott nodded and mounted Charley. “Then I’ll see you two tomorrow afternoon. And Thomas,” Scott called, “if Johnny offers you coffee, politely say no and dump the pot.”

Johnny waved Scott away and turned back to Thomas, looking up at him from beneath the bridge. “We can still get in another couple hours work before we head for the line shack,” he said. “You get the rest of that lumber cut and I’ll...”

“No!” Thomas rushed up the bank, standing in front of Johnny, his chest heaving. “You’re just trying to make me change my mind about what I know I got to do.”

“What you think you got to do. If you take the law into your own hands you’ll regret it the rest of your life,” Johnny shouted back. “I know. You have to let go of the hate...”

“I can’t!” Thomas picked up the saw and flung it toward the bridge, bringing his fists up, ready to fight Johnny. “I know it ain’t right by the law, but it’s right by me. I made a promise.”

“So did I. A promise that nearly sent me to hell.”

“Well, hell is where those two men who killed my ma and pa are going. And if I end up there too,

then I don't care. Least ways they'll be paying for what they did.

Johnny reached out and grabbed Thomas by the shirt, dragging him up so close that Johnny could smell the sudden fear on the boy's breath.

"You think you know what hell is, boy? You think you know what waits for you out there if you do this?"

"A man's not a man if he don't keep his promise," Thomas said defiantly.

"A man's a fool if he keeps a promise he knows is wrong. And who made you promise? Your ma? Your pa?"

Thomas tore himself free of Johnny's grip. "They couldn't. They were already dead. I made the promise to myself."

Johnny took a deep breath and stepped back. "All right," he said softly. "I can't talk you out of a promise like that. Fetch that saw and finish your work. It'll be dark soon."

Thomas watched Johnny walk away, scooping his hammer off the ground as he crossed to the center of the bridge and started hammering nails into the planks again. He knew what Johnny was trying to do, but it wouldn't work. He had to keep his promise.



The sun had disappeared behind the mountains as dusk spread across the land. Thomas knew in twenty minutes or less it would be too dark to see.

"Johnny, when are we stopping?" he called.

Johnny had been silent since their encounter earlier in the afternoon. "A few minutes," he answered. "You better put that saw up, you don't want ta fall over it in the dark."

Thomas returned the saw to their dwindling pile of supplies, stunned to see the lid to the water barrel tied down with rope.

"How are we gonna get to the water, Johnny?"

"We're not," Johnny answered simply. "Better get yourself settled under the bridge, it'll be dark soon."

Thomas looked around at their desolate location. "Aren't we going to that line shack?"

Johnny shook his head.

"How come?"

"It's just the way it is." Johnny threw his hammer next to Thomas' saw and grabbed his shirt. "Now, get yourself settled."

Thomas trudged down the embankment angrily, stunned to see nothing of what they left behind under the bridge.

"Where's our food?" he demanded, as Johnny made his way down the steep slope behind him.

"Gone," Johnny said.

"What ya mean, gone? It was here this afternoon. Enough to feed us 'til tomorrow."

Johnny shrugged, his figure just a silhouette in the deepening darkness.

"I'm hungry," Thomas complained.

"So am I. You better get settled. It's going to be a long night. Cold too."

"What about a fire?"

"Not tonight," Johnny answered emotionlessly.

Like a curtain drawn over a window, the last light of day disappeared and darkness closed in around them.

Thomas' foot hit something hard, and in a fit of fury he leaned down, grabbed the heavy rock and threw it in the direction of Johnny's voice. He heard the thud of it hitting something and a grunt of pain, then a second thud as it hit the ground.

"Why are you doing this?" Thomas demanded, easing himself down to the ground. He could barely see a blacker shape a few feet from him move as Johnny settled himself on the ground too.

"Get some rest, Thomas," Johnny ordered, his voice sounding clipped. "We still have to finish the bridge in the morning."

Stillness flooded the darkness and Thomas felt a shiver of fear crawl down his back.

"Johnny...?"

There was no answer.

He strained to see in the blackness. "Johnny...you still there?"

Still no answer.

Everything that had happened since that terrible afternoon when two men barged into their house and killed his ma and pa came crashing down on Thomas. He felt like he couldn't breathe, like the

blackness of the night was suffocating him. Images, smells, tastes all bombarded him. The helplessness, the anger...they hammered in his head and he felt hot tears roll down his cheek. He rolled onto his side and pulled his knees up close to his chin and let out all the pain...cried like he hadn't since he was a baby. He didn't care that Johnny could hear him. For at that moment, nothing existed except his pain.



Johnny settled down quietly. The sound of Thomas' quiet sobs in the dark raked at his heart. He so wanted to go over and comfort him. But the boy needed time. Johnny knew all too well the demons of hate and revenge. He only hoped by the time this night was over Thomas would follow another road.

But first he had to contend with, what was most likely, a broken arm. Thomas had thrown the rock hard and it had landed dead center on Johnny's left forearm. He moved his fingers but they were already beginning to swell. The rock had not snapped the bone in half, most likely it had splintered it, leaving him some use of his hand. But he knew it would be a painful injury until he could get home and Sam could set it. He slipped his arm inside his shirt for support and found as comfortable position on the ground as he could - and waited. This was Thomas' night...he didn't need to worry about anything else but the lesson he was about to learn.

Johnny waited until he heard the sobs turn to fretful sighs, then silence.

"Why you doing this?" came the frightened question, drifting off into the blackness.

Long minutes passed before Johnny spoke, his voice cold as steel. "You see those two men who killed your ma and pa, Thomas? They're everywhere, aren't they? You close your eyes and they're there. Don't matter if you're awake or asleep...they're there. You can see the color of their hair, the color of their eyes. You smell the gunpowder...the blood... The stench of death that surrounds them...that surrounds you..."

"Johnny, stop."

"You made a promise to kill them, to avenge your ma and pa's death. A man ain't a man unless he keeps his promise, right, Thomas? Well, there they are... you see them? They don't remember you...they don't remember your ma and pa. Feel that gun in your hand? Feel it?"

Johnny heard Thomas shift, and then sit up.

"You got a promise to keep, remember?" Johnny's voice echoed beneath the belly of the bridge, painting a vivid picture that Thomas couldn't escape. "You just have to pull the trigger...twice...and you send them both straight to hell. What are you waiting for, Thomas? This is what you wanted, right? To kill them...to keep your promise? Just squeeze the trigger. It doesn't take much to rid the world of scum like that. Go ahead, squeeze the trigger."

Johnny heard a muffled sob, but he wouldn't stop. Not if he wanted to save this boy.

"They're dead, Thomas. You kept your promise. I bet your ma and pa are real proud of you now. I bet they're resting in peace knowing that you killed two men in cold blood to avenge their death. How does it feel? Does it make you feel like a man? Does it make all the hurt go away?"

Johnny's words hurt, but the silence between his words hurt even more. Thomas drew his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms around his knees. He wanted Johnny to stop...but he didn't.

"You took the law into your own hands, Thomas...the sheriff's after you now. And a posse. They'll make you pay for what you did...put the rope meant for those two who killed your ma and pa around your neck."

Silence again. Thomas wanted to run, but there was nothing but darkness around him.

"Hungry? It's been awhile since you ate, but you can't stop at the café or the cantina. Sheriff might find ya. And you can't stop to buy supplies...ya got a horse and no food and just enough water for your horse. You can't shoot a rabbit or a squirrel...someone might hear the shot. Can't build a fire...someone might see it."

"Johnny, please...why are you doing this?"

"Was it worth it, Thomas? Was the revenge so sweet it made it worth a life on the run?"

A wolf howled in the distance, answered by another one, much closer...too close.

"We should build a fire," Thomas said nervously. "That wolf's getting..."

"Can't," Johnny said. "Posse might see it."

"But Barranca..."

"He's ground tied. If he smells 'em too close he'll take off."

The blackness moved in tighter around Thomas. He stared into the darkness, at the spot where Johnny's voice came from, like a bodiless apparition...speaking of what was to be. A spasm of fear shook Thomas' body.

"You just stopped in a town this afternoon...a piss poor town...all you wanted was a soft bed for one night and a bath..." Johnny's voice turned darker. "You haven't seen a soul for days, just you and your horse...but that's the way it has to be. But someone spotted you. You got away, but not without picking up a bullet in your shoulder...Hurts like hell doesn't it...burns like a hot poker, throbs with every breath...but you got no doctor to dig it out. It's up to you, Thomas. Dig that bullet out yourself or die. That knife your pa gave you...he'll be real proud that it's being put to such good use. And after you get that bullet out and the infection sets in, and the fever starts burning your insides, you start wishing you were dead too...now you got to ask yourself, was it worth it? But the answer doesn't matter. You did it...you kept that promise and killed those two men...can't take back a killing..."

Silence filled in the blackness again. Thomas listened. The wolves were calling each other...there was a new purpose to their calls. Above them he could hear Barranca nicker nervously. And to his right he could hear Johnny breathing...

"Is that the kind of life you want to lead, Thomas? Always looking over your shoulder. Always wondering if today is the day that it all ends. Wishing deep down inside that it would be, because you ain't living, you're just existing."

"But they killed my ma and pa," Thomas said, but the conviction of revenge was missing. "They have to pay."

"And they will. Just because that sheriff of yours wasn't worth nothing doesn't mean that there aren't lawmen out there who are. We'll make them pay...the right way. You willing to give it a try?"

Thomas knew the truth of it now. He could not kill those two men in cold blood. "Will you help?"

Johnny's voice sounded tired to Thomas' ear, but the answer filled a hole in his heart that had been bleeding since his ma and pa died. "We'll make them pay...together...the legal way."

Thomas settled down on his side, his stomach aching from hunger. But his head was filled with thoughts and new feelings. His life had revolved around one thing only for so long now...killing those two men, but Johnny's words echoed in his mind and he knew the truth...he would be killing his ma and pa all over again...killing the good they had taught him...the love they gave him everyday if he kept that promise.

Sliding closer to where he thought Johnny lay, Thomas felt his boot hit Johnny's leg and he breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't feel Johnny pull away. Tomorrow they would talk some more. Tomorrow he would start a new kind of revenge...the legal kind.



Johnny smiled into the darkness. He heard the change in the boy's voice. What would have happened if someone had stopped him before he pulled the trigger that first time? No time to wonder about that now. He had to deal with his arm. It was beginning to throb with every beat of his heart. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he could be in real trouble by morning.

Somehow he drifted off toward a light sleep, knowing that dreams of his mother and her killer would be visiting him this night. But if he had gotten through to Thomas then the nightmares would be worth it. With his hand around his pistol and his ears listening for those wolves, he gave into exhaustion, knowing Barranca would alert him if the wolves got too close.



Thomas awoke to the smell of rabbit sizzling over a campfire. Sometime during the night, Johnny had retrieved his bedroll, and now Thomas found himself huddled beneath a warm blanket.

Reluctant to move for fear of losing the feeling of security he hadn't felt in months, Thomas kept his eyes closed and just listened.

He could barely hear Johnny moving about the camp, only an occasional scuffle of his boot on the dried riverbed gave him away.

Last night had been hard. Johnny had forced him to see what kind of life he faced if he had stayed on the road to revenge. He was still angry and wanted the men to pay with their own lives, but not by his hand. He would do it Johnny's way.

"If you don't get over here pretty quick, this rabbit is gonna be gone," Johnny called, a hint of laughter in his voice.

Thomas rolled over and rubbed his eyes as he opened them. "How'd you know I was awake?"

"I could tell by your breathing. You can tell a lot about a man if you just listen."

Thomas scooted himself over to the fire, feeling its warmth and inhaling the aroma of the rabbit. He couldn't believe Johnny had done so much so early in the morning without waking him. Johnny had fashioned a spit over the fire and he slowly rotated the rabbit.

"Take over here," Johnny nodded at the spit, "while I get those biscuits Teresa sent along yesterday."

As Johnny stood up Thomas noticed he held his left arm protectively against his side. "You hurt your arm?"

Johnny held his arm up, studying his swollen fingers and bruised hand. "Funny thing," he said, "a rock just came out of nowhere last night and got my arm, but good."

Thomas froze, remembering the rock he had thrown in the heat of anger. Lowering his head in embarrassment and guilt he mumbled, "I'm sorry. I threw it."

"Kind of figured that," Johnny said. "Goes to show what can happen when a man gets so mad he can't think straight anymore. Keep that rabbit moving, you don't want to burn it."

"Is it bad? I mean your arm. Is it hurt bad?"

Johnny nodded. "Bad enough. Won't be doing no bridge work today. And you can be the one to explain to Murdoch why the bridge ain't finished. That should be punishment enough."

Thomas couldn't keep the smile off his face. "I guess I deserve it. Why don't you sit down and I'll get them biscuits, wherever you hid them."

It was Johnny's turn to smile and he lowered himself to the ground and pointed to an old flour sack peeking out from behind a boulder. "There's half an apple pie left if you're still hungry after the rabbit."

Thomas retrieved the sack, pulling out the biscuits and pie.

“How’d you do all this with a hurt arm?” he asked, knowing that Johnny had somehow caught the rabbit, skinned and gutted it before putting it on the spit.

“Been hurt worse than this,” Johnny answered softly.

Thomas fell silent for a long time before he looked over at Johnny. “Them things you said last night, about being chased, about being cold and hungry and alone... digging that bullet out of your shoulder...that was you, wasn’t it?”

Johnny nodded.

“Them sheriffs and their posse ever catch you?”

Johnny grinned. “A couple a times. But they couldn’t hold me for long, I never broke the law...just pissed them off a bit.”

“Why? I mean...why did you become a gunfighter?”

Johnny raised an eyebrow and Thomas quickly added, “Some of the kids at the orphanage said you used to be Johnny Madrid, a famous gunfighter. And all those scars on your back and chest...”

Grease from the rabbit dripped into the fire and a flame licked at Johnny’s hand before he could pull it back. Looking at the singed hair on the back of his hand, he dropped his hand down to his gun and caressed the smooth, well worn handle.

“I guess I didn’t see any other way of survivin’. Once I outdrew that first man, others followed, all trying to beat the kid with the fast draw. Before I knew it I was the one everyone wanted to face. Got to the point where I didn’t think much about anyone or anything...just trying to stay alive day by day.”

“You told me last night that I should let the law take care of the men who killed my ma and pa. Why didn’t you let the law take care of the man who killed your ma?”

“Cause there was no law along the border...still isn’t. And I had no one to talk me out of it. I was eleven years old...angry and scared. But the hate kept me going.”

“But...”

“There ain’t nothing wrong with hating the men who killed your ma and pa. I’d think there was something wrong with you if you didn’t. But you can’t let it take over your life. You can’t let it ruin your life.”

“But you’re happy now...now that you found your pa and brother...right Johnny?”

Johnny nodded. “Happy as I can be with all those ghosts walking behind me. It ain’t easy killing a man, Thomas. Even the ones you know are itching to kill you. It robs your soul a little each time.”

“That’s how you got all those scars on your chest and back.”

“Thomas, I don’t want to see them kind of scars on you. Inside or out.”

“You won’t,” Thomas vowed.

Johnny studied Thomas for a long moment before a smile spread across his face again. “I know. Now let’s eat so we can head back...if I know Murdoch, you’ll be back out here with one of the other hands to finish this job.”

Thomas grinned. “I bet your pa couldn’t hold a candle to my pa when he got mad.”

Johnny grinned back. “Boy oh boy, you sure don’t know Murdoch Lancer. I’m starting to feel right sorry for you, Thomas.”

Thomas stood up slowly and walked around the fire to stand next to Johnny. Reaching down to shake Johnny’s hand he said, “My friends call me Tom.”



EPILOGUE

Two days later Father Emiliano passed beneath the Lancer arch, Thomas driving the old buggy.

“How’s the arm?” Father Emiliano asked, nodding at Johnny’s left arm encased in a cast and cradled in a black sling.

“Fine.” Johnny grinned. “You know how Sam is, he’s an old worry wart. He’d put your whole leg in a cast for a stubbed toe.”

Murdoch harrumphed. “It’s a little more than a stubbed toe, Johnny. That bone is cracked, and you’ll be in that cast for another eight weeks.”

Thomas grabbed his jacket and jumped down from the buggy. “That’s why I’m here. Father Emiliano said I could take over Johnny’s chores until he’s fit to work again. Seems only fair, since I was the one who hurt his arm in the first place.”

Johnny nodded. “Scott will appreciate the help. He’s been picking up the slack.”
The sound of horses approaching brought everyone’s attention to the two riders trotting to a stop in the courtyard.

“Look who I found.” Scott grinned at Val who was already dismounting.

“Scott was telling me about that bridge.” Val laughed, tapping Johnny’s cast. “Dern fool thing ta do...but I might a knowed it would be somethin’ you’d do.”

"Thanks, Scott." Johnny scowled. "Now the whole state will know about it."

Val grinned then took a deep breath, all the levity gone in the blink of an eye. "I come out here 'cause I got some news for ya, Thomas. Sheriff from Vallejo sent a wire. He caught up with them two who killed your ma and pa. They got a dozen other charges against 'em. Sheriff said they're sure ta hang. Just wanted ta know if yer needing to go and watch them meet their maker."

Thomas looked over at Johnny, then shook his head. "No need, Sheriff. Just as long as I know they're paying for what they did to my ma and pa. That's all I need."

"Good to hear it. Johnny, take care of that bum wing...herding cattle over a wood bridge...You were sure sitting on your brains that day."

"You wanna swap stories, Val?" Johnny warned.

"Ain't got time to talk now." Val mounted in a hurry. "See ya'll in town some time."

Murdoch laughed as Val disappeared in a cloud of dust. "Father." Murdoch wrapped an arm around Father Emiliano's shoulder. "How about a cool glass of lemonade before you head back?"

"Any chance there might be some of Maria's cookies left?"

"I'll see what I can do. Meanwhile, Scott, Thomas here is taking over for Johnny while he's healing."

"Sounds good. Maybe we'll get some real work done now." Scott grinned, turning to Thomas. "Tell Jelly to fix you up with a horse and gear. We'll head out as soon as you're ready."

Thomas took off for the barn hollering for Jelly before he reached the doors.

Father Emiliano turned to Johnny. "Thank you, John. I know it wasn't easy for you, but you gave that boy back his life."

"He just needed a little push in the right direction."

Father Emiliano smiled. "Don't underestimate what you have done here, my son. John, you said you were not looking for absolution...I believe whether you want it or not, you have taken a large step in that direction." Father Emiliano clasped Johnny's hand between his. "I am proud of you, Johnny Madrid Lancer."

Johnny looked up to see Tom heading into the corral to pick out a horse with Jelly. The nightmares that he feared would return after opening up those old wounds were blissfully absent. In fact, he slept with a peace he had not felt in years. Perhaps Father Emiliano was right...he had taken one step closer toward atonement for the sins of Johnny Madrid.

He felt Murdoch's strong hand squeeze his right arm gently. "Come on in out of this hot sun. Sam wants you resting, remember?"

“And I would love a glass of that cool lemonade,” Father Emiliano said.

“You know what?” Johnny asked with a straight face.

“What?” Murdoch asked.

“I think Father Emiliano is right...this was God’s plan all along. That’s why he made me run those cows over that bridge.”

Murdoch looked at Johnny and his jaw dropped open. Father Emiliano simply crossed himself and looked up to the heavens and sighed, “I know, Father...one step forward and two steps back.”



ABOUT COWS

BY KAREN AND NANCY



He rode in alone. Again.

Johnny Lancer covertly studied the lone horseman. The young man seated on the top rail of the corral appeared completely absorbed in accustoming the handsome palomino standing alongside him to a *reata*. His ever restless fingers manipulated the rope effortlessly as he swung small loops near the horse's haunches and head, gently demonstrating that the gelding had no reason to fear the humming lariat. He never skipped a beat in his task, yet his intense eyes raked the incoming rider, missing not a single detail.

The slightly slumped shoulders and downcast eyes told their own tale. As did the *vaqueros* trotting behind the easterner in distinctly companionable groups. High-spirited joking and laughter emphasized the stark contrast between their easy camaraderie and the solitary rider.

Johnny slowly coiled the lariat as he studied his boots, mulling over his observations. Today marked the third day since Dr. Jenkins had judged him recovered enough to leave the house. Each evening for those three days, he'd sat on the corral fence and watched the men ride in from their day's work with the herd. Each evening, his brother had ridden in alone, the *vaqueros* studiously ignoring him. Each evening, Scott had disappeared upstairs to his room until supper.

The young gunfighter didn't know much about his newly discovered brother, but he had a wealth of experience in how established groups of men initiated newcomers into their ranks. No question about it, Lancer's cow hands were hell bent on givin' ol' Boston the royal treatment. He could easily imagine the various trials the men devised daily to test the proud easterner. And the Old Man wouldn't lift a finger to help Scott figure out how to stop it.

Johnny sighed when he thought about the gruff stranger who was their father. His father. Lancer. He'd never experienced such a bewildering morass of feelings toward anyone in his life. Murdoch Lancer seemed to wield some mysterious power to virtually bring him to his knees in confusion. His head ached with the effort making sense of his thoughts about the Old Man.

//How is it possible to hate a man with every fiber of your being – despise him so much that you've dreamed of killing him – actually picturing that fatal scene in your mind thousands of times, planning every last detail – and yet long for the same man's acceptance and respect so badly that your insides freeze solid and shatter into a million jagged shards that rip you apart every time you look at him? How can your worth as a human being turn on whether or not Murdoch Lancer approves of you? Why does it matter if he calls you “son” – and says it like he means it? What is it about that man that strips away every shred of control and confidence and leaves you feeling like a child?//



Johnny couldn't remember a time when he hadn't felt a gaping hole inside him. The terrible emptiness terrified him – threatening to swallow him from the inside out and leave nothing of him but a bitter shell of hate. The hate fueled an anger that drove him to the peak of his profession and defined the legend of Johnny Madrid.

Teresa's passionate explanation of the truth about Murdoch and Johnny's mother had turned his life upside down. His mother had lied to him all those years – his father hadn't thrown them out, had never said he didn't want Johnny. On the contrary, the Old Man had searched for his stolen son for eighteen years, investing thousands of dollars in the effort. With a handful of fateful sentences, the girl had crumbled the foundation of the hate that had sustained Johnny for so long.

//My father don't want me. Ain't a day gone by that I haven't heard that echoin' in my head. Nuthin' in my life ever hurt as bad as knowin' that. And I learned to live with it. ... But I been livin' a lie. He did want me then. ... But what if he don't want me now? He loved his little boy, but how does Murdoch Lancer feel about the man that little boy grew into?//

His memories of that time when he lay in the throes of fever from the ugly bullet wound in his back were still hazy, but Johnny knew Murdoch Lancer had scarcely left his side. And he'd wanted the Old Man there!

Yet when his fever broke and he could think clearly again, Murdoch pulled away. Instead of his father's massive paw holding his water glass or changing the dressing on the wound, Johnny found his brother, Teresa, or Maria attending him. Oh, Murdoch stuck his head in the door each evening to check on him, and he sure as hell popped in when it was time for Johnny to take his medicine. The Old Man seemed to relish forcing the vile stuff down his throat! But his constant vigil at Johnny's bedside was a thing of the past.

Honed steel now laced Murdoch's tone and words, replacing the concern. The Old Man's disapproval hung as a vicious, living thing between them. Yes, his father seemed to be pulling away, but Johnny admitted that he was pushing Murdoch away from him with equal intensity. The unfortunate result was an ever-widening rift between them, ensuring that their time together remained tense. The pair of them circled each other like wary dogs – stiff-legged with hackles bristling.

//I don't like the way things are between us. But I don't know how to change it. He just don't know what to think of me... and maybe I ain't good enough to be a Lancer. I got a black soul and I killed a lot of men. The Old Man don't see much in me to be proud of. Not like Scott...//

His father's behavior contrasted sharply with that of his brother. Scott had spent hours sitting with his injured sibling. Johnny remembered how that low-pitched, pleasant voice soothed him, holding out a lifeline against the pain and confusion raging through his battered body. And as Murdoch pulled away, Scott stepped closer, carefully laying a foundation of trust between them.

He'd never forget Scott's whispered words when he thought Johnny was unconscious – all about how Scott had always wanted a brother and how glad he was to discover that he had one; how he

looked forward to getting to know Johnny. And how he was determined to give Johnny a reason to call him brother – more than the fact that they shared Murdoch Lancer’s blood.

Ol’ Boston sure had a way with words. Johnny felt the same way, but he didn’t know how to express it. He’d often wished for a brother. And he looked forward to getting to know Scott Lancer. The quiet easterner intrigued him. Underneath the veneer of society manners and polish lurked the soul of someone he had a hunch he’d be happy to call “friend.” And Johnny had badly underestimated that man he first saw on the stage to Morro Coyo.

It wasn’t an easy thing to admit, but it was a stone cold fact. Accomplished reader of men he might be, but Scott was far from the tenderfoot greenhorn Johnny had originally dismissed. Ol’ Boston might’ve been raised in high society and dress like an eastern dandy, but he could sure ride – and shoot – and use his fists. Those three abilities alone made him a man worthy of respect in Johnny’s eyes.

//But I know lotsa men who can shoot, fight, and ride. Scott... well, he’s a man of honor, too – a rare breed. ... But what will that honorable man think when he finds out the truth about me, about what I’ve done?//

His brother didn’t shy away from hard work, either. He’d proven that by the savage intensity with which he fought Pardee’s fire that first day at Lancer. A slight smile quirked the corner of Johnny’s mouth as he remembered Scott’s soot-streaked, determined face. His brother stood beside his shovel with military erectness, seemingly unconcerned that his carefully tailored, ruffled shirt hung in grimy tatters. Or that his Boston barber would most likely have fainted in shock at the sight of his mussed, sweat-matted hair and skinned, dirty hands.

Scott accorded the condition of his hands and nails the same rapt attention as Madrid paid to his revolver. So Johnny had noticed Scott’s rope-burned palms and bruised wrists and arms in spite of his fever and the laudanum-induced fog. His brother wouldn’t talk about how he got the marks, but they were worse the next time Johnny saw him. Scott skillfully parried any attempt to discuss it and Johnny finally swallowed his uneasiness and questioned Murdoch.

The Old Man told him not to worry, that such marks were natural when a man’s hands were “unused” to hard work. In time, Scott’s skin would toughen and build up calluses. Then Murdoch looked pointedly at Johnny’s hands, his smirk declaring that the gunfighter would have to go through the same conditioning process. Johnny bit back the burning retort he wanted to utter, content to anticipate the surprise – and pleasure – on the Old Man’s face when he learned that his son could ride and rope better than most of his *vaqueros*.

But Johnny worried about more than abraded hands. He pressed Murdoch to learn how he planned to teach Scott the skills required by a rancher. Turns out their father’s plan amounted to tossing his older son into a flooding river and standing back to see if he could swim. The gruff Scotsman had definite ideas about building character – and posing tests. After all, the man had made it clear to Johnny that he’d have to prove himself “man enough to hold it” before he received his share of the ranch. And he’d aimed those words directly at Johnny.

“You know how men test each other – there’s nothing unusual in that. Scott’s a big boy. He’ll handle it. He must if he hopes to wield any authority with these men. They’ll test you, too, when you’re well enough to get around.” Then Murdoch fixed his younger son with the look Johnny thought of as ‘I don’t know what to think of you’. “No son of mine will back down from learning whatever is necessary. Gaining the respect of Cipriano and the other men is part of earning your share of this ranch. Your brother understands that.”

//I understand it, too, Old Man, more than you’ll ever know. I know all about winnin’ respect. And I know that it ain’t power or authority unless you take it – by force or by the earnin’ of respect. ...

But you didn’t give Scott advice or nuthin’. Just sent him out to work with a bunch of top California vaqueros. That group’s been together a long time and their standards are real high. Boston might be the patron’s son – but they won’t respect him until he shows them what he’s made of. He won’t have no trouble with that. But they won’t accept him at all until he asks for help. And ol’ Boston is too proud and he don’t know that’s what they want him to do. Hell, he was probably brought up bein’ told that a gentleman don’t ask for help. You oughta give him some tips on what to expect, Murdoch – maybe a couple hints on how to pass the tests they’ll throw at him. But you’re too damned hard-headed.//

Johnny swore that he’d find a way to help his brother. Hell, Scott had risked his life to pull Johnny to safety. He owed him for that, if nothing else. But Scott evaded Johnny’s every probe into what was happening during his time with the *vaqueros*. Johnny finally admitted that makin’ Boston into a top hand would have to wait until he was back on his feet. Meanwhile, he turned his attention to the visible effects of Scott’s struggles – those damaged hands.

Johnny urged Scott to wear gloves. When Scott confessed that he owned only kidskin dress gloves – and those had shredded the first day he wore them to work in – Johnny offered up his own favorite deerskin work gloves. Something about those gloves appealed to Scott and he’d worn them religiously since, treating them with great care.

Even now, as he reined in his horse at the corral gate, Scott performed what Johnny thought of as his “glove ritual.” He meticulously tugged on the tip of each finger to loosen the gloves before slipping them off, folding them neatly lengthwise, slapping them against his palm, and nestling them across the butt of his holstered gun.

Johnny slid to the ground inside the corral and patted the palomino’s broad forehead. Well, he was back on his feet now, the Old Man was safely out of the way, and it was time to come up with a way to help Boston in spite of his stubborn pride. He hung the *reata* on a fence post and followed Tomas through the gate as the wrangler hastened to take Scott’s horse.

“Hey, Scott.”

“Johnny,” Scott looked his brother up and down, assessing whether Johnny had pushed himself too hard during the day. He didn’t miss the lines of pain around the boy’s eyes and mouth or the

hint of fatigue in Johnny's movements. He nodded toward the palomino. "I trust you haven't tried riding."

Johnny rolled his eyes, uneasy with Scott's obvious concern. He wasn't used to having anyone worry about him and he wasn't sure how to deal with it. "Nope. I been a real good boy. Just rode this fence," his face darkened with an unwelcome memory and he hung his head, "Rode a desk most of the afternoon."

Scott rewarded him with a sympathetic smile. "So Murdoch assigned you some of the bookwork before he left."

"Yeah." Johnny scuffed his toe in the dirt, wishing he could ask Scott to help him understand the bewildering scrawl of figures filling the pages of the ledgers Murdoch had stacked on the massive desk. The Old Man barked a quick explanation of the columns of numbers and ordered Johnny to familiarize himself with the ranch's books, speaking to him as though he were a school boy. The young gunfighter dreaded the question and answer session his father would insist upon when he returned from his unplanned trip to Merced.

//Murdoch's treated me like a kid from the first, callin' me 'boy' an all. Hell, he even makes me feel like a kid! ...But he's always seen Scott as a man. //

"Good luck, brother." Scott shook his head in amusement. "I think you'll need it. Murdoch will certainly expect to discuss what you've learned when he returns." He strolled toward the *hacienda*. "Coming?"

Johnny hurried to catch up with him, brushing some caked mud from the seat of Scott's britches. "Hard day, huh?"

Scott slapped his hand away and ignored the question, so Johnny tried again. "The Old Man's got you workin' out at the herd, huh?" He laughed. "Reckon he'll wanna discuss what you've learned when he gets back."

"I'm sure he will." Scott paused at the door, lips pressed tightly together in frustration. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to clean up before dinner." He reached for the latch, but couldn't suppress a wince when Johnny grasped his wrist.

Johnny searched his brother's face. "Like I said before, looks like it was a hard day."

Scott shook his arm free and grabbed the latch, but Johnny blocked the door with his arm. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." Scott glared pointedly at the offending arm.

"Scott..."

"I don't need your help, Johnny. I can take care of myself." He shoved past his brother's arm and stalked inside. "Just drop it."

“You’re makin’ me feel left out, brother.” Johnny shouted after him. He leaned against the doorframe and watched Scott march toward the stairs. The determined easterner couldn’t quite hide a slight limp or his drooping shoulders.

//Stubborn. My brother is a stubborn man. Got too much pride to admit he might need some help.

...Damn Murdoch anyhow for throwin’ him to the wolves. Well, I ain’t about to sit around and let Boston be wolf bait. With the Old Man outta the way for the next couple of days, I can pull it off.//

He stared after Scott as his brother disappeared up the stairway, then turned and headed for the barn. It was time to have a little parley with Cipriano.



Johnny returned to the *hacienda* in time for dinner, satisfied that he’d hatched a workable plan – with Cipriano’s help. The burly *segundo* was a true Californio with the vaunted skills of a *charro*. His capabilities – and not the title of *segundo* – won the total respect and outright devotion of the *vaqueros* he lead so proficiently. Yet he treated Johnny with a deference the young man didn’t understand.

It had nothing to do with his reputation as a *pistolero*, Johnny was certain of that. His abilities as a gunfighter wouldn’t earn him the kind of respect Cipriano offered. And it wasn’t that the older man had known Johnny as a baby. No, it was as though Cipriano acknowledged that Murdoch Lancer’s younger son was also a top hand, worthy of being called a *vaquero*. Yet Johnny hadn’t had the opportunity to demonstrate that he did, in fact, merit the title of top hand. So why had Cipriano accepted him so readily when he should have forced Johnny to pass the same sort of tests that Scott was struggling with?

//He saw me workin’ with Barranca. Could that be it? ... Nope. Gotta be more to it than that. I’ll figure it out – sooner or later.//

He pushed the questions about Cipriano to the back of his mind as he lost no time in setting his plan into action. The moment Scott descended the stairs; Johnny positioned himself next to his shoulder, consciously invading his brother’s space. When Scott walked toward the fireplace, Johnny paced beside him, subtly crowding the taller man. When Scott paused at the sideboard, Johnny halted next to him. A smooth, sly shift of Johnny’s arm caused Scott to change his mind about pouring a drink and continue on his journey to the fireside, doggedly herded along by his brother.

Each time Scott moved away, seeking to establish a comfortable amount of space between them, Johnny closed the gap, seemingly unaware of what he was doing. By the time Teresa called them to the table, Scott’s frustration with his sibling’s unprecedented behavior was visible on his face.



Johnny, Scott, and Teresa enjoyed a peaceful, carefree dinner. A master of the art of small talk suitable for the dinner table, Scott kept the conversation brisk and interesting. He even convinced Teresa to regale them with several tales about the absent patriarch.

Without Murdoch's daunting presence and disapproving stares, Johnny relaxed and laughed along with them, even adding a couple of his own anecdotes to the mix. He had to catch himself several times – Teresa seemed so poised and older than her years that it was easy to forget she was really just an innocent girl.

The three young people spent a satisfying hour together, lingering over coffee and Maria's apple pie. When Teresa finally rose to help Maria clear the table, the brothers moved to the fireplace. Johnny took up his station beside Scott's shoulder, once again encroaching upon his brother's space. Scott sidestepped the entire length of the mantel before throwing up his arms in frustration and taking a seat on the long couch.

He abandoned his claim to the couch after scooting the entire length, left to right, as his brother insisted on sitting nearly on top of him. Johnny seemed oblivious to his pointed looks and exaggerated sighs, nonchalantly matching each move Scott made. When the easterner moved to the armchair, Johnny casually followed and perched on the arm. They repeated their bizarre dance from the loveseat to the desk to the reading chairs in the middle of the room and finally back to the couch.

When Johnny flopped down beside him, scooting so close that their shoulders brushed, Scott rounded on his brother in exasperation. "What do you think you're doing?"

Johnny stared at him, all round-eyed innocence, "Me?"

"You."

"Nuthin'. I ain't doin' nuthin'."

Scott leaped to his feet and leaned his shoulders against the mantle, holding Johnny at arm's length when his brother followed. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. This," he tapped Johnny on the shoulder, "is not 'nothing'."

"Oh, this."

"Yes. This."

Johnny gave Scott his most engaging grin. "Well, this is just to figure out how much work we gotta do tomorrow."

"We? Work? Tomorrow?" Scott put his hands on his hips and fixed Johnny with his best 'elder brother' stare. "What the devil are you talking about?"

Johnny stretched out on the couch and glanced sideways at his brother. "It's like this..." he traced a pattern in the leather of his pants with his left forefinger, "you're a real expert on Boston high society, but that ain't gonna help you much out here."

Scott's eyes narrowed. "Oh? As I recall, you said something along those lines before. Now what was it..." he tapped his finger to his lips, looking like a man struggling to recall an elusive memory.

Johnny cocked his head and sighed, anticipating a scornful comment.

Scott didn't disappoint him. "Oh, yes, I remember. You told me that being able to ride didn't make me ready for Day Pardee. You predicted I would end up with a bullet in my back." He shook his head. "Except – now correct me if I'm wrong," he ticked the points off on his fingers, "Pardee shot you in the back, I dragged you to safety, I killed Pardee, and then I carried you back to the house when you collapsed."

He folded his arms across his chest and shot a smug smile at his unabashed younger brother. "Not a bad performance for an 'expert on Boston high society'."

Johnny nodded. "You're right, Boston. You're right. You did real good." He turned on his side and stared up at Scott. "But don't let it make you cocky. See, none of that makes you ready for cow society."

"Cow society?" Scott had discovered early on that his cynical younger brother was an accomplished prankster. Something in the boy's voice warned him that this might be a prelude to a joke at his expense. Yet the way Johnny strung those two words together fascinated Scott. He subconsciously leaned toward his brother.

"Yep." Johnny was hard put not to react to the suspicion so obvious in Scott's face and voice.

"Okay, I'll bite. What, exactly, is cow society?"

Johnny sat up and wiped the humor from his face. "Cow society is all the stuff you gotta know to pull your weight with the *vaqueros* when they're workin' in the herd."

Scott clenched his fists. "I told you to drop it."

Johnny leaned toward him. "Listen, Scott. I know you like to do things for yourself, but this," he gestured toward the view out of the big windows, "is different than anything else you've ever done." He stared down at his feet. "Goin' by the look on your face the last few days, well, you ain't doin' so good on your own."

"Johnny..."

Johnny stood up and walked to the desk, idly flipping through one of the stacked ledgers. "I was really hopin' you and me could make a deal." His gaze lingered on the page of numbers before slowly lifting to meet that of his brother.

Scott strolled to the desk and settled himself in the chair in front of it. "What, exactly, did you have in mind?"

"I was thinkin' that I could give you some tips on herdin' cows and you could give me some tips on herdin' the numbers in these ledgers."

//Well, well. I do believe Mr. Madrid is asking for my help. In a roundabout way, of course. ... Okay, Johnny. I'll play your game.//

A slow smile spread over Scott's face and he inclined his head toward Johnny. "That sounds like a fair deal."

"Yeah?" Johnny plopped down into Murdoch's chair and spun it around. When it stopped, he leaned his forearms on the edge of the desk and stared at his brother. "Thanks, Scott. I can really use your help on these things." He ruffled the pages of one of the ledgers. "I reckon the Old Man told me as much about these numbers as he told you about what to do when you ride out with them *vaqueros*."

Scott sighed. "He didn't tell me anything, really. He just said to watch and learn."

"Yep. That's pretty much what he told me – read 'em and learn." Johnny chuckled. "Might as well have said read 'em and weep."

The brothers shared a laugh, but Johnny sobered abruptly, leaning forward to stare at Scott. "You know, that old man don't know if he wants us to succeed or not. Seems like he's makin' it as hard for us as he can."

"He is making it hard," Scott tapped his finger on the desk, "but he does want us to succeed."

"Well, it don't feel like it."

"No, I don't suppose it does. Yet in his own way, Murdoch wants us to live up to his expectations." He glanced at the doubt on Johnny's face. "I know it doesn't make sense."

"Nope." Johnny fiddled with the pen on the desk. "But the way I see it is that we help each other and both succeed. The Old Man don't need to know nuthin' about it." He looked at Scott and smiled. "Then all three of us'll be happy, huh?"

"Agreed." Scott leaned back in his chair and crossed his left leg over his right.

//Don't think for a minute that Murdoch won't realize we've collaborated, little brother. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if our helping each other wasn't part of his plan all along...//

"Now explain to me how your little performance earlier is going to teach me about cow society."

Johnny's eyes gleamed and he hurried around the desk to stand next to Scott, crowding past his brother's comfort zone. Scott reflexively slid the chair away and Johnny grinned triumphantly. "See what you just did? That's what you gotta know about makin' cows move."

“What? Just crowd up against them until they step aside? I tried that and it didn’t work.”

Johnny shook his head. “Scattered ‘em all over the place, huh? Mamas and calves separated from each other and runnin’ and bawlin’?” He chuckled, “Oh, boy, I bet them *vaqueros* were real happy with you.”

Scott stared at his hands. “Happy is not the word I would use to describe their reaction.”

“Scatterin’ a herd is a big sin to a drover.”

“So I saw. More than once.” Scott studied his white knuckles, still unable to understand how his actions had caused the herd to react as it had. He’d watched the *vaqueros* closely and copied their movements exactly. At least he thought he had – but the cows obviously didn’t if their reactions to his clumsy efforts were any indication.

“Well,” Johnny sat on the edge of the desk, correctly interpreting the disheartened expression on his brother’s face, “I’m gonna show you how to move a cow without spookin’ it – or the herd.”

“Johnny,” Scott’s head snapped up and he folded his arms across his chest, “do you know how to herd cattle?”

Johnny sighed. “Yeah, I do.” He fingered one of the ledgers. “I helped drive a herd of longhorns from Texas to California when I was ten.”

Scott started to laugh at such a blatant boast, but the expression on Johnny’s face proved that his brother was deadly serious. It reminded him just how much of an enigma Johnny was. How could he have so easily forgotten his shock at learning that this boy was the legendary gunman, Johnny Madrid? Most people might be stretching the bounds of truth when making an outlandish claim such as driving a trail herd from Texas to California at the ripe old age of ten. But Johnny wasn’t most people. And he wasn’t prone to exaggeration or bragging.

Scott mentally filed this new piece of the “Johnny puzzle” away and turned his laugh into a warm smile. “Well then, I imagine you do know how to herd cattle.”

“Yeah, so shut up and listen.” Johnny subconsciously rubbed his side, his fingers tracing an old scar he carried – a souvenir of that memorable cattle drive.

“Lead on, brother.”

“Okay.” Johnny’s eyes brimmed with mischief. “Pretend you’re a cow.”

“A cow?”

“You can be a bull if you want.”

Scott rolled his eyes and sighed. “All right. I’m a bull.”

“*Hola, Señor Toro*,” Johnny’s grin glinted in the lamplight. “Ah, that means ‘Hello, Mr. Bull’.”

Scott bit back a snort.

Johnny leaned forward and gestured at the distance between his knees and Scott’s. “Now picture a big circle around yourself.” He waited until his brother indicated compliance with his order. “Right now, I’m inside that circle in what I call the ‘See Ya zone.’”

“See ya?”

“Yep. You see me, but I’m not a threat and you don’t feel like you gotta move away. If you really were a bull, you’d probably pick up your head and watch me, maybe flick your ears. As a drover, it’s part of my job to notice those signs.”

He stood and took a step toward Scott, leaning forward until he sensed his brother’s discomfort. “Now I’ve moved into another zone inside the circle. I call it the ‘Adios’ zone.”

“Adios?”

“Yep. Means ‘goodbye’ in Spanish.” He tapped the fingers of his left hand against his thigh. “You ain’t comfortable with me bein’ this close and you feel the need to move away – *Adios, Señor Vaquero*.” Johnny put his hands on his hips. “Now if I’m a good drover, I’ll put just enough pressure on you to make you move and I’ll apply it at just the right spot.”

He nibbled his lower lip. “I’ll show you how to find the right spot tomorrow. Right now the important thing is to know that there are three zones inside the circle and that the way the cow – or a bull – reacts changes with each zone. Knowin’ the zones and usin’ ‘em is how a drover controls the herd.”

“I understand. What’s the third zone?”

“That’s one a drover don’t wanna be in. I call it ‘On the Prod’.”

“On the prod?”

“Yep. Lookin’ for a fight.” Johnny leaned forward deliberately, moving steadily closer to Scott’s face until his brother held up a restraining hand. He stopped. “See, now instead of just movin’ away, you feel like you gotta defend yourself. And if I kept movin’ closer, you’d try to stop me.” He moved back and propped a hip against the desk.

“If you were a bull, you might turn and face me, shake your head, paw or stomp, or even back up a few steps. If I didn’t back off, you’d probably get pretty wild and try to push under my horse’s neck or between me and another drover, or hook at me with your horns. Maybe even charge me and my horse.” He cocked his head and a crooked smile ran up the side of his face. “And if you were part of a herd, you’d cause ‘em to scatter in all directions.”

Scott nodded, closing his eyes to visualize what Johnny had just told him. He suddenly understood why his earnest attempts at copying the *vaqueros* as they moved quietly around and through the herd had ended in failure.

Johnny smiled to himself as he studied his brother's face. He could see the light dawning. "Now all them zones apply to a herd of cattle just like they do to a single cow – or bull. Just remember that the spookiest member of the herd decides where each zone begins and ends. As a drover, it's your job to figure out who that cow is and where it draws the line for each zone."

"I understand. When I'm working with the herd, I need to know when I've entered the 'See Ya' zone. Once I know that, I can test until I find the 'Adios' zone. I force the herd to move by the way I apply pressure within this zone and I direct and control the movement by where I apply the pressure. And I make sure to stay out of the 'On the Prod' zone."

"I'll say one thing, Boston. You sure are a quick study." Johnny stretched, wincing as the motion pulled on his still tender wound.

"It helps when you have a good teacher." Scott stood and put his newly learned techniques to use, herding his younger brother toward the stairs. "Now, why don't you pretend to be an obedient little brother and get up to bed. I don't want you overdoing it on my watch."

"Hey, Boston? You're about to get into my 'On the Prod' zone."

Scott caught Johnny in a headlock and marched him inexorably toward the stairs. "Am I? Well, as you're already in my 'Big Brother Calls the Tune' zone, I'm not too worried. Of course, if you aren't ready to go to sleep just yet, I can give you a lesson in ledger society."

Johnny gave an earsplitting yawn. "Guess I didn't realize just how sleepy I was. *Buenas noches, Señor Toro. See ya mañana.*"



Scott found Teresa impatiently tapping her fingers on the breakfast table the next morning. Maria stood beside her, the picture of smoldering wrath. The formidable housekeeper thrust a cup of coffee at him, causing Scott to leap backward to avoid the liquid sloshing over the rim. The scalding brew splashed on his hand and he slammed the cup on the table, patting the reddened area with a napkin and blowing on it.

Teresa turned her back to him, indignation in every line of her body. Maria executed an about-face with military precision and marched back toward the kitchen with the coffee pot.

Scott stared from one to the other in bewilderment. He'd done something to set them off, but he couldn't imagine what it might be. He was fully clothed in his 'California style outfit' as his brother called it. He'd washed his face and hands and combed his hair. He wasn't late. His fly was buttoned...

//Looks as though I'm in their 'On the Prod' zone.//

"Ah, good morning, Teresa."

The girl sniffed and tossed her hair over her shoulder.

Scott tried again. "Johnny still asleep?"

Teresa whirled on him, hands on her hips. "You know good and well that he's already outside, just itching to ride out with you." She gestured dramatically with both arms. "How could you, Scott? You know the doctor said he needed to take it easy for another week. He isn't supposed to be on a horse." She brushed an angry tear away. "Your father is trusting you take care of Johnny."

Scott choked on the gulp of coffee he'd just swallowed. "Now wait a minute," he spluttered. "Nobody said anything about Johnny riding out with me. I'm not about to let him disregard the doctor's orders."

"Then why is he outside waiting for you?"

"I don't know," Scott stood, pocketing a biscuit, "but I will find out." He took a huge bite of another biscuit before snatching his hat from the rack and striding outside.



The rising sun painted an incredible portrait across the sky, but Scott had no time to admire the view. His gaze fixed on the empty corral as he noted with dismay that the *vaqueros* had already left for the day's work at the herd.

//Now why are they already gone? We aren't due to ride out of here for another half hour or so...//

A team of horses harnessed to a buckboard stood beside the hitch rail. His brother slouched on the seat of that buckboard, hat over his eyes and feet propped on the dash, crossed at the ankle. Johnny's handcrafted spurs glistened on his heels. He was wearing his gun. The bay horse Scott had been riding was saddled and tethered to the back of the buckboard.

//So this is why I got the royal treatment from the "Johnny Protective Society"...//

Scott planted his hands on his hips and cleared his throat. He had to clear it three times before Johnny rolled his head back in order to see beneath his hat brim.

"Thought you might sleep all day, Boston," he drawled.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Johnny stretched languidly and sat up in the seat. "I'm waitin' on you so we can get on with your lessons in cow society."

"And just where do you think you're going?"

Johnny gestured toward the *hacienda*. "To the big round corral in that pasture behind the house."

Scott moved next to the buckboard. "Oh, no. The doctor was very specific. He said you were to take it easy." He gestured open-handed at the buckboard. "Driving around in this doesn't qualify as taking it easy."

Johnny stared directly at Scott, eyes huge and luminous. His lips quivered and his lugubrious expression caused Scott to bite the inside of his cheek.

//He looks like a little lost puppy. How could anyone resist that look?//

"Now just how am I supposed to show you how to make a cow move where you want it to if we don't use real cows?" Johnny crossed his arms across his chest and hung his head. "You'll be doin' the drivin' and the ridin'. C'mon, Scott. It's just behind the house."

Scott struggled to resist that hangdog expression and the wheedling tone. "Now, Johnny..."

"Look, I been shot before. I know when I'm ready to start livin' again and when to take it easy."

//Don't you start treatin' me like a kid, Boston. I can take care of myself and I don't need coddlin'.//

He held up his left arm, as though swearing on a bible. "I swear I won't do nuthin' to get you in trouble with the Old Man."

Scott slapped Johnny's thigh. "Actually, I'm not worried about Murdoch." He gestured toward the *hacienda*. "It's your palace guards who concern me."

"Huh?"

"Maria and Teresa. They seem to think I'm going to drag you out and put you to work on a chain gang. With your consent, of course."

Johnny grinned delightedly. "You tellin' me you ain't afraid of the Old Man, but a bunch of women has got you spooked?" He cuffed Scott's chin. "I thought you said you served in the cavalry!"

"Damn right, little brother." Scott pushed his hat back on his head. "And one thing I learned in the cavalry is 'know your real opposition.'" He rested his hand on Johnny's shoulder and bent his head close to his brother's. "Now, the real power in that house is not Murdoch Lancer."

"Not the Old Man?" Johnny matched Scott's conspiratorial tone.

“Oh, no,” Scott pointed toward the kitchen. “It's that tiny housekeeper.”

“Maria?”

“That's the one.”

Johnny cocked his head and studied Scott's face. “That's good thinkin', Boston.”

“Thank you.”

“And if I were you,” Johnny continued as though Scott hadn't spoken, “I'd stay on her good side.”

“I plan to.”

Johnny put his hands behind his head. “Well, you see, that's why you need to drive me out to that round corral.”

Scott pursed his lips and let his expression ask the question.

“'Cause if you don't, I'm gonna be real disappointed. I'll mope around all mornin', sighin' and moanin', maybe even fret myself into a fever,” he glanced sideways at his brother. “And I'll be sure Maria and Teresa know it's all your fault.”

“That's blackmail!” Scott had to struggle to project a sense of disappointment and disbelief in his tone. Johnny's threat didn't surprise him in the least. Not that his brother would actually carry it out – but the dire warning was entirely predictable.

Johnny gave him a reproachful stare. “No it ain't. It's just what you cavalry types call positionin' the troops for maximum effectiveness.”

Scott couldn't contain his laughter at Johnny's audacity. “All right. I'll retreat – for now.” He climbed across Johnny, settled himself on the seat, and picked up the reins. “You can ride this buckboard and the fence this morning while you teach me about cows. But this afternoon, you're going to ride that desk again while I teach you about bookkeeping. Agreed?”

Johnny pushed his hat further down over his eyes and slung one arm across Scott's shoulders. “Sounds like a good plan to me. You got a deal.”

With an exasperated shake of his head, Scott slapped the reins and set the team in motion. The grin on his face delighted his younger brother.



Scott dashed the sweat from his eyes and caught his tongue between his teeth as he concentrated on keeping the group of heifers moving around the pen. The deep sand of the corral made each

step a struggle as his feet sank nearly to the ankle with every stride. He focused his entire attention on the small herd as he struggled to apply the knowledge Johnny had shared with him.

//No, no. Not behind them. They're turning to face me because I'm directly behind them and they can't see me when I'm right behind them. They've turned around to keep me in sight. ... So I need to approach slightly to the side and at a right angle to the hip. ... Maybe a bit farther to the side... Yes! It's working! They're moving forward again.//

“Hey, that was real good, Scott. You figured out why they stopped and turned and moved right back into position and got 'em goin' again.”

Johnny's words of encouragement didn't come from the spot on the fence where he'd been perched earlier. Scott felt a moment of total disorientation as he tried to comprehend how Johnny's voice could be above and behind him. A sudden sinking suspicion assailed him and he whirled. Sure enough, Johnny sat astride the bay horse beaming down at him.

“Johnny...”

Johnny's eyes widened. “Hey, pay attention to your herd. I'm just givin' my voice a rest here. It's hard hollerin' all the way across this big pen.”

//I've never met anyone as talented as you at devising a justification for anything, no matter how outrageous. Resting your voice! It's hard to 'holler' across this big pen, but it's fine for your brother to trudge across and around it trying to drive a bunch of cows. 'Trust me, Scott. You'll learn to move 'em better and faster if you try it on foot first.' Just wait until we hit the books, little brother. ... And I thought we agreed that you wouldn't ride more than the buckboard and the fence. Yet here you sit, bold as brass, on my horse.//

“Uh, Scott?” Johnny looked away from his brother's accusing glare and gestured toward the cattle. “The herd has stopped.”

Scott shook his head and turned back to the cattle. It was just too much effort to argue with the scamp. Besides, sitting on the horse really wasn't all that different from sitting on the fence. And he wouldn't let Johnny do anything more than sit while the animal stood still. With that comforting thought, he did a quick visual reconnaissance to be certain Maria or Teresa wasn't watching. Then he began to walk steadily toward the cows, noting when they raised their heads to stare at him.

He planned his approach as Johnny had taught him and was gratified when the cows begin walking forward. Scott kept them moving, angling back and forth behind the group at a 90 degree angle to the direction of desired movement.

“I think you got it, Boston. Now, let me show you somethin' else. Just stop right where you are.”

Before Scott could say a word, Johnny was riding toward the front of the group. He kept the horse in a slow walk, but moved parallel to the lead cow at a point just behind her shoulder. The herd slowed its pace to match that of the horse. Johnny rode beside them for a moment and then turned the bay into the bunch. He kept the horse moving forward with the cattle, yet picked his way through the group to the other side.

Once in position, he urged the horse up to the head of the lead cow. Within two strides, the leader moved away from the horse and the entire herd began to turn. As they reached an angle that would take them directly across the pen, Johnny repositioned his horse slightly behind and at an angle to the leader's hip.

Scott just shook his head as the turning ceased and the herd headed straight across the corral.

//I see how you did it – now that I know what I'm looking for. You're a good teacher, Johnny. Divide the cow into three parts – hip bone to tail, body between the hip and the head, and the head itself. Apply pressure to the rear third to move her forward, the middle section to slow or stop her, and at the head to turn her away from you. ... I understand exactly what you're talking about – and I'd have never figured it out just by watching. Thanks, brother. ... Now get your shot-in-the-back butt off of that horse!//

Johnny halted the bay next to Scott and dismounted. “Now try it with the horse.”

Scott took the proffered reins and prepared to mount. Johnny patted the horse's neck. “It ain't so hard once you know what to look for, huh?”

“No.” Scott swung up on the bay and paused to smile down at his brother. “You're a good teacher, Johnny.”

Johnny's face colored and he ducked his head. “Thank you.” He looked up and slapped Scott's knee. “There's somethin' else I gotta tell you.”

“I'm listening.”

“That group of *vaqueros*?” Johnny fiddled with Scott's pant leg. “They give a lotta respect to age and experience. They all learned from watchin' and listenin' – not from readin' books. So they expect you to ask when you don't know somethin'. If you don't ask, if you just try it on your own, they think you're...,” he looked up at Scott, “well, arrogant.”

“I see. The boss' son thinks he's too good to ask a *vaquero* for help?”

“Somethin' like that.”

//You catch on real quick, Boston. You an me are gonna get along just fine.//

They shared a look of warm understanding. Johnny broke the gaze first and gestured toward the cows. "Well, go on. Your herd's gettin' all strung out and you're sittin' around wastin' time talkin'. What would the Old Man say? Go on." He slapped the bay's rump.

Scott spent the next hour or so honing his ability to pick the correct pressure point to move the herd where he wished and learning to trust his horse's reading of the cattle. He was delighted to discover that with Johnny's expert tutelage; he seemed to have a real knack for herding cows. By the time Johnny called a halt, Scott was brimming with confidence in his new found abilities.

//Teresa said it. You're really something, Johnny. I just hope I can explain bookkeeping as skillfully as you've taught me about bovine society...//



Murdoch Lancer leaned back in his chair at the head of the long dining table, savoring the warmth of the brandy while gazing proudly at his sons. His long fingers tapped against the stem of the crystal snifter as he remembered the pleasant surprises awaiting him when he arrived home from Merced that afternoon.

He'd purposefully ridden in through the pasture where the men were working at the herd. To his delight – and amazement – Scott was right in the thick of things, riding competently with the *vaqueros* and pulling more than his weight. His heart swelled when he recalled Cipriano's praise of his older son, how his wise old *segundo* thought Scott had the makings of a true cattleman. Of course, he'd expected nothing less from Scott. The young man was a born leader and possessed the determination to succeed at anything he put his hand to.

His gaze traveled across the table to rest on the dark head bent over the dinner plate. Here was the real surprise. He'd dreaded another uncomfortable confrontation with the boy over a lack of progress with the books. But to his astonishment, Johnny had answered every question his father posed, demonstrating his understanding of the ledgers. The young man had actually updated the ranch's books with two bills of sale and the collection of bills from the feed store and the mercantile. Murdoch had planned to use those items to show his younger son how to make entries in the ledger. But Johnny had figured it out by himself.

//I suppose he's had to figure things out for himself for most of his life. I'd better remember that. I don't always give him enough credit.//

He took another sip of brandy, congratulating himself on how well his plan had worked. Johnny must've made Scott realize that success with the *vaqueros* meant admitting what you don't know and asking for help. Such a mindset would be totally alien to someone raised by Harlan Garrett and Scott was far more likely to accept an idea that went against everything he'd been taught if it came from Johnny. After all, Johnny must have a world of experience in winning his place in an established group. Not to mention that he was well-versed in the traditions and beliefs of the Mexican *vaqueros*. And Scott would have returned the favor by sharing some tips and techniques on bookkeeping with his brother.



Murdoch turned his head toward Scott. "Cipriano tells me you're really helping out with the herd." Absorbed by the play of candlelight on the crystal and brandy, Murdoch missed the wink Scott shot his brother.

"Well, sir, it isn't much of a step to go from mastery of Boston society to mastery of Bovine society."

Johnny had just taken a gulp of milk that sprayed across the table when he whooped with laughter at Scott's remark.

"Mind your manners, young man." Murdoch bit back his own mirth and turned a look of stern disapproval on his younger son. "This isn't a *cantina*."

Johnny swallowed and hung his head, concentrating on his plate.

Murdoch immediately regretted his harshness as all traces of a smile vanished from Johnny's face. He attempted to atone for his error. "I must say that you did well with the books, Johnny. I'm surprised at just how much you accomplished."

Johnny's head snapped up and his eyes glared daggers at his father. The defiance in his voice perfectly complemented the sneer on his handsome face. "Yeah? Well, even us stupid gunslingers hafta be able to count, Old Man. How else would we know how many notches to carve on our guns? And me? Well, let's just say that I gotta count pretty high." He looked back down at his plate and stabbed at a piece of steak.

Johnny's furious response froze Murdoch in open-mouthed surprise for several seconds. The anger he constantly found in Johnny worried him. Not the young man's hot temper – his mother had been the same way and that fieriness added a much relished spiciness to life. No, it was the cold fury he sometimes saw in those blue eyes – the kind of frozen rage that marks a killer.

Yes, Johnny was a killer, but surely there was something more to his son, some vestige of the laughing, blue-eyed rascal his mother had spirited away. For a moment, he swore he'd seen hurt on the young man's face and that thought gave him hope. If he had the power to wound the boy, he also possessed the means to help him build a new life.

//I did it again. I just don't know how to talk to that boy. He's hell bent on taking everything I say the absolute wrong way.//

The all-too-familiar feeling of frustration sweep over Murdoch. His son obviously wished he was jabbing his father with that fork. The big hands itched to yank the young man out of his chair and shake some sense into him. But Murdoch acknowledged that a head-to-head confrontation would only serve to drive them farther apart.

//He doesn't have an inch of "back up" in him. I don't want to argue with my son. It seems like all we do is fight. What if he decides to leave? Lord, I don't know how I'll stand it if he does. Best to ignore his insolence for the moment.//

He stripped the defensiveness and disapproval from his voice, “I don’t think you’re stupid, Johnny.”

“Yeah? Coulda fooled me.” Johnny kept his eyes on the plate.

Murdoch sighed. When Johnny got into this defiant mood there was no reasoning with him. He decided to let the incident go. A brief glance at his older son assured him that he’d made the right decision.

Scott had observed the venomous exchange in mounting dismay. The chagrin he read on Murdoch’s face convinced him that their father hadn’t meant his comments the way they sounded – the way Johnny interpreted them. Murdoch possessed a real way with words, yet he was remarkably inarticulate when communicating with Johnny. The proud, stubborn men just didn’t seem capable of conversing without an exchange of caustic comments. Scott’s diplomatic intervention had prevented a major explosion on several occasions and he worried that Johnny and Murdoch might never get beyond this confrontational stage.

Murdoch felt an odd tingling throughout his body when he glanced at Scott. His older son nodded encouragement when Murdoch decided not to press matters and sought to mollify Johnny. Approval glistened in Scott’s eyes – the same approval he’d seen when he looked into Catherine’s eyes. She understood him – knew full well that he liked to bark, but was loathe to bite. Her quiet encouragement and unconditional support had made him feel as though he had the world by the tail and she had the trick of expressing those feelings in a simple glance. And Scott had her eyes...

//Ah, Cat... I wish you could see our son. You'd be so damn proud of him. He's a diplomat like you. He understands that my words and actions are often at odds with how I really feel. He's figured out that when I really care about something, I bluster and growl. We think alike and I can feel our bond growing stronger every day. I've missed you so and having Scott at my side will be like having a small piece of you here again.

I need some of your sage advice, my love. Scott and I are building a wonderful relationship. But Johnny... I don't know how to reach him, Cat. I bungle it every time. I searched for him for so long. I want him here. I really do – so I can't understand why just looking at him makes me furious. But you know me, I'll find a way. And I'll have our son's wisdom to help me.

The first step is keeping Johnny here so that he and I have a chance. That means getting his signature on the partnership agreement. It's time to let my sons know that I think they have what it takes – that they've earned their shares of this ranch.//

He pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. “Well, gentlemen, Dr. Jenkins tells me that he’ll let Johnny ride come Monday. So Monday afternoon, I thought we’d drive to Green River and sign that partnership agreement.” He took a quick sip of brandy to cover his nervousness. “What do you say?”

Johnny shot his father a startled glance before looking to his brother. Scott gave him a reassuring smile and lifted his glass. "I say, here's to our partnership. May it be long and prosperous."

Murdoch held his breath. Was it possible to experience a lifetime of agony in a handful of seconds? So much depended on Johnny's answer. His sons seemed to be communicating silently and he prayed that Scott would succeed where he had failed.

//Come on, Johnny. Say it. Say you're staying. Listen to your brother.//

At long last, Johnny moved. And even the brazen insolence so apparent in the languid movements didn't bother Murdoch. For his younger son picked up his glass and cocked his head at his father. And the tiniest of smiles ghosted at the corner of his mouth. Then Johnny turned to his brother and the faint smile exploded into a broad grin. He raised the glass and nodded.

Scott winked at Johnny. "Looks as though we're in the 'Agreement zone'."



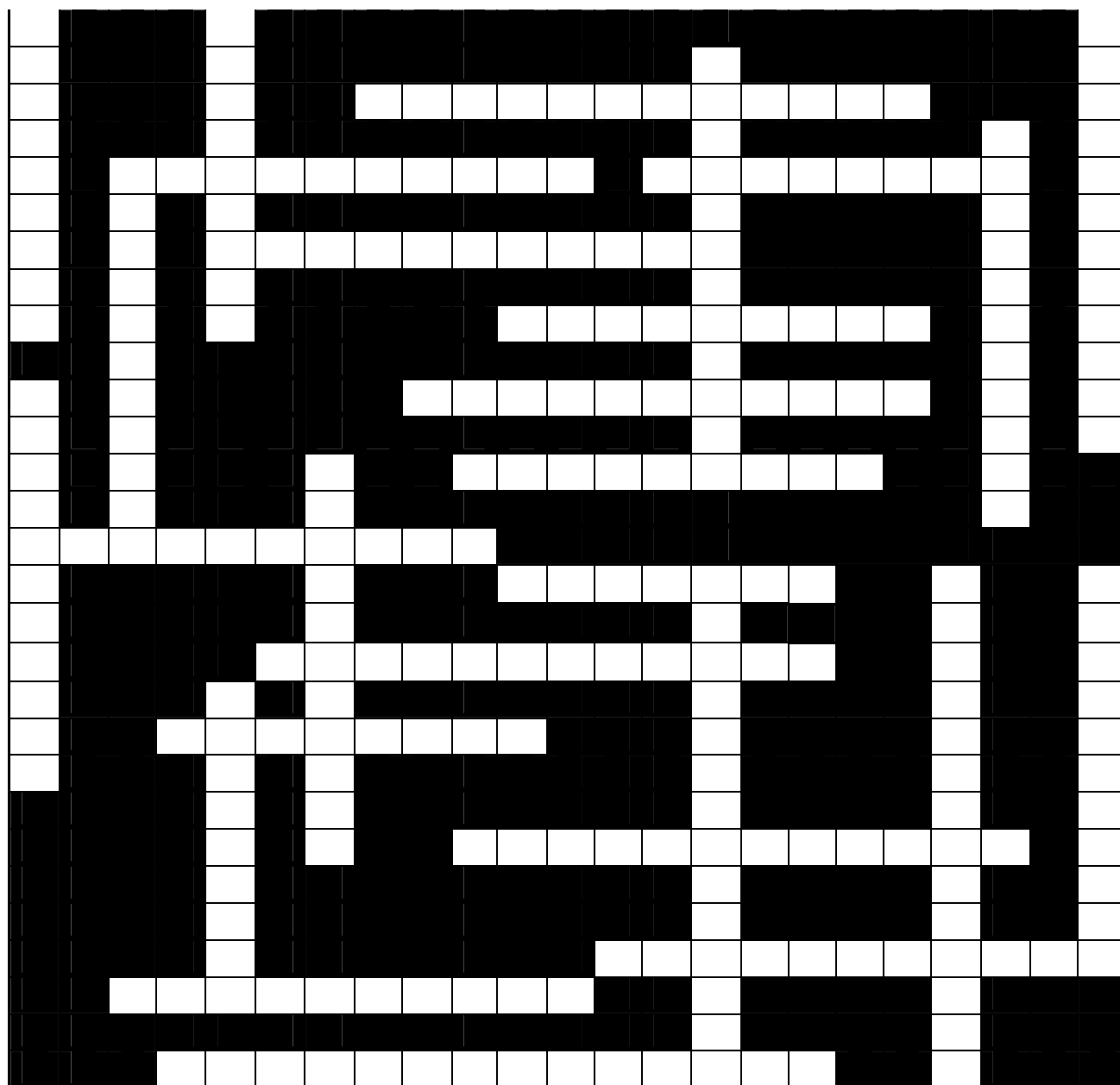
AUTHORS' NOTES: *Our special thanks to Phil Guitar, Arlen Baize, Red McRory and the other great working cowboys of the Guitar, Grissom, and Tongue River ranches for sharing their insights into "bovine society" and tips on herding cattle.*

You can read about how Johnny got that scar on the trail drive from Texas to California in our story, The Ring-tailed Tooter. It's posted on the Lancer Fan Fiction site: <http://www.peterbrown.tv/lancerringtailed.html>



LANCER QUEST STARS FILL IN PUZZLE

BY JANET BRAYDEN



Fill In the following Lancer Guest Stars' Names (answers on page 176)

Paul Fiero
Frank Marth
James Olson
RG Armstrong
Michael Ansara

James Gammon
Lynne Loring
James Gregory
Ken Lynch
Bayn Johnson

Dub Taylor
Harold Gould
Mary Fickett
Russell Thorson
Warren Oates

Victor French
Dan Travanti
Pippa Scott
Bo Svenson
John McLiam

Jack Elam
Linden Chiles
Martin Sheen
Sharon Acker
Lisa Jak

Jonathan Harris
Pat Hingle
Keenan Wynn
Cloris Leachman



THE RIGHT TRACK

BY MAUREEN PREUSS



The heavily laden buckboard took a hard bounce across a deep wheel rut scarred into the earthen road and the entire load shifted, creating a cacophonous moment of mayhem as each piece of cargo made up its own mind where to sit out the rest of the trip. Johnny Lancer was little more than annoyed at the racket, but the buggy horse tied there in front of the bank took downright exception to the commotion behind him and began fighting for freedom. Johnny stepped off the boardwalk and gave the startled animal a gentle pat, crooning quietly until the horse finally calmed.

He couldn't blame the animal for being jumpy – the town of Green River seemed unusually overrun with area locals for a weekday, every one of them darting around like they couldn't wait to be anyplace else but there. The throng pushed their way through stagnant air that grew ever more sultry beneath a cloudless sky and the blazing afternoon sun. But the heat did little to slow anyone's pace, just kept them bubbling around like proverbial water in an un-watched pot.

Johnny was actually feeling a little edgy himself. All he wanted was for Scott to finish up their business in the bank so the brothers could stop in for that cool beer they'd promised each other on the way in, then reclaim their own supply-laden wagon and get back to the ranch.

'Now who's actin' all restless?' he scoffed at his own impatience.

Johnny laid his forearms over the top of the hitching rail and leaned there languidly, casually surveying the town. The ex-gunfighter pondered over how he'd trailed through a whole lot of places just like this over the years, but not a one had he come close to ever calling his "hometown." Green River didn't quite qualify yet either – but it was getting close. After living at Lancer for almost a year, Johnny felt he knew every inch of the burgeoning hamlet and every person living in the area. Trouble was, that knowledge went both ways, and everyone knowing him wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Being easily recognized had always been a double-edged sword to a man with Johnny's reputation – but lingering in one place too long was never recommended. It was still hard to trust anyone who dared title himself "friend," and knowing exactly where to be found at any time could actually prove deadly.

Luckily most of the area's residents were, if not welcoming, at least tolerant of having an ex-gun hawk living full-time in their midst. And those who absolutely didn't care for Johnny or his former profession weren't particularly interested in trying to hide their distain. Knowing exactly who found his presence objectionable didn't bother Johnny – it simply made it easier to either steer clear of or face them head on, depending on the

circumstances. Given his druthers, Johnny much rather preferred to know a snake as being a snake then find out while its fangs were already biting him in the . . . Sharp eyes caught a curious movement down a ways on the opposite side of the street. Johnny couldn't tell who it was exactly, but the pretty flowered dress said "female" – and the considerable stack of packages she was juggling cried, "help." Glancing back at the bank and finding Scott still annoyingly occupied, Johnny gave the horse one more pat, then made his way across the road to offer his assistance.

He almost didn't make it in time. The top bundle of the package mountain began to slip, and the more the woman fought to keep it in place, the more the rest of the pile shifted. Johnny bounded forward with two last long strides, and snatched the troublesome parcel and two others before they could topple completely to the ground.

But misfortune was not totally avoided. Once revealed, the young woman turned out to be Miss Betty Jessup, daughter of one of Johnny Madrid's most vocal detractors.

Young, petite, and on the skittish side, Betty was kind of shy, but a good friend of Teresa's. Johnny had met her plenty of times at town socials and such. But her father had made it perfectly clear that, regardless of his supposed friendship with Murdoch Lancer, he wanted nothing to do with a gunfighter, "retired" or not. To keep peace between the families, Johnny usually purposely avoided Betty, and let the man bluster away – but that didn't mean he liked Jessup or his attitude any. Johnny Madrid would have taught the old blowhard a hard lesson in manners well before now, but Johnny Lancer . . . for the most part . . . held his temper.

"Johnny!" Betty was startled by her unexpected rescue, but more so at seeing the face of the younger Lancer son appear over the top of her remaining packages.

The young woman's stunned expression troubled Johnny, and he had a fleeting notion that she might actually share her father's unprovoked animosity. But he really needn't have been concerned. Really. Betty gained control over her now manageable stack of parcels, then stared intently into Johnny's eyes . . . and smiled.

"Johnny," she repeated, breathlessly. "I mean, Mr. Lancer. I . . . thank you ever so much. I'm . . . I'm . . . well I'm just . . ."

Johnny couldn't help but let loose a smile of his own over her awkward show of girlish infatuation, and something about the sparkle in his eyes told her exactly how un-ladylike she was behaving. Her head dipped in instant mortification.

The reaction had become all too familiar to both Scott and Johnny. Teresa's female friends had a rather discomfiting habit of getting all dreamy-eyed while in the presence of the Lancer brothers, the women's behavior creating a domino effect that left the men feeling a little more than embarrassed themselves.

Taking pity on the both of them, Johnny claimed lead over the encounter. "It's no trouble, Miss Jessup. I saw you were havin' a time of it all the way from the bank.

Surprised no one else stepped up to lend a hand.”

Her eyes glanced furtively up to his, but she didn’t trust herself to once again stare too long into those deep blue depths, and hastily averted her gaze toward the bank. “That’s just where I’m heading,” she explained. “That’s my buggy out front.”

“I’d be pleased to help you get these things packed away . . . if you don’t mind the company?”

“Oh no!” she blurted, too quickly, briefly catching Johnny’s eyes again, but regaining just enough willpower to look away demurely. “I mean . . . well . . . I would indeed appreciate your assistance, Mr. Lancer,” she finished with a very proper and reserved air – personally pleased that she’d been able to keep her puerile babbling to a minimum.

Johnny bit off another smile and merely replied, “It’d be my pleasure.”

The pair strolled slowly down the boardwalk, chatting idly about harmless topics . . . like the weather, and how Teresa was faring. Johnny thought their pace could have been a little swifter, but he kept his opinion politely to himself, his amusement with Betty’s obviously dawdling steps barely contained.

Eventually the street was safely crossed, and Betty’s packages were carefully stowed in the buggy. Ready to help the young woman step up into the carriage, Johnny heard his name called – in a manner he was just never going to appreciate as long as he might live.

“Madrid!”

Betty’s eyes went wide in apprehension, but Johnny knew the threat wasn’t anywhere near as menacing as it could have been. ‘Be thankful for small favors,’ he thought ironically.

The voice was unmistakably Fredrick Jessup’s, Betty’s father. Johnny turned slowly to find the man standing on the bank’s porch, fluffed out like a male turkey ready to spar, exploiting his large bulk and imposing stature to appear stern and commanding. Johnny easily saw through the façade to the sniveling weasel of a man he knew lay just under the surface of all that self-important show. But he was once again determined to remain polite and keep an even temper – if only for Betty’s sake.

“It’s Lancer, Mr. Jessup,” Johnny returned evenly.

“I know who you are,” Jessup replied with derision, as he left his perch and hurried over to the buggy. “My daughter does not need help from the likes of you.”

“Father!” Betty tried to interject.

“Stay quiet,” he rebuked her tersely, placing his mass between her and Johnny as she dutifully ducked her head in submission.



Johnny could handle just about anything Jessup could spit at him – but he hated the way the man talked to Betty. He had his daughter cowed, and Johnny never did like a man who lorded his control over a woman. Being her father didn't excuse the abrasiveness of the behavior.

"You can leave now," Jessup stated dismissively, staring at Johnny contemptuously.

Johnny didn't say a word back, but he didn't move, either. He just matched the man, eye to eye.

Jessup didn't last long. Not many a man did when trying to face down Johnny Madrid. Johnny never had to do much to make another man look away. There was just something about the depth of focus within those blue eyes that said "don't mess with me." Jessup acknowledged the subtle but very real threat with an embarrassed clearing of his throat . . . as he predictably turned away.

Johnny hadn't been in the mood to start this confrontation, and he was even less inclined to keep it going. Betty had been forced to play witness to the challenge, and stood by with a fearful concern. Recognizing the worry, Johnny offered up a genuine smile to set her at ease. "Ma'am, you have a nice day now," he stated pleasantly, touching a couple of fingers to his hat brim and dipping his head politely.

She spared a glance at her father, and in a minor show of defiance boldly offered, "Thank you for your help, Johnny. Please ask Teresa to drop by."

Proud of her audacity, Johnny's smile widened. "I'll do that. You take care." Without a bit of acknowledgment for Fredrick Jessup, Johnny turned to leave and spotted Scott on the bank's porch.

"Bout time," he snipped as he stepped up next to his brother.

Scott had caught only the tail end of the interaction, but from a sad series of past experiences could easily deduce what had put Johnny in a foul mood. "What did Jess . . ."

"Let it lie, brother," Johnny cut him off. "Let's go," he added and immediately stepped away.

Catching up to Johnny took more than a few of Scott's long strides, but he was finally matching his brother's quick pace. Noting their direction he casually asked, "I thought we were going to get a beer before heading back?"

"Not interested," came the clipped reply.

Scott waited the full length of three whole storefronts while Johnny marked the distance with hard pounding steps. "You'll have to teach me how to do that," he finally remarked

with an obvious admiration.

“Do what?” Johnny asked distractedly, wearily, his anger quickly giving way to a too familiar disappointment.

“Put up with the likes of Jessup,” Scott clarified.

Johnny’s stop was so abrupt Scott passed him two paces before he realized his brother was no longer beside him. He turned back, crossed his arms comfortably, and waited.

A hundred ways to respond flashed through Johnny’s mind, but he could tell Scott didn’t really need an answer. He was discreet in his empathy, but Johnny knew his perceptive brother realized all too well how the half-breed ex-gunfighter was often regarded.

With a sigh, Johnny released the last of his resentment, and simply answered, “Just savin’ money on bullets.”

Scott smiled. “Sure you don’t want that beer?”

Squinting back at him with one eye, Johnny asked expectantly, “You buyin’?”

“Seeing as how I’m the only one who went to the bank today, I would guess that I have to.”

“Then I want a beer,” Johnny replied. The subject of Jessup’s intolerance efficiently covered and closed, the brothers made their way down the planked sidewalk toward the closest saloon.



Val Crawford rode under the Lancer arch, hoping at least one thing would go right that day. It was already late afternoon, and if he didn’t find Johnny fast, they’d have to wait until morning.

Luck was with the sheriff of Green River, and he caught sight of Johnny’s flashy faded red shirt as he exited the barn. Ever alert, the ex-gunfighter immediately noticed the rider and walked forward to meet him. The lawman felt like he’d drawn a Royal Flush when Scott Lancer followed his brother out of the stable.

“Whadda yah want, Val?” Johnny asked as soon as the sheriff was reined up beside him.

“Good afternoon tah you, too,” Val shot back as he dismounted.

“You been asked, but you don’t never pay us no social visits . . . so whadda yah want?” Johnny pressed.

"Val?" Scott questioned, ever vigilant to Johnny's moods.

"Glad yer here, Scott," the lawman acknowledged with a nod. "There's been trouble. Betty Jessup was attacked on her way home today."

The brothers shared a quick look as they considered the worst, Scott voicing their concern. "Is she okay?"

"She's shook up a might, but wasn't as bad as it could'a been. She was comin' back from the Murphy place, an' the hand that was s'posed to be escortin' her figured he had better things tah do . . . rode off an' left her." Val shook his head over the now obvious stupidity of Betty's appointed guardian. "He caught back up to her before . . . well . . ." The lawman's discomfort discussing the particulars of the assault was clear as he fidgeted badly. "She's still got her . . . aw hell!" he exclaimed, pulling the hat off his head and slapping it against his leg. "She'll be okay with time."

"She know the man?" Johnny asked impatiently, annoyed with the lawman's awkwardness over how to explain the situation.

"No!" Val shot back, but quickly realized that Johnny was right and he was getting off track. He ran a dirty hand through his hair, reset his hat with a swift tug, and got back to the particulars for why he was there. "She was so rattled she couldn't tell me much, other than he weren't no local boy. I got that no 'ccount ranch hand to show me where it happened. He never saw the man hisself. Tracks are still fresh, so I'm gettin' a posse tahgether tah go after the varmint. Yer the best tracker I know, Johnny. Will yah come?"

Johnny hadn't seen Betty Jessup since their encounter in Green River over two months before. But he could readily imagine how terrified the petite young woman must have been out there on the trail, alone and being manhandled by a contemptible stranger. The thought made him angry. Very angry.

"Don't need a big posse for one man, Val. I'll get 'im."

The lawman had been watching Johnny's features harden, so his offer and determination didn't come as much of a surprise. "Jessup's payin' a reward, so . . ."

"I ain't doin' this for no money," Johnny spat, practically biting his friend's head off. "That could'a been Teresa out there," he stated vehemently, his voice rising. "I ain't lettin' no wanderin' piece of sin move on to try it again."

Scott knew that the intensity of his brother's outburst had more to do with the mention of Jessup's reward than any desire to capture the guilty man. There was no doubt that Johnny would catch the animal behind Betty's assault – but Scott was going to make darn sure he didn't do it alone.

"I'm going with you," Scott stated, hoping he'd left no room for argument.

Val expected a fight, but Johnny simply gave his brother a hard, appraising look. “Fine,” he agreed. “You do all right, but you got a lot to learn ‘bout trackin’ in this kind of country. Be good practice.”

Scott was honest enough with himself to admit that Johnny’s judgment of his skills was accurate, so let what could have been an insult stand. “Whatever you say, teacher,” he merely commented wryly.

An abrasive snort busted out of Val, drawing a grin from Scott and a sideways glare from Johnny. “Ugliest schoolmarm I ever saw!” the sheriff couldn’t resist adding, followed by a hoot of laughter.

“Come on, you worthless excuse for a lawman,” Johnny teased back as he shoved Val forcefully toward the hacienda. “Might as well let Maria feed your sorry hide while we’re gettin’ supplied. Just don’t get too comfortable. I wanna get on that trail tonight.” Johnny got no argument, as each man was equally eager to catch this outsider who had dared to harm one of their own.



Scott took another close look at the tracks, while Val stood nearby, once again fidgeting.

Johnny sat calmly atop Barranca, his arms casually crossed over the saddle horn, Charlemagne’s reins lightly gripped in his hands.

“Can you catch ‘im, Johnny?” the sheriff asked, continuing to stubbornly ignore the fact that Johnny had commanded that Scott take the lead as head tracker.

“Scott?” Johnny deferred the question evenly, as he gazed at Val in silent but obvious displeasure.

The lawman’s persistent questioning was getting to Scott. He hated to admit it, but his own confidence in his tracking abilities was now severely waning as well. “You sure about this, brother?” he questioned back, squinting up at Johnny as the sun began to descend in the sky behind him.

Johnny was determined to use this opportunity to let Scott improve his skills, and staunchly refused to allow Val’s misgivings to rile him. “Yep,” he answered decisively, adding, “I ain’t leadin’ this posse, but I won’t let you do nothin’ stupid either. Now answer the crabby old man.”

Val let out an indignant huff and placed his hands on his hips in a show of feeble vexation. Scott merely smiled, Johnny’s words instantly bolstering his resolve. “We’ll catch him, Val,” Scott answered the lawman as he headed toward his horse, Johnny easily flipping him Charley’s reins.



“Direction he’s heading it might take us a day or two to find him, but we will.” Scott mounted up, and offered one last assurance. “Expect to see us sometime on Thursday.”

Seeing the Lancer brothers ready to ride, Val couldn’t understand why he had ever doubted that either of them wouldn’t get the job done. The sheriff took a step forward, and tipped his hat back to face them. “Didn’t bring no badges with me, but ya’ll are hereby deputies of Green River. Don’t shoot the varmint ‘less yah have tah . . . an’ if yah do, make sure yah get ‘im somewhere where it’ll hurt real bad.”

Scott shook his head at the lawman’s raw humor, and then turned to the man beside him. “You ready?” he asked Johnny.

“Yep,” came the sure reply. “Let’s get this done.”

Taking the appointed lead, Scott prodded his horse, and Johnny followed.



Leading Johnny around was disconcerting, and it took Scott a while to figure out why. It wasn’t that he couldn’t hold his own as a tracker, and he’d certainly commanded men as a lieutenant during the war. But tracking and scouting had been a part of Johnny’s livelihood for years, so Scott just naturally deferred to his young brother when the need arose. To have Johnny purposely following behind on this trail left the elder Lancer son feeling strangely off balance.

So far the man the Lancer’s followed was plainly interested in doing nothing more than putting miles between himself and the scene of the crime. He was moving fast, leaving tracks that were plentiful and obvious. Despite the apparent ease of the chase, Johnny was truly proud of the distance Scott covered before the sun completely faded and the brothers were forced to stop.

Scott’s first real decision had been whether or not to run a cold camp for the night, a choice not quite as easy to make as one might think. A lot of factors had to be considered – number of men being tracked versus number of men in the posse, terrain being covered, expected length of the chase, vicinity of settlements where a man might get lost in a crowd . . . Sight of a campfire might keep a desperate man moving despite the darkness in order to lengthen his lead – or it could draw more dangerous prey back in ambush.

There was no doubt in Scott’s mind that the man knew he was being followed. A cup of hot coffee would have gone down real nice in the chilling air, but the brothers ate their dinner cold. Scott didn’t want to do anything that would give away how close he and Johnny might be to catching up. He’d told Val they’d be back on Thursday, and was determined to keep to that deadline.

Johnny pulled first watch . . . and Scott tried to sleep. But his mind kept wandering back to something his brother had said earlier.



“Johnny,” Scott whispered into the pitch-black night, no moon overhead to reveal where he sat lookout.

“Yah?” The quiet reply came as a surprise from directly behind him. The ex-gunfighter’s ability to tread almost silently was notorious. Scott hadn’t even heard Johnny take up that position, giving rise to the thought that he might not mind a little instruction in that area of expertise as well.

“Back there with Val . . .” Scott hesitated, and Johnny remained still. “You said you wouldn’t let me do anything stupid. Is there something specific I do when tracking that I shouldn’t?”

“No more than most other men, brother,” Johnny answered softly.

Turning and leaning up on an elbow, Scott asked, “What do you mean?”

It took a moment for a reply to come. “You pay too much mind to what’s in plain sight. To track careful but fast, you gotta learn how to consider the obvious without thinkin’ ‘bout it, all while lookin’ for what’s really important. It’s always the sign you miss that’ll come back an’ bite yah. If the man you’re chasin’ wants to have a little fun, he’ll drop all kind of easy sign to get you comfortable . . . then double back and make you wish you’d been payin’ more attention.

“Some men need to get away, and just try to make it hard for you to follow. But it’s those ones who really don’t care if you catch up to ‘em or not that you gotta always be lookin’ out for. ‘Cause they’ll teach you the hard way what you did wrong.”

The inference was unmistakable. “You’re speaking from experience,” Scott stated perceptively.

Again, it took a moment for the reply to come. “Learned from some of the best, brother . . . some of the very best. And it wasn’t always me who paid the price for the lesson.” The night hid his expression, but the pain and regret in Johnny’s voice was clear.

Johnny’s tone was more optimistic as he acknowledged, “That’s why you’re out here, Scott. Better for you to learn to rope on a calf than a longhorn steer. The man we’re trackin’ I suspect might have a trick or two in ‘im, but he ain’t the best you’ll trail. Every man teaches you a little more, though, and if you’re smart, you’ll remember for the next time. I heard tell you take education kind of serious, so I reckon you’ll learn somethin’ over the next couple of days.”

Scott could hear the smile in Johnny’s voice, and smiled back into the darkness. “Yes. I do believe I’ve picked up a thing or two already.”

“Get some sleep, Scott,” Johnny encouraged, his point made and understood. “I’ll be wakin’ you soon enough.”

“Goodnight, Johnny,” Scott answered as he lay down onto his side. Sleep would come now, knowing that his brother had his back.



Scott was indeed quick to learn, and Johnny’s advice paid off. Coming across the man’s tracks again in the morning, Scott took swift note of the easily observable, then started looking for more obscure signs. Just after mid-day he found one, and led Johnny away from the obvious trail.

“Sure you want to go this way?” Johnny questioned, even as he followed along smoothly.

Charley was reined to an easy stop, and Scott turned in the saddle. “Yes,” he answered confidently with a self-satisfied smirk.

Johnny merely smiled back as his horse stomped a foot impatiently. “Let’s get on with it, then. Barranca seems to think you’re right.”

Scott did just that, and prodded Charley onward. The man’s tracks soon became plain again, but Scott remembered his brother’s warning, and fought off an urge to get “comfortable.”

It grew clear that the man knew the area, as he continued to move quickly, carefully choosing a path that would only lead him through terrain that was hard to track over. Thick tree cover with tender foliage was repeatedly skirted in deference to hard packed earth, rocky passages, and creeks and streams. Johnny was actually impressed with the man’s expertise, glad that he was offering Scott more of a challenge than expected.

But Scott held his own against the man. Only once did he take the wrong trail and have to double back. Having seen the trick before, Johnny recognized the error right away, but knowing they were slowly gaining ground on the man, he let the mistake play itself out. Scott promptly realized the error and set them back on track, but the disappointment in his performance was obvious. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Johnny cautioned. “Learn from it and move on. You won’t ever make that mistake again, I guarantee it.”

The day went long, and Scott knew they were getting close. But the terrain was treacherous, and the light was fading fast. He reined Charley to a stop. Johnny pulled Barranca beside him, and waited patiently. The words came hard for Scott. “We have to stop,” he stated with regret.

Johnny knew the frustration went deeper. “You doubt your decision,” he counseled. “Why?”

Scott smiled wryly. “Because I think you’d go on.”



"Then why won't you?" Johnny asked seriously.

He looked up at the sky, then forward to the trail in front of them, considering his response. Finally Scott answered, "We're getting close . . . real close. But it's getting dark. We won't catch him if one of our horses breaks a leg, and over this ground that's a real possibility. He finally seems to be slowing down, which could mean he either no longer thinks he's being trailed, or he has friends or family nearby to help protect him. Riding on tonight is too dangerous, especially when we'll most likely catch up to him early tomorrow morning."

Scott paused, contemplating all he'd just said. "We're stopping." There was no question in his voice now.

"I gonna have tah eat cold beans again tonight?" Johnny merely asked.

Scott scanned the hilly area surrounding them, and spotted a stand of trees that formed a thick canopy near to the ground. Pointing, he asked, "Think you can build a small fire under there that won't smoke?"

Johnny followed his brother's finger, then turned back to face him as he pulled his hat off and let it drop down onto his back by the stampede tie. "I like the way you think, Mr. Lancer. You take care of the horses?"

"I certainly will, Mr. Lancer," Scott replied, his confidence completely restored.



Two nights of sleeping on the hard inhospitable ground made the brothers more than ready to catch up to Betty Jessup's attacker and force him back to a welcome and waiting jail cell in Green River. Both men were up with the rising sun, ensuring that Scott's prediction of finding the man early in the morning would come true.

Scott stopped Johnny just before they crested a rock-strewn hill and motioned for quiet. The pair dismounted, and walked up the remainder of the hillside to stand behind the cover of a large oak at the top. They looked down upon a small rickety cabin that had seen its better day some several years past. The shelter was being reclaimed by the forest, as a mixture of tall lush trees and abundant undergrowth enfolded the hovel in a smothering embrace.

The horse that had invited Scott's attention was grazing in a very small corral hastily reassembled from rotting pieces of previously hewn rails. There were no other signs of life.

"You cut around and watch the back and far side. I'll take the door," Scott instructed and moved off to descend the hill without a glance back.

“Hold on,” Johnny countered, placing a restraining hand on Scott’s arm. “You just hold on now. What makes you think he’s still alone down there?”

Instantly annoyed by his brother’s question, it only took one look at Johnny to change Scott’s attitude. The younger Lancer had a mischievous grin plastered on his now stubbled face, purely relishing his role as instructor.

“Because, Teacher,” Scott accentuated the title heavily, “there obviously hasn’t been anyone living here for a long time and we haven’t found any other tracks. There’s only one horse in sight and we’re still in the middle of nowhere. I also plan on making absolutely sure once we get closer. That satisfy you?” he asked with raised eyebrows and a sarcastic tilt of his head.

Johnny’s grin widened at his brother’s self-assured retort. “Well, I reckon’ you’ll pass . . .” he proffered as he reseated his hat atop his head, “. . . that is, if you don’t get your head blown off walkin’ through the front door. Think you can manage that?” he asked cheekily.

“Just get around the back,” Scott answered with a vigorous push on Johnny’s shoulder.

All teasing aside, the brother’s each took up their assigned positions cautiously. Getting an all-clear sign from Johnny, with gun drawn Scott listened carefully before taking a step back and efficiently kicking in what remained of the aged front door.

Scott followed the movement of splintering wood as it flew into the room, and spied a startled man trying to disentangle himself from the mess of blankets he’d tossed on the floor for the night. “Don’t move,” he ordered commandingly, keeping his revolver firmly trained on the man.

Desperate, hard of hearing, stupid, or all three, the man ignored Scott as he pulled himself up onto his knees and reached for his own weapon. Johnny’s handgun immediately made an entrance through the long-glassless window opening right above the man. “I’d do what my brother says if I were you,” he drawled threateningly.

The man looked back to find Johnny’s gun staring him right in the face. Instantly convinced that he was inescapably cornered, he gave up and raised his hands. Then the never-ending line of excuses started. “Look, I don’t know why you two been followin’ me, but I ain’t got no money,” he declared loudly.

“I have him, Johnny. Come on around,” Scott directed as he ignored the man and took a step further into the room.

“You got no call to be pointin’ a gun at me, mister,” the man continued indignantly. “I don’t even know you.”

“We’re the men who are arresting you for assaulting a woman back in Green River,” Scott calmly stated as Johnny entered behind him and crossed the room to disarm the man.

The man watched Johnny take his gun, then immediately lowered his hands and rejected the charge with an exaggerated shake of his head. “I don’t know who you think I am, but I ain’t never been near no Green River.”

Scott shared a look of incredulity with Johnny over the man’s assured defiance. “Two days on your trail says otherwise,” Scott said in support of his accusation. “Now stand up,” he ordered.

The man obeyed and stood. Cleaned up a might, he could be mistaken for Scott – about the same age and almost as tall. But his considerable bulky muscle base looked to be turning flaccid from lack of use. Dirty and disheveled, from fair-hair to scuffed boots, he had the classic appearance of a long-time professional drifter – just the sort who might show up in a town to look for short-term work or cause a bit of trouble before moving on.

“There’s gotta be a mistake here,” the man changed tack but continued his denials. “Let’s be reasonable,” he added with outstretched arms just begging for concessions. “You gotta know you have the wrong man. I would never harm no woman.” He was oozing charm and a cocky self-confidence, appealing for belief and making himself sound so incredibly misjudged and honorable.

Johnny wanted to slug the man. ‘Smooth talkin’, no ‘ccount . . .’ His mother had fallen for far too many bastards just like this one, and he wasn’t surprised that the loquacious and unflappable cad had been able to talk Betty into stopping for a stranger. Johnny’s patience snapped. “That’s enough. Get outside. Now!”

The man glanced over his shoulder and found a very angry Johnny Madrid pointing his gun at him. He felt more than compelled to put his excuses on hold, raise his hands, and obey.

But his compliance didn’t last long.

“Saddle up,” Scott commanded.

“That ain’t my horse,” the man claimed, waving one of his equally talkative hands dismissively toward the makeshift corral. “Never seen it before,” he added, now planting his hands firmly on his hips, just daring the Lancer brothers to dispute him.

Once again, Scott and Johnny could only stare at each other in utter dismay over the stranger’s outrageous audacity. Scott broke the moment, taking a firm step toward the man to state resolutely, “Mister, since you’ve already admitted that you know we were following you, I’m just going to ignore that lapse of memory and move on. Now saddle that horse!”

To emphasize the point, Johnny reached over and grabbed the saddle blanket off a rail and heaved it at the man’s chest. He caught it and coughed and waved away the dust that exploded out of the cloth, instantly clouding the air.

“I’ll saddle ‘im . . .” Cough. “But anyone comes after us and . . .” Cough. Cough. “. . .

accuses me of stealing . . .” Cough. “. . . I’m tellin’ ya’ll made me . . .” Cough. “. . . take ‘im.” Cough.

“Unbelievable,” Scott uttered under his breath with an absolutely flabbergasted shake of his head. Glancing at Johnny, he saw a totally different reaction. His younger brother was cool, calm . . . and Madrid. Whatever the man’s game was, Scott pitied him if he kept it up. Because Scott had no trouble reading this sign clearly – Johnny had obviously witnessed the clever ruse before, and wasn’t buying it for a minute. The only question was, how long would he put up with it? Scott didn’t think he really wanted to know the answer. The man was already severely trying both their tolerance, and it was anyone’s guess as to whose temperament would win out.

The trip back was certainly going to prove to be educational in a whole other manner.



Another night spent out on the trail didn’t improve the disposition of either brother, and the constant nattering of their prisoner hadn’t helped a bit.

As promised, mid-morning on Thursday the door to the Green River jail flew open, and from behind his desk Val looked up astounded as a man was pushed forcefully into the room. “I ain’t . . .” was all the man could utter before the walls resounded from a thundering call.

“Shut up!” both Lancer brothers cried out simultaneously, their patience having vanished equally long, long ago on the trail.

A flurry of activity and arguments immediately followed that left the sheriff reeling.

The man stumbled for a few feet, catching sight of Val and his authoritative badge as he lurched across the floor. As soon as he recovered his balance he started the performance for his new audience. “Sheriff, I’m glad you’re here. These two men done dragged me here against my will for no reason”

Of all people, ever-composed Scott cut the man off with a resounding slam of the front door and a loudly exclaimed explanation of, “He’s the one who attacked Betty, Val.”

“No I ain’t!” came the swift retort as the man took up station right in front of Val’s desk. “They even made me steal a horse,” he added indignantly, gesticulating wildly, waving his hands accusingly in the general direction of the Lancer brothers.

Johnny had been pacing off his anger and consternation way across the length of the room, and shot over to the desk himself while replying to the man’s claims. “It was his horse, Val, make no mistake about that,” he demanded of his friend. “This snake has an excuse for everything, and we’ve heard every one of them! If you’re smart you won’t listen to a word he says.”



“That ain’t fair, sheriff,” the man replied. “I gotta right to be heard, and I’m sayin’ I ain’t done a thing they accuse me of!” He accentuated his claim with a couple of firm finger pokes to the top of Val’s desk.

Scott had taken up Johnny’s pacing of the office floorboards, and reached the desk just as his brother turned away in disgust, working off some of his frustration by kicking a chair out of his way as he moved to stand by the front door – getting himself as far away from the man as he could so he wouldn’t do anything that might soon be regretted.

“We – got – the – right – man,” Scott emphasized each word as he spat them directly into the face of the man both he and Johnny were ready to kill.

Endlessly brazen, the man just stared right back and stated, “No – you – didn’t.”

Val looked from face to face of the men hovering angrily over his desk, then glanced over at Johnny’s tense form by the door. Then he made the mistake of opening his own mouth. “You sure he’s the right man, Johnny?” he asked tentatively.

The Lancer brothers intuitively turned to face each other in absolute stunned astonishment, then simultaneously faced the sheriff, and again with one voice shouted, “YES!”

The man grew a self-satisfied grin as he relished his minor victory, planting a seed of doubt within the sheriff. For his part, Val stood and backed away from the palpable ire he’d drawn from the Lancers. “Well I’m sorry! I gotta ask,” he stated in feeble defense of his question.

Johnny took a couple of steps toward Val’s desk, and the man had the good sense to move himself to the far side, knowing he’d been pushing both brothers hard over the last twenty-four hours. He was shrewd, not stupid, and knew he’d been playing a dangerous game with the patience of these men – especially the dark-haired one. But like a chronic gambler with a big pot on the table in front of him, he was bound and determined to play this hand out, high stakes be damned.

He didn’t know how but, once more, Johnny reined in his temper and, with a carefully measured tone, stated beyond a doubt, “He’s who the tracks led to, Val. Now you lock him up before Scott and I do it for you.”

Val didn’t take orders from many men, but he knew Johnny wasn’t making a simple request. He’d seen that look on his friend’s face before, and wasn’t about to argue with him in such a dark mood. The man opened his mouth to speak again, but Val cut him off quickly. “If you know what’s good fer you, you’ll shut up . . . right now.”

With a simple glance, the man had to agree that his luck of irritating Johnny with any safety had just run out and the sheriff was right. Listening for a change, he held his tongue as Val led him to the back room and into a cell.

Returning to the office of the jail, the Sheriff of Green River found Johnny leaning up against the front door with his arms crossed, staring straight ahead, his face now unreadable. Scott was seated on the chair by Val's desk, elbows leaning on his knees and his head down.

Cautiously, Val dared another question. "He give you much trouble out on the trail?"

"Just that unlimited nonsense," Scott answered without looking up.

His backwoods speech and disheveled appearance was deceiving . . . Val was actually a good sheriff, and a very perceptive man. "Look. I really don't doubt you boys myself. But if he's gonna keep that up, he's gonna have more than me askin' a whole lot of questions."

"He'll keep it up all right," came the quiet reply from the doorway. "That's his game."

Val glanced over at his friend, who now looked absolutely exhausted. Scott wasn't faring much better. The lawman figured there was a hell of a story to be had about this capture, but he knew the Lancers well enough to recognize the tale would have to be heard some other time.

There was silence between the men for a minute, until Val finally offered his thoughts. "Only way I can see to stop them questions before they start is to get Betty Jessup in here to identify him. Once she eagles him and brands him dog, won't much matter what he jabbers on about."

"Only problem with that," Johnny predicted, "is the minute he lays eyes on her he's gonna start that foolishness. Next thing you know he'll have her so lost and confused her own father won't believe her."

"Johnny's right," Scott concurred quietly as he finally sat up, leaned back, and crossed his arms over his chest. "She won't have a chance."

Val lowered his head, loathe having to state the obvious. "Well . . . can't be helped. If I'm gonna hold 'im 'til the judge gets here, she's gonna have tah identify 'im. That's the only way I can see 'round this." He raised his head and added, "I'll send a runner out to their ranch right away . . . see if Jessup'll bring her in."

Scott turned slightly in his chair, and looked back at Johnny to gauge his reaction. Returning the gaze, Johnny declared, "I'd like to be here when they come."

Giving his brother an imperceptible nod, they both turned back toward the sheriff. Val wasn't sure what Johnny had in mind, but he didn't often argue with the boy's reasoning. "You caught 'im, so I got no problem with that."

That settled, Scott stood, scratched at his face and stipulated, "Soon as our horses are

cared for, I want a bath, a shave, and a good meal while we're waiting."

Johnny's brooding mood finally broke. Laughing he answered back, "Figures you'd find a good way to spend the time. I want a drink, too."

Val followed Scott to the door. "Go on and get your 'chores' done. I'll send someone to fetch yah when I hear if the Jessup's can come tahday."

Scott and Johnny merely nodded, eager to go cleanse themselves of the trail.



Val's runner caught up with the cleaned and shaved Lancers just as they were heading into the town's best saloon. The excited teenage boy eagerly reported, "Sheriff Crawford said tah find yah and tell yah that Mr. Jessup said he'd bring Miss Betty in straight away. Should be here in 'bout an hour or so."

"Thanks, Virgil," Scott replied as he pulled out a coin and handed it to the boy. "You tell Val we'll be there."

Virgil flipped the coin appreciatively in his hand, then held it up before the Lancers and replied, "I'll do it right away. Thanks, Mr. Lancer. You can count on me!"

Despite his assurances, the kid was making no sign of moving. "Go on then, Virgil," Johnny said with amusement. "Get it done."

Working for Scott Lancer was one thing, but taking orders from Mr. Johnny Madrid Lancer was quite another to a young idolizing boy. "Yes, sir!" he responded, then turned too fast, jumbled his feet and practically tumbled off the porch. Too embarrassed to turn around, he called back over his shoulder, "I'm going!"

Restraining their laughter, Scott and Johnny entered the saloon, eager to finish up their "chores."



Now cleaned, shaved, fed, and having enjoyed a couple of nice cool beers – each – the Lancer brothers appeared back at the jail as scheduled. The Jessup's arrived nearly ten minutes later.

The mood was apparent the instant father and daughter stepped into the room. Fredrick Jessup was all hardness and purpose, blindly driven to confront the man who had attacked his beloved child. Betty on the other hand practically had to be dragged into the building, her body tense and steps shuffling. It didn't seem possible, but she looked even more petite than usual, her distress making her appear fragile and vulnerable. She kept

her head lowered, her eyes hidden, as if she were afraid or too embarrassed to let anyone look upon her. An angry bruise darkened the whole right side of her chin, acting like a beacon of evidence against the man in the cells, while demanding justice for Betty.

Fredrick Jessup closed the door behind his daughter, then nodded toward the Lancer brothers standing shoulder to shoulder beside Val's desk. "Scott. John. I'd like to thank you for tracking the man down who attacked my daughter."

That was the extent of Fredrick Jessup's acknowledgement for the Lancers.

Turning his attention to Val, Mr. Jessup gruffly demanded, "Let's get on with this, Sheriff Crawford. Show us the man so my daughter can identify him."

A whimper emanated from Betty, and she took a step back toward the door. Whether she moved consciously or unconsciously, Val, Johnny or Scott couldn't tell, but at least they noticed. Mr. Jessup seemed totally oblivious to his daughter's anguish with having to be anywhere near the jail – or the man being held there.

"Mr. Jessup, first I'd like to tell you a bit 'bout the man . . ." Val tried to explain.

Jessup would have nothing of it, lecturing, "I needn't know a thing about him, other than if the right man has been apprehended. That's why my daughter was brought here. Now let's get on with this," he stated determinedly, immediately pulling Betty toward the cells.

Johnny couldn't bear the man's insensitivity another moment. "Val, can I ask Betty a question before she sees him?" he asked assertively.

The request stopped both father and daughter. Mr. Jessup was clearly piqued. Betty glancing up briefly, her sad eyes tinged with a bit of cautious expectation and even hope.

Val and Scott both looked toward Johnny for a clue, neither having any more idea than the Jessup's for what he had in mind, but glad he seemed to have thought of something to help. "Sure," Val answered. "I got no problem with that."

Of course, Jessup did. "Excuse me, John," he harrumphed, "but Betty has nothing to say to you. We'd just like to get this over with and go home."

Johnny took a step toward Fredrick Jessup, and matched the man's disapproving gaze, eye to eye. "It's just one question," Johnny stated quietly . . . but clearly leaving no room for refusal.

Jessup tried to remain firm, but wavered quickly. With an embarrassed clearing of his throat, he turned away and gave in with a clipped, "Fine."

Trying to be calming, Johnny rounded the desk and approached Betty, suggesting, "Miss Jessup, perhaps you'd be more comfortable if you sat down for a moment . . . over by the window."

Betty glanced up ever so briefly, and seeing that he was indicating a chair across the room, readily agreed. Anything that would get her as far away from the jail cells as possible. Still keeping her head down, she moved swiftly and sat down nervously.

Lowering himself to Betty's level, Johnny settled himself on a knee in front of her and spoke gently with a soothing tone. "Betty, I know this must be pretty hard for you . . . having to come here to look on the man who hurt you. And I bet you're not real eager to see him again."

Her eyes glanced up, full of agreement and fear, but then she hid them again. Johnny knew he was on the right track, and doggedly kept going. "I got a very important question for you Betty, and you don't have to look up at all to answer. Okay?"

Getting a small, affirmative nod in response, Johnny stated, "I'm gonna hold out my hand, and I want you to stare at it, Betty. You stare at it real hard. I'm not gonna touch you. Do you understand?"

Again she nodded. Making sure it would be clearly within her view, Johnny proceeded to hold out his right hand with the palm down, and then instructed, "Betty, you look at the back of my hand real close now. Don't think of nothin' else but my hand. All right?"

Another nod. Johnny let a moment go by, then very softly stated, "Betty, I know the man touched you . . ."

Betty started to sob at the memory, but she didn't look up and Johnny continued quickly. "I don't need to know how he touched you, or where. What I want to know is, how is my hand different from the man who attacked you? Just look at my hand . . . keep lookin at it, and tell me how my hand is different from his."

She continued to sob but, with amazing strength of will for a traumatized young woman, tried very hard to keep looking at Johnny's hand.

Val and Scott shared a look, and both smiled in appreciation, knowing exactly what Johnny wanted her to say – and kicking themselves for not thinking of it first.

Fredrick Jessup was simply confused and more than a little wary of Johnny's actions. He took a step toward the engrossed pair, attempting to dismiss the whole affair with, "This is nonsense. Let's get . . ." But Scott motioned him to be quiet, and for once the man obeyed without an argument.

Suddenly a deep gasp emanated from Betty, and a hand flew to her mouth. Her head rose, and those previously hidden sorrow-filled eyes stared into Johnny's with amazement.

Remaining seriously focused, Johnny unwaveringly met her gaze and demanded, "Say it Betty. What's different?"

Feeling more empowered than she could ever remember, she began hesitantly, but quickly grew more confident. "He . . . he had a scar. Red and jagged . . . kind of like a lightning bolt. Running from his pointing finger all the way up to his wrist!"

Johnny lowered his hand to his knee, and offered her one of his warmest smiles before turning briefly to ask, "That good enough to hold him, Val?"

Sporting a big grin of his own, the sheriff answered, "That's good enough for me. Betty can go now," he announced to one and all.

Turning back to face her, Johnny found the young woman crying again. But this time Betty's tears were clearly ones in relief and gratitude that she would not have to do the unthinkable and go into that abhorrent back room to face the man who had assaulted her.

As she dabbed at her eyes with a dainty handkerchief, Johnny told her, "You done real good, Betty. No other man you're ever gonna know is gonna have hands like that . . . you understand? We caught him, and you made sure we got the right man. Reckon you should be right proud of yourself," he encouraged, and to his delight she nodded her head vigorously.

"Would you like Teresa to visit with you tomorrow?" he asked, pleased to be able to finally change the subject and offer Betty some way to regain a little normality in her life. "I'm sure she'd be happy to come by. Scott bought her a new hat in Sacramento last month that she's just been chompin' at the bit to show off. She thinks it's too fancy for church, so you'll have to tell me what you think."

Watching the beginning of a smile playing at the edges of her lips, Johnny kept his eyes on Betty but over his shoulder asked, "Scott, you'd like a day off to escort Teresa over to Miss Jessup's, wouldn't you?"

"That most definitely would be a pleasure," Scott readily offered.

With a mischievous grin and a sparkle in his eyes, Johnny continued to throw his comments over his shoulder, but winked at Betty as he added, "You like pickin' out ladies hats so much, and done such a good job at it, bet you could offer all kind of good advice 'bout frilly things to the pretty young ladies while you was sippin' on some tea."

Her tears nearly gone now, Betty's smile widened appreciatively over Johnny's good-natured teasing of his brother. Johnny leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, but not so the others couldn't hear, "Just don't get him started on parasols. I swear, if I hear one more argument about tassels versus ruffles, I'll just scream."

The damn burst, and Betty couldn't help but break out in laughter. The release of tension was so great, her hands reached out to pull Johnny into a grateful hug. Burying her head in his shoulder, she offered an immeasurably appreciative, "Oh, Johnny. Thank

you.”

Returning the embrace, for her ears only Johnny simply whispered back, “Betty, you are most welcome.”

Johnny leaned back and finally stood, pulling Betty up with him. Facing the others he suggested, “Mr. Jessup, I’m sure your daughter would be might pleased to be heading home ‘bout now.”

Not something he often admitted, even to himself, Fredrick Jessup felt properly put in his place and totally embarrassed with his behavior and handling of his daughter’s situation. “Yes. Of course,” was all he could manage in response.

As Johnny walked Betty toward the door, Jessup regained some of his normal bravado and pompously added, “John, I’d like to pay you for tracking that man down.”

Johnny froze. Scott and Val both realized that Jessup had just been totally presumptuous and disrespectful. Even Betty understood the ramifications and looked up at Johnny, fearful of his reaction toward her father’s rudeness.

Surprisingly, with eyes firmly focused on Fredrick Jessup, Johnny merely asked, “Scott. Would you escort Miss Jessup to her carriage? I’m sure you two need to discuss when it’ll be best to visit tomorrow.”

Scott looked warily at his brother but, despite his reservations, stepped forward and answered, “Certainly.” Stretching out an elbow, he politely requested, “Miss Betty, if you’d please.” As she took the proffered arm, Scott tried to read Johnny, but was unable to discern any indication for what his brother might do.

The door opened and closed as the young couple exited. Jessup realized he’d erred in some way, but not understanding the depth of his discourtesy took a step closer to Johnny and announced, “I’m sorry to bring up payment in front of my daughter. That was, of course, unthinking of me. I am, however, grateful for what you’ve done.”

The attempted apology might have stood, but Jessup made the grave error of adding, “Whatever your going rate is for this sort of thing, I would be willing to double it.”

Johnny’s reply was quick, severe, and to the point. “I guarantee you can’t afford double my rate.” He then promptly punched Mr. Fredrick Jessup right in the face so hard the older man fell to the ground before he realized what was happening.

Ever perceptive, Val just stood nearby unmoving, having seen Johnny’s answer coming a mile away.

As soon as Jessup regained his senses, Johnny stared down at him and asked, “You mean to press charges?”

Jessup cupped a hand over his swelling eye, then sighed heavily and, with his uninjured eye, looked up. "No," came the simple reply.

Johnny turned to his friend, and in all seriousness implied the same question. "Val?"

"Free to go as far as I'm concerned," Sheriff Crawford answered back, pleased to have the whole incident come to an end.

As Jessup picked himself off the floor, Johnny turned to leave. His hand closed over the doorknob, but a truly repentant voice stopped him.

"John . . . Johnny . . . Mr. Lancer," he began haltingly, the act of contrition coming hard to the proud man. "I'm sorry. I . . . apologize."

Without turning, Johnny sternly suggested, "Apologize to your daughter, Jessup."



Johnny calmly pulled the door closed behind him, and found his brother standing beside the carriage, still chatting with Betty. As if absolutely nothing had just happened, he sidled up beside Scott and instructed, "Come along now, brother. We need to get on back to the ranch if you're gonna get all your quiltin' squares together tonight to take over to Miss Jessup's tomorrow."

To the delight of both men, Betty started giggling, just as any young girl might without a heavy weight burdening her shoulders.

Pleased to play along, Scott suggested, "I'm going to want to bring along those strings of lace you've been collecting. Heaven knows we won't be able to have a decent conversation about dressmaking without them."

"Anything I have is all yours, you know that brother," Johnny replied easily, but cautioned, "Just don't get 'em all dirty like you did the last time you was fingerin' 'em."

Betty was outright laughing now. Johnny tipped his hat to the cheerful young woman. "Miss Jessup," he stated courteously.

Scott followed suit, then stated, "Teresa and I will see you around ten, ma'am. You have a wonderful evening."

With a relaxed smile on her face, Betty released an enormous sigh of relief. "Scott and Johnny . . . thank you." The peacefulness on her face was more than enough reward for both men.

"Our pleasure ma'am," Johnny stated, Scott adding, "You are most welcome."



Hearing the door opening behind them, both men turned to find Fredrick Jessup making his way shamefacedly out of the sheriff's office. Scott could clearly see a shiner already growing around the man's left eye.

Without further acknowledgment, the brothers walked away, heading toward the livery.

"I'm disappointed in you, Johnny," Scott offered casually after a few steps.

"Brother?" Johnny questioned, not quite sure why he was being reproached.

"You led with your right," Scott offered in explanation as they continued to walk easily. "I thought a well-trained gunfighter would know better than to throw a punch with his
gun hand."

Johnny gave that comment some thought, finally answering, "Some lessons are hard learned. I'll try better next time."

"So will Jessup," Scott astutely replied. He let a moment go by before adding instructively, "Still . . . I'd of gone with a left hook."

Johnny stopped abruptly, and Scott passed him a couple of paces before he too stopped, turned, crossed his arms comfortably, and waited. The brothers faced each other openly, words of understanding not necessary between the pair. In the short time they'd known each other, their quickly formed friendship and the close harmony they shared was inexplicable but easily accepted by the pair. Smiling lightly, Johnny merely nodded, and Scott nodded back.

Continuing side by side down the street, Scott couldn't hold back his curiosity another moment. "How in the world did you think of playing that man's scar against him to make it easier for Betty?" he asked.

Johnny's head dipped and swayed in disbelief as he laughed, marveling over the fragility of his tactic. "Whooee . . . that was a risky one, brother. Wouldn't have worked if Betty hadn't of seen it. Remember when I told you that to track careful you gotta learn how to consider the obvious without thinkin' 'bout it, while lookin' for what's really important? Well, I was wrong 'bout one thing . . . sometimes you gotta pay closer attention to what's in plain sight. With those talkative hands of his, that man had been flashing that scar right in front of our faces for a whole day, but was hidin' it behind all that chatter. All I could do was hope that he'd waved it in front of Betty, too. He did, and she noticed.

"Betty caught him fair and square . . . I just showed her how to pay attention."

"Brilliant," Scott complimented, still amazed over the simple yet ingenious maneuver. "Absolutely brilliant."

The pair had reached the livery, but before they could enter, Scott pulled at his brother's arm to gain his attention. "Johnny, I'm very proud of what you did today." He held up a hand, stopping any self-effacing denials Johnny looked ready to offer. "Especially what

you did for Betty,” he continued. “You showed an enormous amount of discretion and respect back there, and I know Betty appreciated it.”

Johnny’s head bowed in embarrassment for Scott’s commendation, and he stated quietly, “It’s what I get paid to do.”

The cynically disparaging remark reflective more of Fredrick Jessup than Johnny Lancer, Scott countered, “I don’t believe that for a second. It’s what a gentleman would do. You drop all kind of false signs to get people to think you’re anything but . . . but brother, you do a poor job hiding the real truth. Because that’s what you are, Johnny, a gentleman . . . in every sense of the word.”

His head still bowed, Johnny glanced up briefly to make sure Scott wasn’t teasing him. Finding him completely serious, he took a moment to soak in the acclamation. “Cut it out, Scott,” he finally offered, squinting at him as he asked, “You tryin’ to ruin my reputation?”

“Yes,” Scott replied, quite frankly. “Every chance I get,” he added with a slap to Johnny’s shoulder.

Firming up the grasp, he led Johnny into the livery. As they saddled their rested mounts, Scott proclaimed, “You’re going to look excellent decked out in ruffles and plaid . . . I can see it now.”

“Oh no, brother,” Johnny protested, shaking his head with a grin. “One gentleman in the family is quite enough. Besides, I need to let you think you’re the best with at least one thing ‘round here. Wouldn’t do for you to be feelin’ like you weren’t good at somethin’, now would it?”

Johnny threw his hands up dramatically in mock frustration as he exclaimed, “See . . . there I go! That wasn’t very gentlemanly of me, was it?”

The excuses continued under Scott’s barely contained laughter as the brothers led their horses from the stable and mounted up for the ride home. “I tell yah, Scott . . . I gotta whole lot I still need to learn from you in order to be anywhere near as good as you at bein’ polite and all . . .”

