

# THE GREAT ROOM

## BOOKSHELF

### Volume III



A COLLECTION OF LANCER FANFICTION & GAMES

Spring 2007

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Each of us wishes we own the Lancers, but sadly, we don't!



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# The Great Room Bookshelf, Vol. III



## A Note From The Editor

Greetings once again, Lancer fans! Welcome to Volume III of a most wonderful collection of Lancer stories and games.

It is a wonder how fertile our memories and imaginations are regarding this particular genre. I remember standing in my best friend's living room watching the pilot episode on her black and white television when Johnny and Barranca made that jaw ~ dropping jump near the end. That scene was forever burned in my memory and I was instantly hooked!

Now here we are thirty ~ eight years later and the Lancer family is alive and well in another realm thanks to the internet and the bold imaginations of so many talented writers. It was such a pleasant surprise realizing I wasn't alone in my love of the show.

So read and enjoy and let the Lancers come alive in you mind's eye thanks to these contributing writers. If you like what you read, please leave feedback for the authors at <http://burfield.org/YuccaFlowerPress> because encouragement in the form of feedback means more stories in the future!

I will descend from my soapbox now and let you enjoy the 'zine and the world of Lancer.



Sincerely,  
AJ Burfield  
Poway, California  
April 22, 2007

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## Dreams (A Foley Episode Addition) By Joan Miller

### Chapter 1 - Scott's Dream

Scott sat up abruptly, gasping for breath. He tossed back the covers and quickly climbed out of bed. The polished floor boards felt cool and somehow comforting under his feet. His bare chest glistened with sweat, the fine, golden hairs curling tightly against his fair skin. Grabbing a towel from the wash stand, Scott slowly wiped it over his face and torso.

The dream was still crystal clear in his mind; he hoped it would fade soon. In it he had been unable to protect Polly Foley, and he had awakened just as her baby was being torn from her arms by her unrelenting father-in-law. But the thing he remembered most vividly was the fact that his family had not been there. He had been alone to face the enemy.

Scott knew he had no reason to dwell on the dream. Polly and her infant daughter Martha were sleeping down the hall – though he had to admit to a strong temptation to go check they were really alright. Murdoch and Johnny were also safe in their rooms.

He tried to analyze the causes behind the dream. He was sure if he could just understand it, the dream's hold on him would be broken. He had found the whole experience with Polly quite unsettling. He knew that Johnny believed he had been deceived by Polly, but he had known she was lying – though she was indeed very good at it. He smiled slightly at the thought. He wasn't exactly sure how much had been truth and how much lies, but he had been sure of one thing. The girl was afraid and needed his help.

Johnny had been surprised that Polly hadn't taken the money and sold her baby to her violent in-laws. It made Scott wonder about her past, and just how that past had intersected with his younger brother's.

Now Polly didn't seem to want the money at all. She had finally accepted Murdoch's suggestion that the funds, all three thousand dollars, be deposited in the bank and only used when and if they were needed to guarantee a secure future for baby Martha. And it was Murdoch who had helped Polly decide on what would be best for her and her baby. Scott had been surprised at how much effort his father had put into ensuring the future prospects of the Foleys, but on reflection he decided it wasn't so unexpected after all. Scott didn't know much about Johnny's childhood years with his mother, but he had a feeling that it was a time filled with poverty and instability. Murdoch would do anything to ensure the new life under his roof had a sound start and never suffered from want or neglect.

Polly and her daughter were heading to Sacramento, where the lovely young widow would work in a dressmaker's shop that catered to a well-to-do clientele. Sometime he would have to ask Murdoch just how he knew the wealthy older woman who ran the store and who had agreed to take on a new assistant. Scott chuckled to himself. He was sure Murdoch had gotten the idea when they had witnessed Polly's excitement as Teresa had helped her put together a few nice dresses. It was clear she loved pretty things.

Scott pulled open the top drawer of his heavy mahogany dresser and lifted out a scarf and silver pin that he had purchased in town earlier that day – a going away present for Polly. Was it too extravagant? He suspected that it was the longing for beautiful things that had led to Polly's ill-fated marriage into the Foley family. He set the items carefully back in the drawer and closed it firmly. Polly and her daughter deserved beauty in their lives and Scott intended to do his part to provide it. He hoped Murdoch's friend would write now and then to let them know how Polly was getting along. He was sure he wouldn't be the only one thinking about her. Again he wondered about Johnny's relationship with the former saloon girl.

Moving slowly back over to his bed, Scott smiled to himself. It had felt good to help Polly Foley, and even better that he and his family had stood together against the enemy. He felt that his brother had come to respect his ability and his judgment. Johnny had admitted that his big brother had been right about Polly. Scott felt a prick of conscience that he had accused Johnny of wanting to sell the girl out in exchange for their father's safety. He knew Johnny would have helped her, for the sake of the child if for no other reason, even if he had continued to doubt her.

Now Polly was about to move on to a new life, just as he had done; and she had a family to care for, just as he did. He hoped she would be as happy in her new life as he was in his. With a contented sigh, he swung his feet back up on the bed and pulled up the covers.

## **Chapter 2 - Johnny's Dream**

Johnny leaned back against the headboard. He could hear Scott moving around in the room next door, and wondered if he too was having trouble sleeping. A frown creased Johnny's forehead. He knew that Scott had been deeply affected by their run-in with the Foleys, and although the experience had brought them all closer as a family, it had left him with a lingering sense of unease. He suspected the situation was the same for his older brother.

Polly would be leaving them tomorrow morning. Johnny wasn't sure if he was glad or sorry to see her go. He had worried some about Scott's obvious interest in Polly; he just couldn't quite figure out exactly what that interest was. Scott clearly felt protective of her, as if his job was not complete. Maybe once she was settled in Sacramento, Scott could relax and move on.

Although Johnny had admitted to misjudging her, he felt sure that Polly was not the woman for Scott, and he took comfort that Polly herself seemed to feel only gratitude for all that Scott had done for her. Not that he would let himself be guilty of judging her again; Johnny was well aware he did not have that right. He knew how it felt. There were a good many fine citizens of the Green River area who would not want their daughters to show too much interest in a man with his background. The fact that he was Murdoch Lancer's son kept them from prohibiting a date for a Saturday night dance or a church social, but he suspected it would be a different story if there was a hint of a serious romance.

He knew Scott wouldn't have that problem. His attentions to any local beauty would be welcomed by her family. But he also knew Scott might have trouble finding the right girl out here. He would surely want a well educated woman, one who was his intellectual equal. Johnny felt a sudden bolt of fear. What if his brother decided to return east when the time came to settle down and start a family?

No, he wouldn't sell his brother short. Scott was fully committed to Lancer and the surrounding area. He was already talking about helping to start a school in Green River. Johnny felt a surge of pride that was beginning to be very familiar where his brother was concerned. A grin slipped across his dark features. A school could mean a smart and pretty teacher lady, perfect for Scott, provided Johnny didn't meet her first. No, and the smile left his face as quickly as it had come, like does better with like, he thought.

He found himself wondering about his own parents. Had that been the problem? Had Murdoch and Maria been too different to ever be happy together? And what about Scott's mother? Had she been a better choice for their father? Johnny viciously squelched his runaway thoughts. He knew that was the road to divisive jealousy, and he was determined not to envy the love and respect he believed Murdoch still held for Catherine Garrett. Besides, Catherine had been rich and educated, and she had chosen a man who at the time must have been a common laborer. He knew his father loved books. His bookshelves were full to overflowing with well-worn copies of what Scott called classics. But had he been an educated man in his native Scotland? That his father had not been born and raised a California rancher had come as a shock to Johnny. There was just so much he didn't know, he thought sadly.

He forced his mind back to the present situation. He and Polly had finally had a good talk the night before last. They had been alone in the great room that evening, as the rest of the Lancer family had been attending a special church service in Green River. Johnny had studied her dark head, bent lovingly over her baby. It was still hard for him to reconcile this woman with the one he had known before, but he was sure she loved Martha. He was worried for Martha though. His mama had loved him too, but it had not always been enough. Many times she could not look after him; often he had gone to bed hungry and often he'd had nothing to wear but rags. He knew his family wondered about his flamboyant taste in clothes, but how could he explain it was a need rooted in his past, a time that as Murdoch said was "past and gone".

He had been proud of the way Murdoch had stepped up to help Polly settle her future. He knew part of the reason had to do with his own childhood, but he also knew Murdoch's innate sense of compassion had much to do with it.

Johnny thought about the gift he had made for Martha, braided leather that could be used to decorate the crib Murdoch planned to buy in Sacramento. He hoped Polly would like it. She had often admired the braid work he wore on his jacket.

He had been surprised when Polly had asked him if he wanted to hold the baby. He had accepted the offer though, recognizing the importance of her show of trust in him. As he had carefully cuddled the sleeping baby snugly to his chest, he had felt her warmth seeping into his soul, and had to acknowledge (only to himself, of course) a hope that one day he would have a child of his own.

He tried to concentrate on the conversation that he and Polly had while he had held the small bundle rather awkwardly in his arms. He wondered how Scott had looked so natural holding her the day she was born. It seemed unlikely that he'd had much contact with babies in his social circle in Boston. Johnny would have to ask him about that.

Again he yanked his wandering thoughts back into focus. The two of them had talked about their shared past. Polly had always been perceptive and she was aware of his discomfort at having her

there, at his family knowing they had been acquainted in days gone by. It wasn't that he resented her exactly. It was that unexpected nudge from his past that made Johnny so uncomfortable. Not that he was ashamed of his past, not really. There were some things he would change if he could, but wouldn't everyone say that? And he was proud of his skill with a gun. There was just so much he did not want to share with his newfound family, not yet. He had to hand it to them though – no one had asked him how he knew Polly Foley.

Not that she had been Polly Foley then. In fact he had no idea what her last name had been. She was just Polly, saloon girl and singer at a bar down south. He used to stop in there every month or so, as long as business in that area was good, which it usually was. People always found something to fight about down around the border. They had struck up a friendship of sorts, as much of a friendship as he had dared to have with anyone. He knew she had stretched the truth a good bit back then, especially if there was a chance he had some extra dollars to share, but he found himself believing her now, believing that she planned to work hard and do everything she could to justify the Lancer family's faith in her. He knew she was doing it for Martha, and he was satisfied that her intentions were good. But he knew from experience that good intentions weren't always enough. He would have to remind Murdoch to ask the friend who had agreed to hire Polly to be sure to send them regular updates on how she and Martha were getting on.

Johnny sighed and wondered if he could get back to sleep. He hadn't had that dream since his first night at Lancer. Having a home he could call his own seemed to have driven many of his demons away. Life was good now that he had a family to trust and who trusted him. He swallowed hard as he thought again of his mother and the day she had died. How often had he dreamt of kneeling helplessly over her still body, weeping for her and for his younger self? Only this time the dream had changed, and it was Polly lying there, and the crying child whose eyes he was seeing through was undoubtedly Martha. He shook his head angrily. So much for his childhood being past and gone! There was no need to relive all that now.

Resisting the temptation to get up and pace the floor, he scooted down in the bed, and snuggled under the covers, wriggling slightly to find the most comfortable spot, determined to get some much needed rest.

### **Chapter 3 – Polly's Dream**

Polly sat in the comfortable chair that Mr. Lancer had kindly placed by her window. She had spent many happy hours here since her arrival at Lancer, cradling her baby in her arms and watching the activity of the courtyard. She smiled as she recalled seeing Johnny thrown from the horse he was trying to break – though at the time she'd been afraid he'd been hurt – and watching Scott repair the barn roof. She had been surprised at how comfortable Scott had seemed at such a height. His explanation when she asked him about it, that he'd had some practice escaping through upper story windows, had puzzled her. Had he run away from home often as a child? He didn't seem the sort. Perhaps he had been unhappy living in Boston, although it had certainly sounded wonderful in the stories he had told her about attending fancy balls and the theatre.

Her smile faded as she remembered why she was sitting here in the dead of night, Martha sound asleep in the cradle by her side. Mr. Lancer told her he had made that cradle for Johnny. She still found it hard to believe that Johnny Madrid had been born in such luxury. Oh, she knew it wouldn't have been quite like this back then, but it was still so much better than anything she had known. Of



course, she now understood that it was much better than anything Johnny had known as well – he couldn't remember his brief early life in this place.

She looked around her. In the glow of the full moon, she could clearly make out the lovely wallpaper, the pretty floral bedspread, and the intricate lace runner on the dresser. It was the nicest room she had ever seen, let alone stayed in. And tomorrow she would have to leave all this. She wished she could stay. She felt cared for here, a new experience for her. Even in her earliest childhood, she couldn't remember her parents worrying about her. They were too busy fighting with each other to care what she did, so she had run at the first opportunity. But the young man had soon left her and her only means of support had been working the saloons. She had been little more than a child then. She sighed. She would ensure a better life for her precious Martha, she swore to herself yet again.

She knew that in order to do that she had to move on and make a fresh start. She had quickly sensed Johnny's discomfort at having her there, a reminder of his past, a reminder he did not need as he tried hard to succeed at his own fresh start. She wondered about Scott – was he uncomfortable with her too? He had been very kind to her, very protective, but she could not lean on him forever. She would have to make it on her own, make good at the job and the new life Mr. Lancer had arranged for her. And it was more than a job, it was a home too. He had told her that the store owner, Mrs. Matheson, lived in a roomy flat above the shop, and that Polly and Martha would have adjoining bed and sitting rooms of their very own. Polly was excited over the prospect of a real home. Due to the Foley family's criminal activities, she and Frank had been constantly on the move, and she craved the stability of putting down roots. Martha needed the security that a home would bring. She had worried about furnishings, but Mr. Lancer had assured her that between him and Mrs. Matheson that problem would be looked after. She was still rather offended that he had insisted on accompanying her to Sacramento, to "help her get settled" he had said. She couldn't help but feel he didn't trust her to actually go there. She ruthlessly stifled the thought. All the Lancers had been nothing but kind to her. For everything to work out, she had to continue to trust in them.

Polly was truly grateful for the Lancers' help. They had all done so much for her, but without making her feel like a charity case. She was scared though, not just for herself but for Martha, especially for Martha. What if she failed?

She thought again of her dream, the one that had driven her from her bed, to seek the peace and comfort she found sitting in this chair. A nameless, faceless Foley had wrenched a screaming Martha from her arms and she had been helpless to stop it. She had called for help, but no one had come. She had been calling desperately for Scott and Johnny when she had awakened, and then hoped just as desperately that she hadn't been calling their names out loud. But no one had come, and her heart rate had slowly returned to normal. It was just a dream, wasn't it? Even so, she thought she'd sit up and watch over her beloved Martha just a little bit longer.





## A Different Type of Housekeeper

By Janet Brayden

Spring was in the air at Lancer, in Morro Coyo, Green River and Spanish Wells. It was obvious the way the grass was turning green, the waterholes were filling up, new foals and calves were being born and by the way the dust was flying in the air as rugs were hung over clotheslines and beaten and dust rags and feather dusters attacked furniture and everything else in the houses at Lancer and in the homes of the Prankster Posse's families.

Felicia Portillo, Rachel Millar and Susan Mays were cleaning house. Their sons and husbands had left immediately after breakfast was finished. Or, rather, they tried to. Kevin, Willie and Rico were roped into helping their mothers by moving furniture around for them that the women couldn't begin to move. All three young men were looking for a way to escape just as soon as they could.. The bright sun and warm breezes were beckoning them to the great outdoors only their mothers seemed to be oblivious to that.

Fortunately for Willie and Rico their families lived in small and medium sized houses. Kevin was not so lucky for the house at the Rocking M was three stories high. Kevin was the next to oldest of five children in his family. His older brother, Brian, was married and lived near Stockton where he worked as a cattle buyer. Sarah, Lori and Kelly, the three youngest children, ranged in age from twenty down to twelve. The girls were helping their mother by polishing furniture and washing walls, woodwork and windows. Rachel herself was scrubbing floors and shelves in the kitchen and blacking the stove.

The first chance Kevin got, which was a couple of hours after lunch, he took off for the barn, saddled Eagle, and headed for Lancer where he hoped things would be quieter. He was wrong. If anything it was busier at Lancer than at the Rocking M for Jelly Hoskins, the Lancer handyman, had decided that the barn needed a good cleaning as well as the house and Murdoch had agreed. It wasn't just dust that was flying in the barn and the stable – it was straw and hay. Truth be told it was probably fur as well for those that were working under Jelly's direction, including Johnny and Scott, were ready to wring the old man's neck for being so bossy.

"A job worth doin' is worth doin' right – the first time," Jelly said. "Tim! Look out there with that harness! Get it up off the ground and onto that fence so's you can clean it proper! Johnny that saddle you're carryin's draggin' on the ground as well. Get it up before you have to polish the buckles all over again! Who's got the broom? It's time we got these stalls and aisles cleaned out good and proper. I never saw such a messy stable in all my born days!"

"How's the cleaning going, Jelly?" Murdoch asked as he arrived home from Morro Coyo.

"It'd go a whole heap better iffen certain parties paid more attention to what they're doin'?" the grizzled one complained. "Tim, I done told you not more than two minutes ago to get that harness up off the ground! Now look at it – it's gonna take you the rest of the day to clean and oil it proper!" Jelly hustled over to where the young man in question was attempting to wrestle a harness with twelve-foot long reins over to the corral fence so he could clean it.

“How much longer do we have to put up with this, Murdoch?” Scott wanted to know as he wiped his face with a bandana.

“As long as it takes to get the job done,” his father replied. “Jelly’s right, you know. The barn and the stable haven’t had a really good cleaning for a long time. You’ll need to check for hay that’s gone moldy and get rid of it before it starts a fire.”

Scott put the bandana back in his pocket and turned resignedly back toward the barn. He was met halfway back by Johnny who was carrying two saddles, two bridles and the blankets that went with them. He put them up on the fence and grinned as he saw his three pals riding into the barnyard together.

“Hi Kev! Rico. Willie. Good to see you.”

“Hi!” the other three chorused back.

“We thought we’d ride over and see if you wanted to go fishing but I guess you won’t be able to, huh?” Kevin was disappointed.

“Nope. Gotta keep at this until Jelly’s satisfied. Care to lend a hand?”

“Not really,” Willie said with a grin, “but we will. The sooner you’re done the sooner we get out of here. At least it’s not moving furniture which we all done at home this morning.”

“Maybe not,” Johnny grimaced as he saw Jelly approaching again, “but I’ll bet your mothers don’t bark orders at you the way Jelly does.”

“Here now, what’s going on? Don’t you boys have anything better to do than disrupt our work here?”

“Jelly, my friend,” Willie said with a grin at the bewhiskered one, “this is your lucky day. You’ve just inherited three more workers.”

“Is that right? Well then put them horses of yours in the corral and get busy moving hay bales out to this end of the barn and the straw bales out to the other end. We’ll put them back when the place is spic and span.”

“Who’s ‘we?’” Johnny wanted to know. “I don’t see you doing any of the heavy work.”

“Somebody’s got to boss this job or it ain’t gonna get done right,” Jelly huffed.

“You’re bossing it all right, Jelly,” Scott agreed. “You’re pushing your luck, too,” he added under his breath, “and sooner or later somebody’s going to rebel.”

The new comers quickly turned their mounts loose in the currently empty paddock near the barn and joined in with the work crew hoping to finish in time to go fishing. They’d even take old sober sides Scott along with them if they had to. They liked Scott well enough but they did find him a

little too serious minded at the times that they most wanted to have some fun. However, they took care never to call him ‘old sober sides’ to his face.

Kevin and Johnny tackled the job of moving the hay bales out to the south end of the barn. Willie and Rico helped Scott and Walt move the bales of straw out to the other end. Frank was taking an inventory of each plus the bags of grain so that Murdoch would know what he needed to order in Green River next time he went to town.

In the house Teresa and Maria had already scrubbed the upstairs rooms, both declaring Johnny’s to be the worst, and Murdoch’s little area in the Great Room around his desk. They were now in the kitchen taking stock of the supplies stored in the pantry. Juanita and Josefina had taken on the job of the largest area of the Great Room itself including dusting the furniture and books, cleaning the lamps and, with a little help from Randy Bennett, were now cleaning the chandelier.

Randy had been tasked to help the women with chores like that and to carry the rugs out and drape them over the line. He was hauling the heavy buckets of water and ensuring that they had all the firewood they needed with which to heat it.

The work at the barn progressed quicker now that there were three extra pairs of hands. The work of cleaning the tack, and harness, draped over the paddock fence was constantly in disarray because Kevin’s horse, Coco, was as much of a clown as his master and he kept pulling the blankets off the fence and dropping them. Out of sheer desperation the gelding was finally haltered and tied to the fence on the other side of the paddock to keep him from disrupting Tim’s work.

Willie’s horse, Moe – short for Molasses due to his color (Johnny would say due to the way he moved) was busy munching on some hay that one of the cowhands had obligingly dropped in to the paddock for them. Eagle, however, apparently had other things on his mind. He wanted to help.

Nobody ever found out where he learned how to do it, but Eagle sauntered over to the gate, reached over and got hold of the latch with his teeth. He pulled the latch back and opened the gate, then he wandered over to the ramp into the barn where he stopped and picked up a broom that someone had dropped just inside the doorway.

When Johnny and Kevin got to that doorway they were greeted by a sight so amazing to them that they dropped the bales of hay they were carrying and their jaws dropped. Turning toward the other end of the barn they hollered for Rico.

“Hey, Rico!” Johnny called. “Come down here will ya?”

“You have to see this,” Kevin added.

The noise attracted everyone within earshot but it wasn’t often that Johnny Lancer sounded amazed at anything and he definitely sounded surprised now.

The group that gathered at the south end of the barn saw an amazing sight – a horse sweeping the floor. Nearly everybody in attendance was amazed. Nearly everybody. Rico, the proud owner of

said horse, was not in the least bit surprised and laughed at the expressions on everybody else's faces.

"What's the matter – haven't you ever seen a housekeeper at work before?" he asked with a big grin as he reached out and took the broom from Eagle and leaned it against the nearest wall.

"Yeah," Kevin said, "I've seen housekeepers and I've seen housekeepers that were horse-faced but I've never seen a horse that was a housekeeper!"

"Eagle's just a different kind of housekeeper," Rico said as he led Eagle back to the paddock. "He's a horse-housekeeper."

*Author's Note: This little story was inspired by a picture in the book on horses that Rita bought me in Quechee, VT. The author of the book said that the horse in the picture belongs to them and he likes to make people think that he really can sweep the floor even though he really just holds the broom in his teeth. I thought it was the perfect opportunity to write a story based on a picture.*





## Carl Freeman's Boy By Ros

"Hey, Johnny!" Jelly called out as he jumped down from the wagon. "Got a note for ya."

"For me? Who from?" Johnny ambled over to the wagon. For a change, work had kept him close to home today. They had invested in a dozen head of unbroken horses for the remuda and he was looking them over with the intention of breaking them in later in the week.

Scott climbed down from his side of the wagon and took his hat off to swipe away the dust from his clothes. No rain in two months had left the land dry and the roads like a dustbowl. He looked up at Jelly's call with considerable interest. It was the first he'd heard of any note and it wasn't like Jelly to be able to keep anything to himself.

"Can't say as I know her, Johnny," Jelly informed him. "New ta town, I reckon. Handsome woman, though." He emphasized it with a wink at Scott.

"You move fast, Brother," Scott told him, grinning.

Johnny smiled wickedly and snapped the note out of Jelly's proffered fingers. He only glanced at it before tucking it under his belt and strolling towards the house.

"Ain't ya gonna read it?" Jelly called to him.

"Later," Johnny answered without turning.

"Aren't you going to help unload all this?" Scott shouted after him.

"Nope." Johnny turned around to face them both, walking backwards while he grinned wryly and added, "I've got me a note to read." With a laugh, he turned back and continued on his way to disappear through the doorway.

Jelly scowled his dissatisfaction. "You didn't read it, huh?" Scott asked him with a mischievous smile.

"None o' my business," Jelly growled and unlatched the tail gate of the wagon to lower it. He pulled out a coil of new store bought rope and tossed it to one side so that he could reach in for the heavier supplies. "She said ta give it to him privately. If he wants ta read it in private, well, that's his say so."

"Privately, huh?" Scott asked. "Do you call that 'private', yelling it out in the middle of the yard?"

Jelly scowled at him again. "There was just us an' him. You gonna tell anyone?"

"No."

“Well, I ain’t. An’ I don’t reckon he is, so that’s private, ain’t it?”

Scott shook his head at Jelly’s reasoning. He walked to the back of the wagon and pulled out a sack of oats, then threw it over his shoulder and walked towards the barn with it.

Jelly followed with another sack and threw it down on top of the one Scott had dropped. “It ain’t none o’ my never mind, o’ course, but she didn’t seem like Johnny’s usual style,” he commented.

“How so?”

“Well, she was kinda more mature’n the gals he usually sparks.”

“Mature, huh?” Scott remarked, smiling. “Just how ‘mature’?”

“Oh, maybe in her thirties.”

“Not exactly over the hill, Jelly,” Scott laughed.

Jelly stopped and pulled on his suspenders aggressively. “Well, I know that!” he told him gruffly. “Sides, there’s the boy.”

Scott was half way to the barn door and stopped, turning around to stare at Jelly. “What boy?”

“Well, I didn’t see him, but Clive, at the store, he says she’s got a boy ‘bout twelve.”

Scott found himself curious about the mystery woman. Like Jelly, he told himself that it was none of his business, but he was beginning to get a niggling sensation at the nape of his neck. It never did augur well.

“What else did Clive say?”

Jelly walked past him to the wagon and pulled out another sack. “It weren’t none o’ my business, but you know how that man just lets his mouth run on.”

“And?”

“Seems she only turned up day ‘fore yesterday. Been holed up in a hotel room with the boy,” Jelly told him. “That brother o’ yours sure moved quick.”

Scott frowned. “Jelly, Johnny hasn’t been to town since last Saturday. He couldn’t have met her already.”

Jelly pulled on his whiskers and considered it. “Maybe she knows him from somewheres.”

“Maybe,” Scott answered, distracted.

Jelly turned back to the sacks and hauled out another one. Throwing it over his shoulder, he walked past Scott. "Well, it ain't none o' my business anyhow," he repeated, and disappeared into the barn.



Half an hour later, with the wagon unloaded, Scott made his way into the house. He was determined to find his brother and find out who the woman was. It might not be something Johnny wanted to talk about, but that niggling feeling at the back of his neck had become an itch that needed to be scratched. Scott was sure that note meant trouble.

He'd figured that he would find Johnny in his room, probably with the door closed, seeking privacy. But he was wrong. Johnny stood at the vast French doors behind Murdoch's desk. He was leaning one shoulder against the wall, his arms folded across his chest, staring out at the driveway and the arch and obviously lost in thought.

"Hi," Scott said amiably as he walked into the room.

Johnny looked over at him, then turned back to the window. "Hi."

He sounded less than enthusiastic. "Something you want to talk about?" Scott asked him.

Johnny shifted his feet and glanced down at them for an instant before turning his face back to the window. "Why, you curious?"

"A little," Scott admitted. "As long as it's not trouble..."

Johnny turned his head towards his brother then straightened up.

"Scott, you're turning into one hell of a pessimist," he replied with a wicked smile.

"Then I've been around you for too long, Brother." Scott took a place on the sofa and dumped his hat onto the seat beside him. "Pardon me if most of the time I'm right."

"Well, this time you're not," Johnny assured him. With his back still against the wall and his arms still crossed, he added, "The note's from a lady in town who wants to meet me. Nothin' wrong with that."

"Jelly says she's only been in town a day or so. You can't have met her in that time."

Johnny's eyes gleamed. "Then maybe word's got out about me. She just had to meet me."

Scott couldn't help but chuckle. "A somewhat debatable theory, Little Brother."

Johnny smiled, then dropped his chin to his chest for a moment of thought and sighed. "Actually, there's nothing for you to worry about. She's the widow of a man I used to know is all. I'll go into town tomorrow and catch up with her."



“Oh,” Scott answered, relieved. “A close friend?”

“Nope, just someone I used to know.”

Scott wasn’t as relieved now. There was something about Johnny’s demeanor that didn’t sit right with him. “So, she’s just passing through and looked you up.”

“Guess so,” he answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

“And she knew that you’re Johnny Lancer?” he asked but got no reply. “And that you’re living here at the ranch now?”

Apparently, Johnny had had enough. He pushed off the wall and headed across the room. As he passed Scott, he answered. “Like you said, she’s just passin’ through an’ wants to see me.”

As he passed, Scott added, “She and the boy.”

Johnny came to an abrupt halt, but didn’t turn around. Scott couldn’t see the expression on his face, but he figured that it was one of surprise... at the very least.

“Boy?”

“She has a twelve year old son with her,” Scott told him. “Didn’t you know about him?”

“No.”

“I see.” Actually, he didn’t and he was worried. “I think I should go into town with you,” Scott suggested suddenly.

“No need,” Johnny replied. He still hadn’t turned around and that gave Scott reason to be further concerned.

“I know, but...”

Johnny’s shoulders slumped. He still didn’t turn around but answered with a weary tone, “Just leave it, Scott. I wanta do this on my own. I’m not walkin’ into an ambush and I don’t need someone to watch my back this time. Okay?”

Scott knew when to cut his losses. He picked up the hat from beside him and stood up, then walked over to Johnny’s side. “Okay. If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure,” Johnny assured him and walked to the staircase.

He put one hand on the railing and seemed to trudge up the stairs towards his room. Scott watched him go with a feeling of unease mixed with a twinge of irritation. Sometimes Johnny’s way of handling things was downright infuriating. He was obviously upset by the prospect of meeting the woman, but his determination to do it alone was pretty final.

Scott sighed heavily. Sometimes, it just had to be enough to be there to pick up the pieces.



Johnny rode into Green River slow and easy. He'd tried not to think too hard about why Carl Freeman's widow would ask to see him. It made no sense and, despite his assurances to Scott, he was pretty sure that nothing good was likely to come from it.

But he wasn't one to walk away from trouble, so that was that. He considered stopping at the saloon first for a little false courage, but that idea was quickly cast aside. Instead, he stopped at the general store – orders from Teresa who had left one item off her shopping list for Scott the day before. Apparently, she couldn't get by for another week without a reel of pink thread and, since he was coming to town anyway, had insisted on his picking it up.

He dismounted and lazily tied the reins to the hitching post outside the store, then wandered in. As he passed them, he glanced at the pair of boys loitering outside the door and then noticed the noisy group of children playing across the street.

Taking his hat off and letting his eyes adjust to the dimmer light inside, he dusted the hat against his jeans and grinned at the shopkeeper. "Mornin' Clive," he said cheerfully.

"Well, Johnny Lancer, what are you doing here? Scott forget something?" the man answered agreeably.

"Nah, Teresa left somethin' off the list. You...er..." Johnny hesitated and looked around to make sure there was no one behind him. "You got pink thread?"

Clive smiled. "Sure thing, Johnny," he told him.

The man turned away to get it and Johnny looked around the store and then out the window, bored. The two boys he'd passed coming in were still hanging around the front door – twelve year olds he figured, looking for mischief. He watched them more closely for a moment, certain that he knew what they were up to.

"Here you are, Johnny," Clive said behind him.

Johnny turned back and walked to the counter to pay the man. "School out?" he asked conversationally.

Clive scowled and then sighed. "Yeah, out for summer. Kids running riot all over town and just looking for trouble," he said dismally. "The worst two are that pair outside. Damn, there they go again!"

Johnny looked back over his shoulder, just in time to see the two culprits scamper away.

"There goes another two apples," Clive growled.

Johnny turned his attention back to the storekeeper. "Happenin' a lot?"

"That pair are out there every day. I can't keep my eye on them all the time so, the minute my back is turned, off they run off with them."

Johnny took the tiny package. "Well, thanks for the thread, Clive. I'll see you next time."

He ambled out onto the sidewalk and stopped. He looked both ways without seeing either of them, then a suspicion occurred to him. He walked to the corner of the building and stuck his head around the corner.

"Hey there, boys," he said with a smile.

Both jumped in fright and each quickly ducked one hand behind their backs. "Hi Johnny!" they said in unison.

Johnny turned the corner to join them. "Those apples good?"

For a moment, he thought they would try to deny it, but they hung their heads a little. "We just got hungry, Johnny. We didn't mean no harm."

"That right, Tommy?" Johnny asked the second boy. He nodded.

"You get hungry yesterday too?" Johnny asked.

The boys looked at each other in surprise and neither answered.

Johnny sighed. "Listen, you two think you can stay outa trouble till Friday?"

"Why?" Tommy asked him.

"Well, we've got some horses need breakin' out at Lancer. Thought you might wanta come watch the fun," Johnny suggested. "Course, there's two conditions."

They looked at him expectantly. "What are they?" Tommy demanded eagerly.

"First, your parents have to say you can come," Johnny explained. "And second, you have to stay outa trouble till then." He almost laughed at the cherubic expressions on their faces. He knew better. "If I hear of either of you gettin' into mischief, the deal's off."

"We can do it, Johnny," Tommy insisted. "Right Matt?"

"Sure, we won't get into no trouble, promise," Matt agreed.

"Okay, I'll check on that," he assured them. He pulled a penny from his back pocket and flipped it to Tommy. "Take that to Mr. Richards for the apples."

“Ah, Johnny, he don’t even know ‘bout ‘em,” Matt complained.

“He knows,” Johnny assured him with a scowl. “An’ that ain’t the point. You both apologize an’ quit swipin’ his apples. You’re lucky he hasn’t told your folks what you’ve been up to. Got it?”

“Yes, Johnny,” they replied, in unison once again.

“Good. I’ll see you both at the ranch on Friday... if you can do like I said. Stay outa trouble.”

He left them then and walked across the street to the hotel.



Johnny stood at the door to her room, his hand up and poised to knock on it. But he stopped. Once again, he wondered what she could possibly want with him. He knew there was only one way to find out and that was to see her, but his nerves twitched just thinking about it.

He straightened his shoulders and swallowed hard, then knocked.

“Come in, Mr. Lancer,” a voice said from the other side of the door. ‘Lancer’... that seemed like a good start. Why hadn’t she said ‘Madrid’?

He opened the door and looked into the room. The hotel in Green River wasn’t exactly up to the same standard as those fancy San Francisco places, but it was tidy, clean and comfortable. The furniture in the rooms was always polished and the lamps always clean.

But there was no need for a lamp at this hour of the day. He could see Alice Freeman clearly. She stood by an armchair and table, placed opposite the doorway. She was taller than most women, with fair hair pulled back into a stylish chignon and a light complexion, a handsome face and neat, if slightly unfashionable, clothes.

“Good morning, Mr. Lancer. I’m Alice Freeman,” she said quietly. “Won’t you come in?” As an afterthought, she added, “And please, close the door. I don’t think either of us wants everyone to hear what we have to say to each other.”

He did as she asked, taking a step inside the room and gently pulling the door closed behind him. There he stood, looking at her and unsure of himself – for once.

“I won’t bite,” she said with a smile. “Would you like a cup of coffee? It’s freshly made.”

She indicated the cups and pot on the little lace-covered table behind her.

“No, thanks,” he replied, even more confused. She was being awfully polite and he didn’t know what to think.

She sat in the armchair next to the table. She brushed her skirt into place, keeping her eyes away from him while she did. It suddenly occurred to Johnny that she might well be just as uncomfortable as he was. This couldn't be easy for her either.

She looked up at him again and seemed to have put her feelings aside again. "I'm sure you're curious as to why I asked you here," she said calmly.

'Understatement', Johnny thought quickly, but what he answered was simply, "Yes, Ma'am."

"I would prefer 'Mrs. Freeman'," she told him, then she threw her hands up a little in frustration. "Oh, do sit down somewhere! I don't want to have to look up at you."

Without a word, Johnny walked slowly over to the bed and sat down on the extreme edge of it. None of this felt right.

"Thank you," she said with relief in her voice. She seemed to have gotten herself back into that strangely calm mood. "I'm sure you realize this is rather difficult for me."

He nodded, clasped his hands lightly on his lap and glanced down at them.

"I have come here to beg a favor of you," she explained and he looked up in surprise. She ignored it and continued. "I have a son, Tyler. I don't imagine you knew about him... or me..."

"No."

"No, Carl was careful about that." She stopped for a moment, then went on. "Tyler adored Carl, as you can imagine. He was young when his father died, just seven, but he was old enough to remember him and know what he lost. He's heard all the stories about how he died, but he's come to believe his own version of events."

Johnny said nothing, preferring to let her keep talking. It was obviously hard for her, and he couldn't find any words to add anyway. He pulled his eyes away from his hands and looked towards her.

"I'm worried about him. The older he gets, the more fixated he is becoming with revenge. He wants to kill the man who gunned down his father." She stopped and stared right into Johnny's eyes before she finished. "He wants to kill Johnny Madrid."

And there it was. He'd known that, sooner or later, it was going to be said, but not in that context. He was taken aback.

"Then why bring him here?" he asked, coolly putting aside the surprise. "If you're so afraid for him, why bring him here?"

She sighed heavily. "I can't talk to him about it. I know he's only a boy, but he's on the verge of manhood now and..." She stopped and looked away for a moment, to collect herself. "I might not always be there for him. I dread what he might do if he were alone in the world."

Johnny frowned. "Kind of a pessimistic way o' lookin' at things, Mrs. Freeman."

She glared at him. "Perhaps." Then she pulled back on her tightly controlled emotions again. "But I want you to talk to him."

"Me?" This time he was shocked. "What do you want me to do? Apologize for killing his father?"

"No," she answered flatly. "I don't expect that of you. I'm well aware of the circumstances of my husband's death. I made sure of them when it happened."

'The circumstances...' Johnny thought. An image came to him of a dusty San Diego street and a man facing him twenty yards away... both of them ready to risk losing their lives for the sake of a reputation. He saw again the flicker in Freeman's eyes that warned him, the man's hand reach down - going for his gun. And Carl Freeman had been good - fast. It had been a real competition for both of them... and Johnny had won that one.

Carl Freeman had lost.

"Carl was a gunfighter," she said bluntly. "I knew it when I married him and I knew it when I bore him a son. Oh, I hoped he'd give it up and settle down once Ty was born, but that wasn't Carl. I also knew that he was going to call you out."

Another shock. Johnny stared at her.

"He wanted better pay and the only way he could demand that was to build his reputation. He told me about an up and coming young gunfighter named Madrid. You'd built quite a name for yourself, even then. Carl thought that he could take you and improve his own status."

It sounded strange coming from this woman. She was elegant and obviously educated and yet she talked about gunhawks and gunfighting as though it were second nature to her.

Silence fell on the room as Johnny digested her words and she had no more to add for now.

He fidgeted, first with his hands and then with the one of the silver conches on his pants, thinking. Finally, he glanced back at her. "I'm not sure what you want me to do then," he said quietly.

"I want him to meet you. I want him to see that you're not the cold-blooded murderer that he's imagined you to be."

"How do you know I ain't?" he asked coolly.

She smiled. "Oh, I know that you've given it all up. I know that you're a rancher now and trying to live down your past. It was what I always hoped Carl might do some day. I rather admire you for trying."

"If your boy is as angry as you say, nothing I say will change his mind." Johnny knew all about that kind of anger. That gunfight had been five years ago, so the boy had to be around twelve now. He

remembered himself at that age – motherless and angry at the world... and particularly at the father who had ‘thrown them out’ and left him and his mother to the life they’d been forced to live.

“I want him to see you for what you are now, without knowing what you were, yet,” she explained. “Let him get to know you first.”

“I don’t know,” he answered warily. “It don’t seem like a good idea to me. An’ I’m not used to bein’ ‘round kids a lot.”

She smiled at last. “I watched you across the road. I saw you ride into town...”

“You knew who I was?”

“Mr. Lancer, I was married to a gunfighter for eight years. I can recognize one from a mile away. The way you tie down your gun is a give-away.”

“Oh.”

“But I saw the boys take those apples, and what you did. I don’t know what you said to them, but I did see them go back to the store after you left.”

Johnny went from pleased that Tommy and Matt had done the right thing to angry that she wanted this of him in the turn of one moment’s thought. And more than that, how could he face a boy he knew only because he had killed his father?

“There’s a big difference between getting two kids to pay for the apples they swiped and convincing a boy not to kill me.”

“I understand that.”

“No, I don’t think this is such a good idea,” he told her and got to his feet. “I’m sorry but I don’t think he’s gonna listen to me.”

“You won’t even try?” she asked, pleading now. “Mr... Johnny, please. I don’t want my son coming after you in a couple of years. I don’t want him living with that terrible anger he carries without anyone to...”

She stopped and blushed hotly.

“Without anyone?” Johnny asked, catching her words and apprehensive of their meaning.

She looked down into her neatly folded hands and twisted the gold ring on her finger. It was a moment before she finally answered. “I’m dying, Johnny. I had Rheumatic fever a couple of years ago and it left me with a bad heart.”

He stared at her. Shock number three...

“When?”

“They can’t tell me. It could be a year or a month... it could be tomorrow. I’m not afraid for myself...” She looked up now. She looked straight into his eyes and added, “But I am afraid for Ty.”

Johnny turned away and walked over to the window. He looked out into the street but didn’t really see the children playing around the big oak near the livery stable. He didn’t take any notice of the people, the horses or the wagons rattling through the street.

“I’m sorry,” she said behind him. “I know I’m forcing this on you, but I’ll do whatever I have to. I will not leave Ty without doing everything in my power to protect him.”

“What you’re suggesting won’t work, Ma’am,” he told her, still staring out of the window. “My past is no secret in this town. He’d soon find out I’m Madrid.”

A knock on the door startled both of them. “Ma!” a young voice called through the closed door.

She stood up quickly. Johnny had looked back at her and then turned around.

“Please, will you talk to him?” she asked quietly and urgently. When he didn’t answer right away, she begged him again. “Please?”

Johnny only nodded. He had a feeling that he’d regret it, but she played rough.

She opened the door and Johnny caught sight of the boy. He was fair and tall and Johnny tried to remember what Carl Freeman had looked like. Was there a resemblance in that face to the man he’d last seen lying in that San Diego street five years ago? If there was, Johnny didn’t recognize it. He looked more like Alice Freeman.

“Tyler,” she said brightly as the boy came into the room. “You’re back just in time to meet Mr. Lancer.”

He was giving Johnny a wary once over, but there was no hostility there that Johnny noticed.

“Howdy,” Tyler said cautiously.

“Hello, Tyler,” Johnny answered, just as uncertainly.

“Johnny knew your father,” she explained and, suddenly, there was a light in the boy’s eyes.

It wasn’t a lie; not really. Johnny had known Carl. They’d worked together on the same side of a range war before that fateful day when they met for the last time. He’d never counted the man as a friend though. Carl Freeman had been little more than a casual acquaintance until San Diego.

“Really, Mister?” the boy asked eagerly and Johnny felt a sudden urge to run and hide somewhere.



But his eyes caught Mrs. Freeman's, caught the unspoken plea in them, and he nodded instead, and then added, "Yeah, I knew him."

It felt wrong, but the relief in her eyes was enough to urge him further. He ducked his head to think, running his fingers around the brim of his hat while he did. When he looked up again, the boy's eyes were still on him, expectantly.

"You like sarsaparilla, kid?" he asked. "There's a parlor down the street sells a real good one."

"Could I, Ma?" the excitement in the words threw another panic into Johnny, but he held tight to the hat in his hands and watched her.

She smiled complacently at the boy and said, "Of course, Ty."

"Thanks, Ma!" he answered and then beamed at Johnny.

Johnny lingered for another instant, then walked towards the door. The boy walked out in front of him and waited in the hall for him.

"Best behavior, Ty," she warned the boy and then glanced at Johnny as he passed. "Thank you," she whispered to him, too quietly for Tyler to hear.



Tyler Freeman sat on a stool with a glass of sarsaparilla in front of him that looked big enough to quench the thirst of a man just in off the badlands. A similar glass sat in front of Johnny.

They had attracted some interested looks when they'd sat down. The storekeeper certainly wasn't used to Johnny's patronage and the only other customers, a woman with her youngsters – a boy and a girl – had appeared stunned to see him there.

"So, how did you know Pa?" the boy asked.

It was the natural question to ask, but also the one that Johnny had dreaded. "I worked with him once," Johnny told him, truthfully, but still avoiding the real issue.

"Yeah? Are you a gunfighter, too?" Tyler asked. In his excitement, the words came out too loudly for Johnny's composure.

The woman looked over at them.

"Hush!" Johnny said quietly. "No, I'm not a gunfighter... not any more anyway."

The boy did lower his voice. "But you were? I figured so. You wear your gun like one and you look around you a lot... real edgy."

Johnny suspected that he looked edgy for an entirely different reason on this occasion.

“Tell me ‘bout him,” the boy persisted. “He was fast, wasn’t he? I used to watch him practice when he was home.”

“Yeah, he was fast,” Johnny agreed.

“Were you friends long?”

“I’m not sure you could say we were ‘friends’ exactly, kid,” Johnny told him. “We worked together, on the same side an’ all, but mostly... well, none of us got really close back then.”

“Why not?”

“Cause the next time we met, we might not be on the same side.”

“Oh,” Tyler said quietly, thinking, “I guess that makes sense.”

They fell silent and each took a swallow of the sarsaparilla in front of them. Johnny tried hard to recall even one story to tell the boy about his father, but nothing came to him. He just hadn’t known Freeman well enough, or cared enough, to remember any.

So, he considered making something up. But he cast that idea aside as well. It was bad enough that he had evaded the whole truth. Lying wasn’t going to make his chances of talking this boy’s anger away any better than they already were.

“Where did you meet him?” Tyler asked, breaking their strained silence. “Did you know him long?”

Johnny sighed heavily. He didn’t much like talking about those days. “There was a bit of a fracas down near SanYsidro. Not much water down that way an’ there were these two ranchers both claimed the rights to what little there was.”

“Wow! A range war?”

“Nope. It didn’t get that far,” Johnny told him.

“What happened?”

“A man got hurt – one of the vaqueros, not one of us. The ranchers finally realized what they were doing and just how far it could go an’ came to a compromise. It was all over in a couple o’ days.”

“That must have been disappointing,” the boy said, shaking his head.

“Nope,” he answered easily. “We just went our own ways.” He stopped and sighed, took another swallow of the drink and wished silently that it were something considerably stronger, then he spoke again. “Ty, even gunfighters don’t like killing. It’s the last resort, not the first.”

“Oh,” the boy answered and looked down. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. A lot of people make that mistake, but I never did enjoy having to kill a man and I don’t think your father did either.”

“But you said you hardly knew him.”

“I didn’t need to. There are men who do enjoy killing, but they’re the exception – not the rule. I didn’t know your pa well, but I knew him well enough to figure out that much about him.”

Suddenly, like an unexpected gift, a memory came to him. “He was good with cards,” he said abruptly and took the boy by surprise as well.

“What?”

“Your pa, he was good with cards,” Johnny repeated, pleased to finally be able to actually tell him something.

“You mean poker?”

“No, I mean WITH cards – fancy card tricks and he could shuffle cards like I’d never seen anyone do before,” Johnny explained. Once started, the memory proved to be a good one. “I watched him do it, then tried to do it myself when I thought no one was looking. Just couldn’t get it right. He found me tryin’ and offered to show me how.”

Johnny chuckled lightly. “I didn’t like taking favors from anyone back then, so I was gonna say no, but he sat down beside me an’ showed me before I got the chance to. I got the idea pretty quick, so he showed me a few more.”

“Can you still do them?” the boy asked, his eyes gleaming with renewed interest.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Could you show me, one day?”

“Sure.” He stopped and picked up the glass to finish the drink. When he swallowed the last of it, he put the glass back on the counter. “Finish up, kid. We’ll go walk a ways.”



“Did you tell your ma?” Johnny asked, leaning against the hitching post outside the hotel with his arms crossed over his chest. Barranca was behind him and nudged his shoulder.

“Yeah, she don’t mind how long I’m gone. She’s lyin’ down for a while,” Tyler told him. He stopped in front of Johnny and looked past him to the horse. “Is he yours?”

"Yep," Johnny answered while the palomino lifted his head and shook it, then nudged Johnny's shoulder again. "He just wants attention," Johnny said with a laugh. He stood up and turned back to Barranca and laughed. Then he ran his hand through the horse's mane and patted him.

"He's a beauty," the boy said wonderingly.

"Yeah, and he knows it." He rubbed the horse's neck once more and then turned back to Tyler. "Come on."

They walked together to the far end of town where a scattering of oaks lined the banks of what was enigmatically called Green River. It was little more than a small stream, and even less in a dry season, but it had given the town its name so it was referred to as a river. There were fewer people around and some measure of privacy could be secured for the discussion that Johnny still didn't want to have with the boy.

"You any good at skippin' stones?" Johnny asked.

"Oh yeah," the boy answered excitedly and ran to the water's edge.

The two of them tossed stones for ten minutes or so, vying for the most perfectly flat stone and the most hops across the river. Johnny watched the boy enjoying himself and found himself doing the same.

Finally, Tyler found a log to sit on while Johnny leaned lazily against a tree.

"Ma asked you to talk to me, didn't she?" the boy asked suddenly.

It took Johnny by surprise. He tapped his hand against his pants nervously. "Yeah."

Tyler looked down sadly at the ground between his knees. "She's real sick," he said at length. "She worries about me."

"I know," Johnny admitted. "But worryin' about you is a good thing. That's what mothers do, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Did you really know my pa? Or did you make it up?"

"No, I knew him. It was just like I said."

"She wants you to talk me out of killing Madrid, doesn't she?" the boy said quietly. Then he looked up at Johnny defiantly. "You won't."

"That's what I told her," Johnny answered truthfully.

"You did?"

Johnny nodded coolly. "Yeah, but I'd like to know why you want him dead. I mean, I know he killed your pa in a gunfight an' that might be enough for some men, but I can't figure you're that kind."

"He murdered my father," the boy said bluntly, glowering at Johnny. "He drew first. Pa didn't stand a chance."

"That what the witnesses said?" Johnny asked.

"No," Tyler answered. "He had them so scared they backed his story."

"That right?" Johnny asked. He shifted his feet a little and folded his arms around him, unaware of the defensive stance he had taken up. "So, who told you all this?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "No one had to. I know he had to have drawn first. Pa was just too fast for him."

"I see. Have you ever seen how fast Madrid is?" Johnny asked, still managing to maintain his calm exterior.

"I don't need to. I know how fast Pa was," the boy said sulkily.

"How many men have you seen draw, Tyler?" Johnny asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "Not many," he answered. "Ma don't let me see that sorta thing. Like I said, she worries a lot." He seemed to realize what Johnny was hinting at and added defiantly, "But I don't need to see Madrid draw. No one was as fast as Pa!"

"There's always someone faster waiting around the corner," Johnny told him firmly.

Johnny sighed heavily. He looked around him till he found a small branch and picked it up. He checked it over, assessed it and then tossed it to Tyler.

Tyler was taken by surprise, but he caught the piece of wood. It was about a foot in length and an inch thick, dried out and aged. "What...?"

"Toss it in the air, over the river... high as you can," Johnny instructed.

Tyler got to his feet and made ready to throw it, looking questioningly at Johnny once more before going ahead. Johnny nodded casually, so the boy hurled it as high as he could.

It was still on the rise when the first bullet snapped it in half. The two pieces split apart and took different directions, but a second bullet broke one of the halves into two pieces while a third bullet did the same to the other.

Tyler watched the pieces fall and splash lightly into the water, then glanced towards Johnny in time to see him still holding the colt in his hand, his left hand still poised over the hammer and smoke curling around the end of the barrel.

Johnny took a breath and slid the gun back into the holster. He turned his attention back to the boy and found him staring, his eyes as big as saucers and his mouth hanging open.

“Sit down,” Johnny told him coolly and waited for the boy to obey him. He stood up straight and walked over to the log, then sat down beside the boy.

“There’s always someone faster, kid,” Johnny explained to him again. No matter how fast your pa was, isn’t it possible that...?”

“No! I reckon you must be nearly as fast as my pa was, but not quite.” The words amused Johnny, but saddened him at the same time. His uncharacteristic display had served no real purpose. “Will you teach me to shoot like that, Johnny?”

“Tyler, I’ll teach you those card tricks an’ maybe even a little poker if your ma ain’t lookin’, but I’m not going to teach you to kill. ‘Specially if you plan to kill Madrid.”

“Why not? He’s a killer?” the boy protested angrily.

“Yeah, he’s a killer. No one is arguing with that,” Johnny conceded dejectedly. “But you’ve got no evidence that he’s a murderer. What you’ve got is hate... and that’s somethin’ I know about.”

“I do hate him,” Tyler said with an intensity that made it all the more credible. “And I’m going to kill him one day. I’m going to learn how to draw and fire even faster than Pa did and I’m going to call him out and kill him – fair an’ square.” He glared straight ahead of him. “And that’s more than he did for my pa.”

“Listen to me, Tyler,” Johnny said quietly. “You’ve got every reason to hate Madrid. No one denies that. Whether it was murder or not, he killed your father and that’s enough to hate him for. But hate can eat at you if you carry it too close, kid. Believe me; I know what that’s like.”

“How do you know?”

The question was expected, but Johnny had no desire to discuss it. There were wounds from his past that had never healed. But he’d opened the way for it himself, so he knew he couldn’t stop now.

He put his hands together in front of him and rubbed them slowly against each other. “I grew up hating a man,” he finally said. He didn’t look away from his hands and stopped for a moment before he continued. “I hated him all my life. When I picked up a gun for the first time, all I could think of was using it to kill him. I worked an’ practiced for years.”

“Did you ever find him?”

“It wasn’t a matter of finding him, Ty. I always knew where he was. I just wanted to be so good that he’d be afraid of me when I went for him... real afraid. But bein’ good with that gun led me down a whole other path. I got caught up in gunfighting.” He stopped. “No that’s not true. I wanted to be a gunfighter. I worked at it and it got to be important to me.”

“Did you ever kill him?”

“Nope, he’s still alive an’ well, Ty.”

“Why didn’t you go after him?” the boy asked.

“I met him... learned some things about him... got to know him. He wasn’t what I’d expected. All those years of hatin’ him... well, I was wrong. He an’ I came to an understanding, I guess. I don’t hate him no more.”

“I’m not wrong. I know what he did.”

“Maybe. Or maybe you believe just what you want to believe. Is it so impossible that someone actually beat your father to the draw?”

For a flicker of a moment, Johnny thought he saw something other than obstinacy pass over the boy’s face. But then it was gone and that stubbornly intense hatred was back. “No! Pa was the best there was.”



“Let me get this straight, Johnny,” Murdoch Lancer insisted loudly. Standing over his desk in the Great Room and leaning both palms on it while he glowered at his younger son, he presented a daunting image. “You’ve invited Mrs. Freeman and her son to dinner tomorrow night?”

“If my friends aren’t welcome...” Johnny said coolly. He was sitting on a sofa in front of the empty fireplace, looking into it rather than at his father. The palm of his right hand was rubbing up and down his thigh in agitation.

“It’s the ‘friends’ part that I’m having trouble with, Johnny,” Murdoch told him bluntly. “We are talking about Mrs. CARL Freeman and her son, aren’t we?”

“That’s right.”

“Just who was this Carl Freeman?” Scott asked, intruding into the conversation for the first time. He had preferred to stand back and listen first, so he’d waited quietly beside the fireplace until now.

“Why don’t you tell him, Johnny?” Murdoch invited him sarcastically.

“Carl was a gunhawk, like me,” Johnny explained briefly.

Scott looked towards his father. “Well, I don’t see why that should prohibit his widow and son maintaining a friendship with him, Murdoch. I hardly think...”

“Tell him the rest, Johnny,” Murdoch insisted, glaring at his son.

“Carl wasn’t a friend, Scott,” Johnny said quietly. “He was a man I killed in a gunfight in San Diego five years ago.”

Scott frowned. “And his widow?”

“Never met her till today.”

“It was that note wasn’t it?” Scott stated firmly. “Just what does she want?”

Suddenly tired of the grilling, Johnny leapt to his feet. “I figure that’s my business, alright?” he growled at Scott. Then he rounded on his father. “Now, like I said, if my friends are not welcome here, I’ll take ‘em to dinner in town. But I won’t like it.”

“I didn’t say they’re not welcome, Johnny,” Murdoch told him, reigning in his temper. “But we’d like to know what’s going on. If you’re in some sort of trouble, we’d like to help.”

“I’m not in any trouble,” he told them coldly. “They’re nice people and I’d like them to come to dinner.”

“Alright, tomorrow night,” Murdoch said, quieting now. “But I wish you’d tell us more about this.”

“Nothing to tell, Murdoch,” Johnny answered and turned to leave the room. He stopped at the doorway and stood indecisively for a moment. He tapped his hand against his thigh again and then turned back to his father and brother. “There’s one thing,” he said. “The kid doesn’t know that I’m Madrid. I’d like it to stay that way, for now anyway.”

“Oh God, Johnny, what are you doing?” Scott asked him in frustration.

“Just leave it, Scott. I’m not gettin’ into that again, but I’d appreciate you mentioning that point to Teresa as well.”

With that he left the room, leaving his father and brother wondering.

“What was that about a note, Scott?”

Jelly brought it back for him from town yesterday. The woman had given it to him for Johnny.”

“Do you know what was in it?”

“No and neither does Jelly. He didn’t read it.”

Murdoch dropped into his chair. “I don’t like it. Why would this woman be looking for the man who killed her husband? It can’t be good.”

“The note was addressed to Johnny Lancer, not Madrid,” Scott told him, not sure whether it meant anything or not.



“She must know.” He turned the chair away while Scott walked over to pour each of them a drink. “What about this boy? Do you know anything about him?”

“Only that Jelly said he’s about twelve years old.”

Murdoch accepted the glass that Scott offered him. “Well, we’ll just have to hope that Johnny knows what he’s doing then.”



Scott was agreeably surprised by Alice Freeman. She was indeed a handsome woman, probably in her mid-thirties, though a little paler than he liked to see a woman. She kept up her end of the conversation at the dinner table while actually telling them virtually nothing about herself or why she was in Green River, as Scott realized when he thought about it later. If she was uneasy in their company, she didn't show it at all.

Johnny seemed determined that the woman and her son be comfortable at Lancer. He talked more than Scott could remember him doing with dinner guests ever before, making sure that the boy wasn't left out either.

When dinner was over, they retired to the Great Room where Murdoch poured drinks for everyone, brandy for himself and his sons and sherry for Teresa and Mrs. Freeman.

“Will you show me those card tricks now, Johnny?” the boy asked with more than a trace of expectation in his voice.

“Tyler,” his mother chastised him. “Where are your manners?”

But Johnny was apparently ready for him. “It’s okay. I promised him.” He produced a pack of cards and set about entertaining the boy as well as the adults with his tricks, patiently teaching each one to Tyler.

“I didn’t know you could do that, Johnny,” Teresa said, impressed.

“I haven’t seen them done for years,” Alice Freeman added, and Johnny looked up at her. They exchanged what seemed to be an understanding look and then Johnny turned back to his games.

She stepped back to where Scott and Murdoch stood watching Johnny and smiled at them both. “I hope both of you know what a special young man Johnny is,” she said, too quietly to be heard by the subject of her discussion.

“Well, yes, of course,” Scott said awkwardly.

“Just what brings you to Green River, Mrs. Freeman?” Murdoch asked, also in hushed tones.

She looked away towards Johnny before answering. “He hasn’t told you?”

“No,” Murdoch replied.

“Then I think I should leave it up to him to tell you what he wants you to know.” She stopped there and looked at her son for a while. Then continued, unexpectedly, “But you do know who I am, don’t you?”

Murdoch shifted uneasily and glanced at Scott. “If you mean do we know you’re Carl Freeman’s widow, then yes, we do.”

She nodded. “Johnny is doing what Carl never could, or would, do,” she explained. “Not even for me or for Ty. Carl loved us, but he couldn’t bring himself to try to do what Johnny is doing. Johnny’s so determined to break away from his past. I hope the past let’s loose her hold of him.”

“He’ll have us to back him if it doesn’t,” Scott told her firmly.

The boy’s laughter rang around the room and drew their attention back to the pair on the floor. Johnny’s face glowed with sheer delight and Scott caught his breath. That image was so rare.

Then Johnny looked up and caught his brother’s eyes. He grinned and then stood up. “Mrs. Freeman, I’ll escort you an’ Tyler home if you’re ready to go.”

“We are ready, Johnny,” she replied. Scott was sure that she really was ready. She looked tired, even though it was still early in the evening. “And I’m sure you have to be up early if you’re to break all those horses tomorrow morning, so there’s no need for you to escort us. I know the way.”

“I won’t be breaking ‘em all on my own, Ma’am,” he assured her with a mischievous grin. “And it don’t matter if you know the way home or not. That’s rough country between here an’ Green River at night. Not the place for a woman an’ boy alone. I’ll see you home.”

She smiled wanly at him. “Then thank you, Johnny. We would appreciate it.”

“Say, why don’t you let Tyler come out an’ watch a while in the mornin’?”

“Oh, no, Johnny, we’ve imposed enough on your family,” she insisted.

“It wouldn’t be an imposition,” Murdoch told her.

“Sides, there’s a couple of other boys comin’ out to watch,” Johnny added.

“Are there?” Scott asked, his curiosity piqued. “You didn’t say anything about that. Who are they?”

“Tommy Watts and his friend, Matt,” Johnny replied. “Provided they’ve lived up to their end of the bargain.”

“If, by that, you mean have they stayed away from the storekeeper’s apples,” Alice Freeman suggested merrily, “then I believe they have. I haven’t seen them loitering outside the store for the last couple of days.”

“That was part of it,” he admitted.

“Johnny?” Murdoch asked, with an edge to his voice that was more like amusement than annoyance.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders negligently. “Just a couple o’ kids with too much time on their hands. They’re good kids.”

Murdoch laughed and put his arm around his younger son’s shoulders. “Take the lady home, Son,” he said, grinning. “And then get home to bed. It appears you’re going to have to put on quite a show tomorrow.”



Johnny was up early next morning. There was a kick in his step. He felt good. He’d had fun last night, showing the kid those old card tricks and hearing the boy’s laughter. Knowing that he was passing on a little something of Carl Freeman to his son had made it even better.

“Morning, Brother,” Scott said. He was standing by the corral fence and had been looking over the horses that were to be broken today, but he grinned at his brother. “You look mighty pleased with yourself.”

Johnny shrugged. “Why not?” He looked up at the blue sky above. There wasn’t a sign of clouds. “Looks like a good day for a little horsebreakin’.”

Scott folded his arms across his chest. “I liked your Mrs. Freeman. Seems like a nice lady.”

“She’s not ‘my’ Mrs. Freeman, Scott. You know it ain’t like that.”

“Do I?” Scott asked mischievously. “You seem to get along fine with the boy, too.”

Johnny reached the fence and leaned his arms on the top rail. “He’s a good kid.”

“He’s certainly well mannered. And he likes you,” Scott said, then stopped as Johnny closed up on him. “He really doesn’t know who you are, does he?”

“No,” was all the reply Johnny gave.

“He’ll find out sooner or later, Johnny. If you don’t tell him, someone in town probably will.”

Johnny slammed his fist into the rail and rounded on his brother. “You think I don’t know that, Scott.”

“I’m not sure what you’re thinking this time, Johnny.” Scott dropped his head sadly, sighed and then looked up again. “What do you think will happen when he does find out?”

Johnny wondered the same thing. Turning back to the corral, he leaned his arms back on the rail, then he dipped his forehead down against his arms and considered Tyler Freeman. He knew that the boy liked him. Would he consider himself tricked? Or betrayed? Or would he see that Johnny wasn't the kind of man to have done what he was so sure Madrid had done?

He didn't know, and the thought of finding out grieved him. He didn't really believe that Tyler Freeman had let go of the anger he'd lived with for years.

But Scott was right. He had to tell the boy and he had to do it soon. With a heavy sigh, he came to a decision.

"Soon as I'm done with these horses, I'm gonna sit Ty down an' tell him," he told Scott. He scuffed at the loose dirt with the toe of his boot and then looked up and smiled wryly at his brother. "Just be handy to pull him off me."

Scott laughed lightly and slapped his back. "What are brothers for?" he asked and then walked away to have something to eat before things got started.

Johnny watched him go then turned back to the horses. He studied each one closely, judging its temperament and gauging its strength. That roan in the middle of the bunch had a gleam in its eye every time he looked right at it. There was something about her.



"Ride him, Johnny!" the red headed scamp shouted as loud as he could. On the rail beside him, his friend Matt stuck his fingers in both sides of his mouth and whistled shrilly. They were noisy, excited and having a ball, and no one was paying them any mind at all.

In fact, their noise blended in with the general melee around the big corral.

Johnny couldn't hear them either. He had his mind on other things – like staying in that saddle. The leaping, bucking, twisting tempest beneath the saddle was just as determined to rid himself of Johnny as Johnny was to stay aboard. It had come down to a battle of wills now and it had been going on for way too long.

The muscles in Johnny's arms ached intolerably and his thighs were faring little better. His butt had to be bruised black and blue the way it left the saddle and was slammed back into it constantly. He was all too aware that, if the animal didn't surrender soon, he might end up doing it himself.

The yelling around the corral came to him as just a dull roar and he tried to ignore it. The horse swiveled again and threw its head up as it twisted in ways that it just shouldn't have been capable of.

Then, suddenly, the horse quieted. It stopped so abruptly that Johnny was thrown forward like a rag doll. They stayed there, man and beast, panting heavily and lathered in so much sweat that it was hard to tell who was the most exhausted.

“You did it, Johnny!” Tyler shouted in excited approval. Johnny heard him above the applause and cheers, but something just didn’t seem right.

Then, suddenly, the animal lifted off the ground again. Johnny was ready for it, or he’d thought he was. As it turned out, he wasn’t. He held on for only one more twist and then felt himself flying through the air and landing in an ungainly heap, surrounded by a rising cloud of dust.

He’d swallowed a good helping of that dirt as he’d gasped when he hit the ground. He levered himself up onto his elbows and watched Walt and Herb rounding up the whirlwind that had dumped him so unceremoniously. He grimaced and then spat some of the dust out of his mouth.

A shadow passed over him and he looked up. Scott stood there imposingly, his hands on his hips and his face a picture of wanton mischief.

“I knew you were going to put on a show for those boys,” he said with a wry grin and a glint in his eyes. “Didn’t know you were planning a comedy though.”

“Oh, you’re just full o’ laughs, ain’t you, Big Brother?” Johnny replied with a scowl.

Scott laughed and stretched a hand down to him. “Need a hand up?”

Johnny found himself laughing right along with him and accepted the extended hand.

“Well?” Scott asked with a grin.

Johnny dusted off his clothes, unsuccessfully for the most part, and hitched his pants up a little determinedly. “Hold that miserable crowbait for me, Walt,” he called out and started towards them, trying his best not to allow anyone to suspect just how bruised he actually was.

Scott slapped him on his back as he passed and headed back to the fence to join the rest of the onlookers.

“See, told ya he wouldn’t give up,” Scott heard Tommy Watts telling his friend. The two of them didn’t seem to have lost interest at all in the two hours that they’d been watching the ‘fun’. And Tyler Freeman seemed to have fit right in with them. He sat on the fence beside Tommy while Matt sat at his other side.

“Course he wasn’t gonna give up on him,” Tyler agreed, apparently offended that they would even consider such an idea.

Scott joined them and climbed through the rails to stand beside Tyler. “He isn’t even tired yet, is he, Scott?” Tyler insisted.

Scott suspected that Johnny was not only tired after breaking four of the dozen horses, but sore all over. Still, he did nothing to dispel the illusion the boys had created of him.

“No. In fact, I think he could have broken all of them on his own. He probably didn’t need Walt and Herb at all.”

“Scott, why is that roan corralled over there on its own?” Tyler asked, pointing to one of the horses that had been sectioned off.

“My guess is that Johnny saw something in that one,” Scott explained. “He probably wants to work that one his own way.”

“What way’s that?” Tyler asked, but it was Tommy who answered.

“He’s great with horses. Everyone in the valley knows that.”

“Is he gonna ‘whisper’ him, Scott?” Matt asked excitedly.

“I don’t know what he has in mind,” Scott told him, then winced as they watched Johnny hit the ground hard, again.

Johnny got up scowling and walked back towards the horse with a slight limp.

“Johnny? You okay?” they heard Murdoch call out from further down the fenceline.

Johnny turned his head towards his father and waved him off dismissively. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he growled. Scott suspected that the language after that, muttered quietly as he limped across the corral to where Walt held the horse, was a little bluer and smiled.

They watched, enthralled, as Johnny held on this time. The animal writhed and twisted, snorted and screamed like a mad thing but, finally, it relented. With fewer kicks and bucks, each with less gusto than the last, the horse finally gave up the fight and let Johnny ride it around the corral. When he pulled it to a halt it stood, beaten and exhausted, its head down.

Johnny waited a full minute. Walt rode carefully over to his side and took the reins from him, then Johnny slipped to the ground. He wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve and ambled over to the corral fence, still limping just a little.

Tyler held out the canteen of water that had been hanging on the fencepost near him. “Here, Johnny!” he said enthusiastically.

“Thanks Ty,” Johnny said wearily. He took a long swig of the tepid water then replaced the lid. “You guys had enough yet?”

“No sir, Johnny!” Matt exclaimed. “This is great!”

Johnny grinned. “More fun than swipin’ apples?”

Both Matt and Tommy blushed shamefacedly. “Yes Sir,” they agreed in unison.

“Good. You’ve stayed outa trouble for two days,” he said cheerfully. “You think you can keep it up?”

They both nodded.

“Okay. See that you do.” With that, he ruffled the hair on their heads and laughed, then walked over to join Scott. He leaned back against the post and sighed.

“You did good, Johnny,” Scott told him, wrapping his arm around his brother’s shoulders. Sometimes, Johnny managed to surprise even him.

“What those crowbaits? Dios, I’ve been on worse than them?” Johnny assured him.

Scott smiled. “I wasn’t talking about the horses, Johnny,” he explained. He glanced pointedly towards the trio of excited schoolboys sitting on the fence, laughing merrily.

“Ah, that’s nothin’,” Johnny said dismissively. “They’re good kids. Just needed someone to get ‘em outa bad habits.”

“There’s only the roan left, Johnny.” Tommy called over to him. “What you got him all by himself for?”

“She’ is something special,” Johnny told him.

“What’s so special ‘bout her?” Tyler asked curiously.

Johnny looked in the direction of the fenced off section. The roan was pacing back and forth. She’d lift her head and toss it now and then, or she’d paw the ground in anticipation.

“Hard to explain it boys,” Johnny said quietly. “Just look at her. Doesn’t she just look like there something different about her? Sometimes, you can just sense it in a horse. Spirit, that’s what she’s got. She’s not the sort of animal you just ‘break’. That wouldn’t be right.”

“Didn’t that last one have spirit, Johnny?” Tommy asked with a frown. “He sure put up a fight.”

Johnny smiled and rubbed his butt subconsciously. He turned back to the boys and answered. “Yeah, but that wasn’t the sort o’ spirit I’m talkin’ about. That was pure cussedness.”

“You gonna turn her loose then, Johnny?” Tyler asked again. He sounded shocked.

“Nope. Handled right, that could be one real fine horse,” Johnny told him and looked back to where the roan paced.

Scott watched his brother’s face as he stared at the animal. There seemed to be almost a rapture in his expression. His eyes hadn’t left her for a moment, but Johnny himself was almost as entrancing to watch as the roan.

“You are gonna ‘whisper’ her, ain’t you, Johnny?” Tommy sounded awed. Scott doubted that the boy had ever seen it done, but he’d obviously heard about it.

Scott had seen it done. He’d watched Johnny work a horse like that roan once before and he thought that ‘awe-inspiring’ just about summed it up alright.

“I’m gonna give it a try, Tommy,” Johnny answered quietly, his eyes still on the horse. “Hey Herb,” he shouted across the corral. “Turn that roan loose in here, will ya?”

The man waved his agreement and the horse was turned into the big corral. She galloped in, her mane and tail flying as she circled the corral, then she slowed to a trot and tossed her head defiantly.

Johnny was watching her. Well, everyone was watching her. The hubbub of noise around them had died to absolute silence and, beside Scott, Johnny audibly took a deep breath and stepped out into the corral.

The horse stopped and glared at him from several yards away, tossing its head and shaking it, then pawing at the ground angrily.

“Just watch this Ty!” Tommy said quietly.

“Shhh...” Scott warned him, just as quietly. Johnny didn’t need distractions now.

Johnny kept his eyes glued on the roan and his hands at his sides, offering no threat to the animal. She glared back. Her coat quivered as she pawed again and snorted her displeasure.

“Easy, girl,” he whispered calmly. His voice was softly monotonous and he began to speak so low, in a mixture of Spanish and English designed only to calm her.

Along with everyone else around that fence, Scott watched and wondered at the infinite patience Johnny exhibited in dealing with the roan – the kind of patience he rarely showed in other circumstances. He stayed his ground, waiting for the horse to get curious enough to approach him, speaking in that soft hushed voice and remaining perfectly still.

Later, the horse had quieted enough to be standing ten yards away and eyeing him closely. Johnny took his first tentative step towards the roan then stopped. The horse reared and neighed shrilly. When she dropped back to the ground, she pawed the ground and glared furiously at him.

But more time and patience saw her quieten again and Johnny took another small step forward. She started to step back, but stopped and held her ground.

With persistence and hushed calming words, Johnny finally made his way to within a few feet of the horse. Everyone watching held their breath as the two slowly bridged the gap between them when, to their amazement, the horse took one nervous step towards Johnny.

It was the opening Johnny had obviously been waiting for. Even from that distance, Scott could see the smile beaming across his face.



When, some time later, Johnny stood beside the roan with his hand gently rubbing her neck, Scott thought he felt his heart start again. He knew that Johnny would leave it at that for now and work with the animal for days to earn her complete trust before attempting to ride her. He'd seen Johnny do this before but it still fascinated him.

Beside him, he heard the awed gasps from the three boys near him and smiled.

Scott walked out into the corral to join Johnny as Herb led a somewhat annoyed roan back to join the rest of the horses, leaving behind a group of impressed young boys.

"I knew he could do it," Tommy told his friend with the absolute confidence of hindsight. "Boy, I'd like to learn how to do that."

"I reckon Johnny must be 'bout the best horseman in the valley," Matt agreed.

"I've sure never seen anyone handle a horse like that," said Tyler.

Matt laughed. "Yeah, nearly as good as he handles a gun."

"He's fast, ain't he?" Tyler agreed. "I saw him draw the other day."

"You saw him? Where?" Tommy demanded excitedly.

"Down near the river. He showed me." The boy stopped and looked at them, then added, "He'd be nearly as fast as my pa, I reckon."

"Your pa? You think your pa's faster than Johnny?" Tommy gaped. "Who's your pa, anyway?"

"My pa was the fastest man ever to draw a gun!" Tyler told them proudly.

"Was?" Matt asked.

"Yeah, was..." Tyler answered and lowered his head sadly. "He got killed in a gunfight when I was a kid."

"Then he can't have been the fastest," Tommy scoffed and Tyler looked up with eyes that blazed.

"It wasn't a fair fight!" he insisted. "Madrid drew first. Pa didn't have a chance."

The two other boys exchanged stunned glances. They were too surprised to say anything.

"Madrid murdered my pa, otherwise you'd know all about Carl Freeman," Tyler persisted doggedly.

"Johnny wouldn't do nothin' like that!" Tommy exclaimed and pushed Tyler so hard that he nearly fell off the fence.

“Thought you was his friend!” Matt added venomously. He jumped to the ground and stood there glaring at Tyler. “How can you sit on Johnny’s fence an’ say things like that ‘bout him?”

Tommy jumped down and stood with his friend. “Johnny wouldn’t never draw first. He don’t need to. He’s the fastest there is.”

Tyler frowned at them, thinking. “I’m talkin’ ‘bout Johnny Madrid.”

“Johnny is Johnny Madrid, or he used to be. Everybody knows that!” Tommy stated angrily. He balled his fists and put them up threateningly. “You wanta come down here an’ say those things about him?”

“Johnny Lancer is Johnny Madrid?” Tyler asked hesitantly, climbing down to face them.

“Didn’t ya know?” Matt asked, looking curiously at him.

Tyler only shook his head. He looked out into the corral to where Johnny and Scott stood talking together. “He killed my pa,” Tyler finally whispered to no one in particular. Then, suddenly, the words seemed to explode out of him and he cried out aloud, “He killed my pa!” and turned and ran.



“Johnny, that was great!” Tommy exclaimed at his approach. Matt stood beside him, beaming with excitement as well.

Johnny smiled. “So, you enjoyed yourselves?” he asked cheerfully.

“Oh yeah!” Matt answered for both of them.

“Worth stayin’ out of trouble for?” he asked and grinned as both hung their heads instead of answering. He swatted Matt’s head playfully. “Just keep right on stayin’ outa trouble.”

He looked around. “Where’s Tyler?”

“Aw, he took off a while back,” Tommy replied. He frowned and looked at Johnny curiously. “He had some real mean things to say ‘bout you, Johnny.”

“About me?” he asked anxiously, then added the question that he felt he already knew the answer to. “Or about Madrid?”

“It’s the same, ain’t it, Johnny?”

Johnny put his hands on his hips and ducked his head. When it came down to it, for all his efforts to be something else... for all the years he tried to put between Johnny Lancer and Johnny Madrid, the boy was right. “Yeah, it’s the same,” he conceded. “Tyler knows, does he?”

“He said you cheated in a gunfight,” Matt told him. His voice rang with the disgust he obviously felt. “We told him you’d never do that. He’s got it all wrong.”

“Yes, he has,” Johnny told them quietly. Then he looked up to find the boys both eyeing him carefully. He felt the faith they had in him, but regretted the hero worship they so obvious had for him. He could stand it if he thought it was for his handling of the horse, but their words suggested that Madrid was their hero and that did bother him.

“Did you see where he went?” Johnny asked.

“Where who went?” Johnny turned at his brother’s voice and found Scott joining him.

“Tyler,” Johnny told him. “He knows. Seems he’s run off.”

“Then we’d better find him.” There was a worried tone in Scott’s voice that matched Johnny’s own. “What do you think he’ll do?”

Johnny shrugged. He wished he knew. He thought about what must be running through the boy’s mind – anger would be the least of it... a sense of betrayal was likely there too. In that frame of mind, a twelve year old boy might do just about anything.



“He’s not here!” she cried as she glanced quickly around the hotel room. Horrified, she turned back to Johnny. “Where can he have gone?”

Johnny wrapped his arms around her frail frame to comfort her. “We’ll find him,” he whispered soothingly. “You just try to calm down.”

He thought about her words when they had first met, her bad heart and ill health. This situation was the last thing she needed. They had to find that kid and make things right.

In short order, they had learned that Tyler had taken the first horse he had seen and ridden off on it. It had turned out to be Herb’s horse and he’d soon let them know about it.

“Where would he go, Johnny?” she cried into his shoulder. Then she pushed him away and covered her face. “Oh, Johnny, I wish I’d never started this.”

“It was always gonna happen. I told you that,” Johnny told her, but there was no recrimination in his voice. If anything, he sounded sympathetic. “I’m goin’ down to talk to Toby, the clerk. Maybe he noticed if Ty came back to town.”

With that, he turned and left the room, leaving Alice Freeman alone with Scott.

“We’ll find him, Mrs. Freeman,” he assured her hesitantly. He was unsure of her and the reasons for her visit to Green River. It made no sense that she would willingly seek out the man who had killed her husband.

“I know,” she answered him, wiping away a tear. “But I’m terrified of what Ty will do.”

“Why?” Scott asked. “Just why are you here? What did you want from Johnny, anyway?”

She turned away from him and hung her head. “I wanted his help with Ty. I thought if Ty got to see that Johnny Madrid isn’t the monster he thinks he is...”

“The what?”

“Ty is convinced that Johnny murdered his father. He used to watch Carl practise all the time and he’s so sure that no one could have outdrawn him.”

“Haven’t you told him...?”

“Of course I have!” She swung around to face him and the color had risen in her pale face. “Do you think I haven’t tried? Over and over I’ve told him he was wrong! But Ty believes what he believes and nothing would make his anger go away. I was so afraid for him.”

“So you brought him here? To face Johnny?” Scott demanded angrily. “Just how did you think that was going to make matters any better?”

“I’d heard what Johnny was trying to do... giving up gunfighting, I mean,” she told him with a sad shake of his head. “I wanted Ty to meet him and get to know him before he found out who he was.” She hung her head and covered her face with her hands. “I just wanted my son to get past that terrible anger.”

Scott could see the raw emotions in her pale face. He could hear her anguish in her words. But he also knew what such a thing would do to Johnny. To come face to face with a boy whose father he had killed... terrible didn’t begin to describe the feelings that it must have brought to the surface.

“I can’t believe Johnny would be a party to this,” he finally said, shaking his head.

“He agreed to it,” she told him, almost defiantly.

“And I’d like to know what you said to him to get him to go along with it,” Scott demanded, his voice rising with his concern for Johnny.

“I think that’s enough, Scott.” Johnny’s voice was so cool that it startled Scott. He turned around to find his brother standing in the doorway. His expression was icy. “That’s between Alice an’ me.”

“Johnny...”

But Johnny walked into the room, passed Scott and stood beside Alice Freeman. "I'm big enough to look after myself, Scott. I went along with it an' I'll answer for whatever happens out of it. I don't want you botherin' Alice. She's got worries enough."

"She had no right to ask that of you, Johnny," Scott persisted unrepentantly.

"Scott," Johnny began, bristling with irritation, but he stopped at the light touch of a hand on his arm.

"No, he's right, Johnny," she said sadly. "He's right and I've known it all along. I was just so worried about Ty."

He put his hand over the small hand still resting on his arm and nodded at her. "No one's gonna blame you for that. And Ty did come back here. Toby, the clerk downstairs, he says he came tearin' in here and left again a few minutes later."

"He did? I wonder why." She frowned and considered the riddle for a minute, then paled still more. "Oh my God!"

She raced to the chest of drawers against the wall and roughly pulled open the top drawer. She rifled through the contents quickly before stopping and hanging her head in despair.

"He's taken his father's gun, Johnny," she told him. She burst into tears and covered her face with her hands. "Oh God, he's got Carl's gun."



They rode back towards Lancer in an awkward silence that was uncommon between them. Scott understood that Johnny had a lot on his mind, but he also knew that there was more to it than that. Johnny considered that he had overstepped the mark this time.

Scott felt otherwise. "Where do you think the boy will head?" he asked.

"Don't know," Johnny replied coolly. "But he might head back to Lancer to look for me."

"With his father's gun," Scott added bluntly.

Johnny didn't answer.

"Just how angry is this boy?" Scott asked, determined to draw his brother out.

"Killing angry," was all Johnny answered with.

Scott pulled his horse to a halt. "Are you going to keep on shutting me out?" he demanded. Johnny slowed Barranca to a stop and turned back to where Scott had stayed.

"I don't want you second guessin' decisions I make, Scott," he said. "I've got my reasons for helping her."

"Of course you do," Scott replied, edging his horse closer to his brother. "But I know how hard this must be for you. She had no right to ask it of you."

"She had every right, Scott!" he yelled back. "That kid has no father because I killed him. The least I can do is try to help her with the boy."

"Is that what she laid on you? Guilt?" Scott demanded, getting angry as well. "You have nothing to blame for yourself for."

"I don't blame myself, Scott," Johnny told him grimly. "But I know the kind of hate that boy's carrying. I think you kind of know it too. Growing up hating... sound familiar?"

Scott lowered his head. "Yes, it does."

"Well, I've got a chance to help one kid get over his hate... or at least to try." He sighed heavily. "Besides, I like him. He's a good kid an', right now, he thinks I betrayed him."

Scott nodded and then smiled. "Alright, I'm convinced," he said. "But you don't have to do this alone. Let's go find him."

"I have to face him on my own, Scott."

"Maybe," Scott conceded. "But he's armed, Johnny. He might only be a boy, but that's a real gun he's got. I'm sticking to you like glue until we get it off him."

A smile crept over Johnny's lips. "Like glue, huh?"

"Like glue."

They rode on in silence, but it wasn't awkward any more.

Five minutes later, with the sun high over the hillside beside them, Scott caught sight of a glint of light reflecting off metal.

"Johnny!" he shouted and threw himself at his brother. They tumbled to the ground together in a tangled pile just as a shot rang out from above them.

A second shot pinged off a rock a few feet away and the two of them scrambled over behind some boulders and out of the line of fire.

"You alright?" Scott asked quickly as they took stock of the situation.

"Yeah," Johnny answered. "Just as well he's using a pistol. The range is too far for any real accuracy."

“Oh, I don’t know,” Scott said with a laugh. “He seems to be doing pretty well, so far.”

Johnny grinned. “Yeah, not bad for a kid.” He panted and poked his head out briefly to risk a look up the hill. “We gotta get that gun off him before he kills someone.”

Scott stared at him. “Really? Why didn’t I think of that?” he said ironically. “Can you see where he is?”

“About half way up that hillside,” Johnny told him, pointing. “Behind that rock.”

Scott chanced a look and caught a glimpse of movement up there.

“See him?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah, I see him. So what do we do now? Do you think he’ll listen to you?”

Johnny leaned back against the boulder that was the little cover they had. He looked at Scott, beside him, and scowled. “Nope, I don’t think he’ll listen to me. Got any other ideas?”

“No, I’m clean out. It’s your turn to think of something.”

Johnny took a deep breath. “Guess we’ll have to rush him.”

“What?”

“You go left an’ I’ll go right.”

“Are you crazy?”

Johnny laughed him off. “Don’t worry, Brother. It’s me he’s after.”

“Oh, and that’s supposed to make me feel better?” Scott demanded. “We can’t even shoot back.”

“No, I’d rather not,” Johnny agreed. He shifted into position to make a dash across the road. “Once we get over there, he’ll have trouble keeping an eye on us, specially since there’s the two of us.”

Scott shook his head disgustedly. “Alright, on three.”

“One...”

“Two...” added Scott and crouched on the other side of the rock, ready to make a run for it.

“Three!” they called together and ran. They kept low and made it to the other side and under cover before any more shots were fired. Johnny glanced over to where Scott had stopped and nodded, then pointed what direction he would take while Scott silently did the same.

There wasn't a lot of ground to cover, but it was uphill and they had to keep down. Johnny was surprised that no more shots came his way before he made it to the boulder that the boy was hiding behind.

He found Tyler Freeman cowering right where he thought he'd be. The boy had both hands wrapped around the butt of the gun and it was pointing at Johnny as he emerged from the other side of the rock.

The gun was trembling in Tyler's hands. The boy looked pale, frightened and unsure of himself – a dangerous combination but Johnny stood up straight in front of him.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" Johnny demanded, his anger surging through his veins.

The angry words took the boy by surprise. His eyes widened and his hands tightened around the gun.

It stunned Scott as well, arriving at the other side of the rock. He had expected Johnny to sneak up on the boy and try to wrestle the gun away from him, but Johnny now seemed to be determined to confront him.

Scott stood on the other side of the boy, not even sure that Tyler was aware of his presence. But Johnny certainly knew he was there. His eyes were still on the boy and flashing with rage, but he'd given Scott a quick glance.

What Scott could also see, now that he was facing his brother, was that Johnny hadn't been exactly truthful – again – when he'd said he was fine. His left arm hung by his side with blood streaming from a wound on his upper arm. From where Scott stood, it was hard to say just how serious the injury was, but Johnny seemed to be handling it alright, so far.

"You're Johnny Madrid!" the boy shouted accusingly in answer to Johnny's question. "You killed my Pa!"

"Yeah, I killed him," Johnny conceded, but there was no hint of regret in his voice. It was all anger. "It was a gunfight, Tyler. If I hadn't killed him, he would've killed me. That's the way it works."

"No..."

"He called me out, Ty," Johnny all but screamed at the boy. Suddenly, all of Johnny's rage and frustration found words to express itself. He pointed his finger unwaveringly at Tyler. "I didn't get the drop on him. I didn't draw first, but I didn't plan on dyin' myself that day. I don't care what you think; I've never murdered anyone. Now hand over that gun!"

He thrust his palm out flat and waited, while Scott held his breath. He couldn't see the boy's face and had no idea what was going through his head, but the gun trembled still.

"My pa was the fastest..."



"I was faster! Get that through your thick skull," Johnny persisted furiously. "And what happened to those high ideals of yours... that you'd face Madrid like a man one day? And here you are hidin' behind a rock like some yella bushwhacker!"

The boy's head dropped just a little and he didn't answer.

"Give me that gun, Tyler!" Johnny said coldly. "Right now!"

Slowly, Tyler Freeman got to his feet. He stood there; shakily facing Johnny for a minute, then he reached out and put the gun into Johnny's hand. Scott started to breathe again but said nothing yet. The situation was diffused now, but he figured this was the time that Johnny had talked about earlier. He had to handle this alone.

"Did I do that?" the boy asked hesitantly, nodding towards Johnny's left arm. There was a tear in the shirt where a bullet had grazed him and blood was running down his arm and dripping from his fingers.

Scott felt a strong urge to go in there and do something about that wound before Johnny lost too much blood, but he knew that his brother wouldn't thank him for it this time.

Johnny unloaded the remaining bullets from Carl Freeman's gun and then looked Tyler squarely in the eye. "Of course, you did it," he answered cuttingly. "You pick up a gun and fire it, someone is gonna get hurt."

"Does it hurt much?"

"Yeah, it hurts!" Johnny threw back at him furiously.

"I... I'm sorry, Johnny. I was just so mad."

"That you wanted to kill me? That don't make it right, Tyler. That kind of 'mad' gets men hung for murder."

He finished with the gun and held it up. "You got more shells for this?"

Tyler shook his head. "No."

Johnny roughly handed the empty gun back to him. "It's your pa's so I'm givin' it back to you. But he was a better man than this. He would never have tried to back-shoot a man, no matter what the reason. You remember that."

Tyler's chin dropped to his chest and Johnny could see tears welling in his eyes. "You lied to me, Johnny. I thought you were my friend."

"I didn't lie to you, Tyler," Johnny told him quietly. "But I didn't tell you everything I should have. I'm sorry for that."

Suddenly, the boy looked up and straight into Johnny's eyes. "Why did you have to be Madrid? You know how much I've hated you?"

Johnny sighed heavily. "Yeah, I reckon I do. You've got every right to hate me, but hate me for killin' him... not murderin' him. I didn't do that."

"This was all Ma's idea wasn't it?" Tyler demanded.

Johnny nodded. "Yes, but she didn't mean for it to come to this. She was worried about you."

"She's always worryin' about me," Tyler said quietly. "I wish she'd worry 'bout herself."

"And do you think doin' this is going to make things any easier for her?" Johnny asked angrily.

"No, I... I guess I didn't think about that," the boy confessed. "Is she okay?"

Johnny nodded again. "Yeah, she's okay, but she's real scared for you."

Tears threatened to fall from Tyler's eyes. One escaped and he brushed it away determinedly. "If Pa was still here, it wouldn't be so hard for her," he whispered.

"I know. That's why she wanted me to talk to you," Johnny explained. "She didn't want you carrying all that hate on your own."

"I will be on my own, won't I, Johnny?" He sounded scared and Johnny could understand that.

"You don't have to be," Johnny answered quietly and very uncertainly. "You'll have friends... like me, if you think you can do that."

"I... I don't want to hate you..."

Johnny took a step towards the boy and Tyler ran to him. They made an incongruous pair; the gunfighter and the boy. Johnny's blood stained sleeve was wrapped around Tyler and his head hung low over the boy's head.

"I'd kinda like it if you didn't hate me, too, Ty," Johnny said with a kind smile for him. "You can let it go, if you really try."

"Did you?" Tyler asked, his words muffled. He looked up at Johnny. "That man you hated so much, the one you said you didn't kill, did you ever stop hating him?"

Johnny smiled and lifted his head to catch Scott's eyes. "Yeah, I stopped hating him. He's my father."



Johnny heard the knock on the door and got to his feet. It was early afternoon and Sunday, so they were all relaxing in the Great Room. Scott had a book open and was lazily reading; Murdoch had challenged his younger son to a game of chess and was silently regretting it. Teresa was at the table putting pen to paper to write to her friend Melissa in San Francisco.

"I'll get it," Johnny said nonchalantly. He smiled cheekily. "It'll give you some more time to think about that next move, Murdoch."

Murdoch looked up and frowned in annoyance. "Thank you, John. I appreciate the thought, but don't go getting too cocky. It's not over yet."

Johnny strolled out of the room to the front door and opened it. He didn't know the man who stood there.

"Howdy," Johnny greeted him cheerfully and the man took his hat off and held it in both hands in front of him. A tingle of dread spiraled down Johnny's spine at the man's obvious discomfort. "Can I help you?" Johnny asked curiously.

"This is the Lancer Ranch, isn't it?" the man asked.

"Sure is." Johnny looked the man over. He looked harmless enough but he was not from around here. For a start, he was wearing 'town' clothes. "I'm Johnny Lancer."

"My name is Jeb Harmon," he said politely. "Actually, it was you I was looking for, Mr. Lancer."

Johnny eyed him suspiciously and then looked behind him and stopped short. He'd grown an inch or two in the last seven months and he was a little thinner, but the boy was substantially the same.

Tyler Freeman stood a few feet behind the man, unobtrusively holding his ground and letting Harmon do all the talking. His face was pale and his eyes were shadowed with lack of sleep. Johnny heaved a great sigh.

"When?" Johnny asked Harmon. "When did it happen?"

"Just last week," the man answered briefly. "She went peacefully. She asked me to bring the boy to you and to give you this."

He slipped his hand into a pocket inside his coat and pulled out an envelope. Johnny took it from him reluctantly, but didn't open it. It would wait.

Johnny opened the door wide. "You'd better both come on in," he said quietly and stood back to let Harmon pass. But the boy stayed put. "Ty?" Johnny prompted him.

The boy stepped forward, walking steadily towards Johnny and was about to pass him when Johnny reached out to stop him. "Tyler, I'm sorry."

Tyler nodded, then caught his breath. "She's gone, Johnny," he whispered.

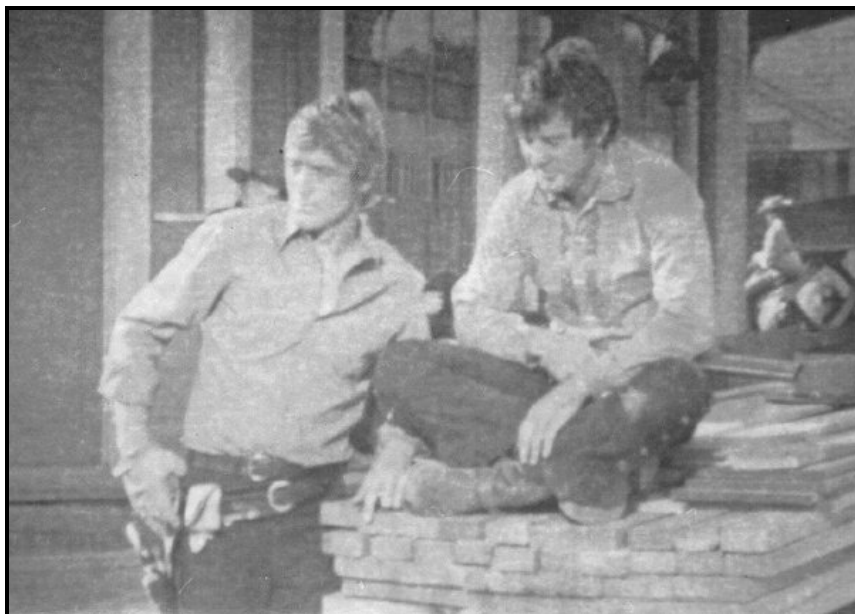
Johnny dropped his head sadly. “Yeah, I figured that.”

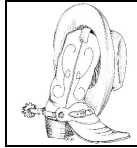
“What do I do now?” Tyler asked him, his words ringing with fear and loss.

Johnny put his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “You go on, but you’re not alone, Ty. You’ve got all of us.” He took a deep breath. “You’ve got me.”

It was all the boy needed to hear. He turned and hid his face in Johnny’s shirt. Releasing all of his pent up grief, he sobbed tumultuously. Without thinking, Johnny lifted his free arm to comfort him, but something stopped him - some ingrained need to hold back... something left over from his years alone.

But he quashed it. He let his arm encircle the boy and hold him through the shattering tears of grief, and then led him inside.





## QUIZ: Who Said It & When? By The Lancer Ranch Hands

Let's see how well you know Lancer!  
Give yourself 2 point for identifying the speaker and 2 points for identifying the episode  
These should get more difficult as you proceed!



1. "I never did like my fun organized."
2. "I could use that drink now."
3. "Elegant. Breathtaking. You are pretty!"
4. "Noblesse oblige, huh?"
5. "How'd you like to be dead?"
6. "Why, you're a girl!"
7. "There's a lot of back shooting going on around here."
8. "Oooh, boy, does that stink! That'd make a skunk sit down and cry!"
9. "Well, I'm just wonderful!"
10. "And get six bolts of cloth."
11. "What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen anyone thrown *into* a bar?"
12. "He mashed my ribs clean to my gizzard."
13. "Never underestimate an accountant."
14. "Uh, Murdoch, I hate to tell you this but you lost by three vertebrae."
15. "Nobody takes Teresa out of here. Not unless she wants to go."

16. "I believe you have an honest face."
  17. "Do you think Johnny's in a jam?"
  18. "Are ya gonna shoot me dead, tie me up and break my arms?"
  19. "Well, I'm not so sure we should be hauling him off to the ranch, anyhow."
  20. "Technically speaking, Mr. Lancer, I'm under arrest for practicing medicine without a license."
  21. "You're not going to take the easy way out and drown."
  22. "And don't forget I got some change comin' out! Don't go runnin' off to 'Frisco!"
  23. "Cut the head off a snake and the rest of it will wiggle right out of town."
  24. "Kinda hard to forget a man that's gonna hang, right? That begs for your help?"
  25. "It wouldn't work without Johnny."
  26. "He may not always be right but he's never wrong."
  27. "Dad blamed it if he don't end up with a busted neck!"
  28. "Maybe she'll throw up."
  29. "We were just admiring you!"
  30. "I'm a Special Person."
- BONUS QUOTE (5 points!): "That went well!"

Ratings and answers on page 241



## My Dearest Sister By Linda Borchers

*My dearest Sister,*

*I know I have been terribly remiss in not writing to you for so long. You must worry daily about my situation here. But I am well and remarkably happy despite everything that has happened this past fortnight.*

*My decision to travel west was a whim and a way to anger our father. Had I thought it out, I would have come to my senses before boarding the train.*

*But if I had, oh, Irene, I would have missed so much.*

*Just one letter cannot convey the majesty of this vast land. Or the people who live here. They are at once wild and truly frightening, and then kind and eager to help.*

*Perhaps it would be best if I told you of the family that opened their home to me. I'm sure I would not be here to write to you if they had not come upon me, newly arrived in a small town called Morro Coyo.*

*The train from Salt Lake City to San Francisco had been derailed, and it would be up to a month before the spur would reopen. I had the choice of staying in Salt Lake City, returning home or traveling by stage. Being the stubborn one of the family, I of course chose the stage.*

*It is not for the faint of heart, dear sister. The seats are no more than wooden benches, the ride akin to traveling across the roughest parts of the narrows leading to Lands End in New Jersey. Even the driest months can't compare to the arid land out here.*

*I can tell you, without exception, I was never so frightened in my life. The stagecoach arrived in a blizzard of choking dust, as there are no paved streets here in this part of California. I stepped off the stage and knew immediately something was terribly wrong.*

*Two men lay in the middle of the street, blood soaking into the dry earth. I was nearly sick at the sight. Someone yelled to get down, and I never thought it was directed at me. But a moment later a man darted from the stage depot's open door and grabbed me around the waist and flung me to the ground, and we rolled together until we were beneath the stage. I thought there and then that I had breathed my last breath.*

*The man was furious with me and I had no idea why. I only knew that the stage was rocking back and forth above us as the horses moved nervously around, ready I'm sure, to take flight any second.*

*The next moment gunfire erupted all around us and I knew why I had been hidden beneath the stage.*

*As I lay there, I tried to make sense of it all. The realization that I had walked into a shootout – as I believe they call them – both frightened and thrilled me. Then I was suddenly aware of something warm and sticky seeping through the arm of my dress. I looked down to see blood covering my sleeve and nearly fainted at the thought that I had been*



shot. But there was no pain and no tears in my dress. I realized that the man who had saved me must have been bleeding. There was a copious amount of blood on and around me and I was immediately concerned for the man. Why had he moved from the safety of the stage when he was obviously hurt so badly?

I soon became aware that more people were moving about the streets so I felt it safe to leave my hideaway. I was most anxious to find the man who had helped me. But there was chaos everywhere I looked. More men were lying in the streets. I hoped it was not my rescuer. To my surprise a tall blonde man came running up to the stage just as I was crawling out and helped me to my feet.

I know you will laugh at me, Irene, and even scold me, but for a moment I had eyes only for him. He wore the dusty, sweat stained shirts like the other cowboys I had seen on my trip across country. But there was something debonaire about him.

I soon learned that his name was Scott Lancer, and that he was almost as new to this part of the country as I was. But he was more concerned with the blood that covered my sleeve and insisted that I see the town doctor. When I explained to him that it was from the man who had pushed me beneath the stage he became unexplainably angry.

"Johnny," he growled, and I knew there was a connection between the two men. For I know from our brothers the look of worry for each other. Even in the face of the worst disagreement, worry and concern always won out. But the two looked nothing alike and I could only believe that they were fast friends.

*After quickly ascertaining that I was traveling alone and had not yet procured lodging, he felt obliged to see to my safety. That meant he needed to keep me near him and so I met the object of his concern.*

*Irene, I have yet to recover from that horrid moment when Scott practically dragged me into the local doctor's office. A most depressing place and he seemed to know exactly where to go and I had no choice but to follow him into a back room. I am sure the torture chambers of the most barbaric castles in England could not hold a candle to the room that the doctor called a surgery. And the man who had helped me lay atop a crude wooden table, his arm and chest covered with blood. You know of course, that I have had some nursing experience at St Mathews Clinic, with the newest equipment and highly skilled surgeons. I could not simply stand there and watch as my rescuer was butchered by that so called doctor.*

*But once again, your sister rushed in before thinking. As I began assisting the doctor I found that he was every bit as capable as any doctor at St. Mathews.*

*The bullet was difficult to remove and by the time the wound was packed and sutured I was exhausted. But I felt a responsibility to the man who had risked his life for me and offered to watch over him while Sam – forgive me, Irene, I failed to tell you his name was Sam Jenkins, a kind and good doctor – saw to the rest of the patients waiting in the outer room.*

*I wish I could put into the words all the feelings I had that afternoon and well into the late night.*

*I talked to Scott Lancer at great length as I watched over my patient. He seemed to need someone from home to open his heart to. He had been through so much in a few short months. As the sky dimmed and the lanterns were lit for the night, he told me how he had first arrived here, how he had met the man lying in the bed before us for the first time, learning that he was his brother. And how he had met his estranged father, having been summoned with a promise of a thousand dollars listening money, as he put it, and the chance to meet the man he had wanted to meet all his life.*

*could you imagine meeting your father for the first time when you are 25 and that same day meeting a complete stranger who turned out to be your brother?*

*But that is not the whole of it. My dear sister, think if this new brother you met for the first time was also a well known gunfighter. I must admit I was both stunned and appalled that Scott could so easily let a killer into his life. But you know me...while I have an adventurous spirit that has gotten me into trouble more than once, I am notoriously hard headed when I make up my mind about someone. And in my mind, Johnny Madrid Lancer was nothing more than a killer. I felt, at that moment, it was my obligation to set Scott on the right path again.*

*How wrong could I be?*

*I spent the rest of the night in an extra room in the back of the doctor's office and awoke at the first light of dawn. So much had happened, and despite that fact that I was exhausted, I found it hard to sleep. As I made*

my way down the hall to the front of the office I noticed Scott's brother's door open and I stepped in.

Irene, I must admit to some terrible thoughts as I saw him lying there. I know he risked his life to save me, but I could not get past the idea that he lived by the gun. Never the less, I checked his forehead for fever; it was not surprising to find that he was over warm. I wish I could tell you that I had even the faintest feeling of guilt knowing that he had been hurt helping me, but I didn't. I already disliked him immensely for what he was. A gunfighter. I cannot tell you how different these two brothers were. Our brothers, Hank and Alfred, look like mirror images of each other. Not so these brothers. Scott is tall and ash blonde, his skin deeply tanned from the unrelenting sun, but his brother is dark by ancestry. Scott's mother was from Boston while his brother's mother was from Mexico. His hair is as black as coal and is a startling contrast to the white pillow his head lay upon. It was truly hard to believe this man was a heartless killer, but I had read stories of gunfighters. I knew the handsome features and the eyes hidden beneath long black lashes were just a mask.

Then I suddenly found myself held captive by those same eyes. Irene, they were as blue as the sky, and so filled with confusion and pain. I could do nothing else but comfort him. He spoke to me in his mother's tongue at first, his hand weakly reaching up to hold mine. When he gathered his wits, his first question was if I was safe and unhurt, then he asked about his brother. I could barely respond. Where was the hardened killer I had expected to see? I gently bathed his fevered brow and spoke softly to him.

Three days passed and he hovered between life and death. I saw the pain in Scott's eyes, the fear that he was going to lose his brother. And I formed a bond with him myself. Despite all my attempts not to, I found myself drawn to Johnny Madrid Lancer.

On the fourth day Murdoch Lancer and Teresa O'Brien arrived. Murdoch was taller than Scott, and as rough as the country he had lived in the past thirty years. But in my haste, I had misjudged Johnny, so I forced myself not to come to a fast assessment of this man. A decision I will never regret. For as gruff as he seemed on the outside, there was no doubt how much he loved his sons, so new to his life. And Teresa, I hope one day that you could meet her, Irene. She is my teacher in this new land and my best friend.

I should end this letter here, dear Sister, but I have so much more to tell you. I believe my life has changed forever. I don't believe I could ever return to the regimented life we grew up in. Nor could I leave this new family without great heartache.

I am hopelessly and helplessly in love with Johnny. He is shy in his own way, and guards his heart, but I know if I am patient he will feel as I do.

The Lancers took me into their home when they brought Johnny home, and I have easily fallen into the routine of ranch life.

We sit around the great room in the evenings and talk of our day, while at least one story is told of this new family's burgeoning love and admiration for each other.

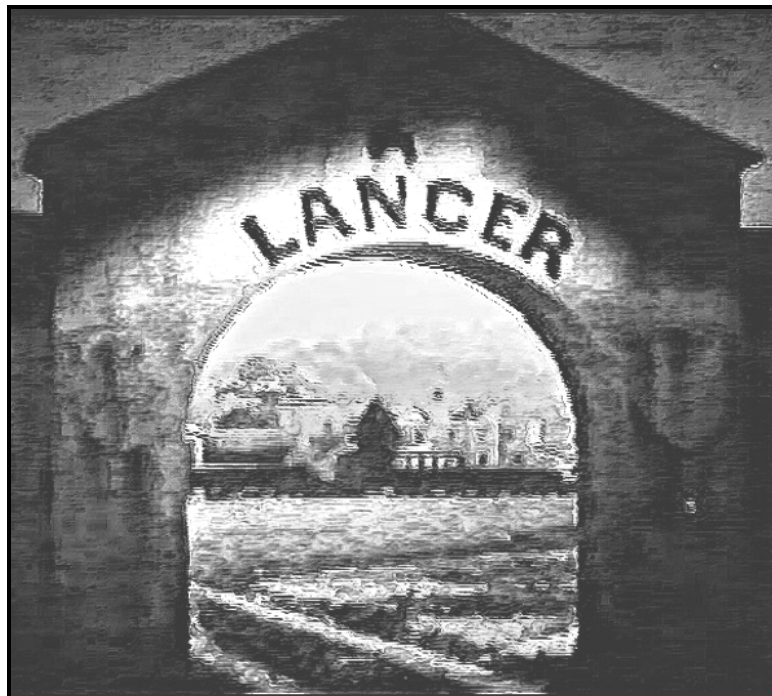
*It is a hard life. I go to bed exhausted each night, but awake each morning knowing that what I do makes a difference.*

*I hope to write to you one day soon announcing my impending nuptials. And I hope you will be my maid of honor.*

*Take care of yourself and be happy and well. Give my regards to Mother and Father and our brothers. Tell them I am well and happy.*

*Sincerely, your Sister,*

*Annabell*





## Vested Interests by Maureen

**Vested Interest:** An interest to which the holder has a strong commitment. Or, a special interest in protecting that which is to one's own personal advantage.



*'I'm so cold.'*



Morning broke reluctantly over the California landscape, little of the sun's warming rays reaching the ground through the thickly overcast sky. An unsettling gray shroud replaced the blackness of night. A lack of shadows manifested in a bleak harshness that boded ill for brighter prospects for the day.

Within the Lancer hacienda, Teresa stirred beneath her cozy mound of sheets and blankets. She poked a bare toe out into the air and drew it back quickly. *'Still too cold.'* She scrunched up her shoulders as she pulled a blanket closer under her chin, curling herself further until she lay in a catlike ball.

Teresa floated down into the half-sleep of one contented as she indulged herself in another couple minutes of snug comfort. But the chiding from years of routine niggled at her senses, until guilt overwhelmed her.

The young woman forced herself to leave the refuge of her bed. She tossed away the covers as she bounded off the soft mattress, escaping before the lure of the temptingly warm fortress could drag her back. She padded over to the window and pushed aside the thick curtains. A fleeting look was all Teresa needed to confirm what she'd already guessed – after five days it was still raining.

*'What will it be today, drizzles or downpours? As if it matters anymore.'*

Teresa flipped the curtain closed with angry impatience as she turned from the dismal sight. A shiver flowed through her that raised goose bumps along her arms, an annoying reminder to keep moving. She flitted about the room, gathering clothing to dress, longing for the blossom of warmth and long days of sunshine that should have marked the season's change from spring to summer.

Her mood threatened to darken even more as Teresa buttoned her blouse and thought of the harm the unceasing showers had already caused. Inch by inch the edges of her garden had been destroyed by the accumulated rainwater, her carefully nurtured plants slowly covered by the flood.

But she knew her losses paled when compared to the damage the unrelenting storm had inflicted all over the ranch. Fences were down everywhere. Landslides had started in the hills. Many riverbeds were near cresting level. Cattle were continually in need of rescue from mud holes that formed in low-lying areas. Every hand on the ranch was working from before dawn to well after dusk, just to keep up with minimal repairs.

The emergency affected the entire area, from Morro Coro to Green River, even beyond Spanish Wells. The unseasonable weather had caught everyone unprepared. But Teresa's worry focused most on her own home and the Lancer men who provided her guardianship.

Father and sons were taking the lion's share of responsibility for holding the ranch together. As co-owners, Teresa understood that it was, of course, their obligation to work hardest to protect the property; but the ranch was large, and the multiplying problems were taking a steep toll. Sleep was a precious commodity, but there was so much to do. She'd barely seen Murdoch or Scott yesterday, and Johnny . . . as she brushed her hair and thought back, Teresa actually couldn't remember seeing Johnny at all, although she knew he'd been the first one up and out the prior morning.

Somehow the thought of not having seen Johnny the night before bothered Teresa. A lot. She felt disturbingly . . . lonely.

Teresa opened a lower drawer of her dresser and reviewed the assortment of shawls stored there. The third one down peeked out at her beguilingly. She lifted the top two and stared at the regal blue material revealed beneath, dotted with vibrant red rose blooms elegantly patterned over the garment. Meant for formal occasions, it had been a gift. From Johnny. She stroked a hand tenderly over the delicate cloth, and found herself smiling for the first time that morning.

The young woman yanked the shawl from the drawer and with a dramatic flourish draped it over her shoulders. She closed the dresser drawer, then ran a hand once more over the soft fabric wrapped around her.

Teresa fluffed her long hair out from under the shawl as she took a final look around her room. The closed drapes renewed her irritation. She strode purposefully to the window and threw the curtains open in defiance, determined to further brighten her day. For good measure, on the way out of the room she stopped at her dresser and placed a drop of her best perfume, a gift from Scott, at the base of her neck.

As she quietly made her way past the other still closed bedroom doors, Teresa thought she heard movement in Johnny's room and paused. Directly across the hall a floorboard creaked within Scott's room. She rued her extra moments of stolen sleep, quickened her pace and hurried downstairs to start breakfast.

It would no doubt be another long day, but Teresa could now maintain a smile. She had a very important job to do, one she relished with a growing passion. The Lancer men needed her, relied on her to nourish them, provide for them, pray for them. Today she would begin their day with a pot of good, strong, hot coffee and a filling meal. She'd do her part to keep them on their feet so they could do whatever was required to protect their valuable assets.





'Someone . . . miss me.'



Scott made his way down the back stairway from the sleeping quarters to the kitchen. Each step reminded him that, one way or another, he was going to get wet again today. His boots had mostly dried during the night. Mostly. Except for the leather right around his toes and heels. The residual dampness there had already begun to leach itself through two layers of socks.

Almost a year at Lancer, Scott thought he'd made great progress adapting to life on a ranch. *'It's a test,'* he considered. *'California's final hazing before initiation into the cowboy fraternity. The newly chartered Alpha Lancer Mu . . .'*

Scott stopped mid-step, leaned back against the wall and slapped a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter. *'Alpha Lancer,'* he thought, then quietly crooned, "moooooo." The hand was moved up to cover his eyes as his shoulders continued to shake from his persistent chuckles. *'I hope it's the lack of sleep . . . otherwise, I've gone absolutely insane.'*

He crossed his arms, took a couple of deep breaths, and tried very hard to stifle his inappropriate humor, Lancer's current situation much too dire to support bouts of uncontrolled laughter. With a final deep breath, Scott continued down the staircase, his amusement tempered. Just before he entered the kitchen, however, he had a wildly errant thought. *'Wait until I tell Johnny that I'm pledging him to Alpha Lancer Mu.'*

Scott lost the battle with his sensibilities and was laughing aloud when he turned the corner and stepped into the invitingly warm kitchen.

"What's so funny?" Teresa looked back briefly from her task at the busy stove, a bright smile on her heat-flushed face. She turned quickly to flip a piece of bacon that sizzled beside several others in a large cast iron pan.

"Oh, nothing," Scott managed as he fought off another urge to laugh hysterically. "Just something I need to tell Johnny."

"Do you know if he's awake yet?" She flipped another piece of bacon, and then grabbed at her shawl as it attempted to escape from her shoulder.

"I don't even know if I'm awake yet," Scott said as he knuckled residual sleep from his right eye. "I imagine he'll be down soon. I think I heard Murdoch grumbling. Might have been a bear though . . ."

Teresa giggled. "Can you blame him? I can't wait for this weather to end so we can all get a decent night's sleep again."

"You seem to have had a good night. Who's invited to your party?" Scott grabbed a mug off the table and joined Teresa at the stove. He poured coffee from a bubbling pot.

She glanced over to Scott as she pulled again at the wayward shawl. "Oh, this. I just wanted something to brighten my day. Everything's been so gray and dreary . . . I'm fighting back."

"Good for you. You do look very nice, and I'm sure Johnny will approve."

As Scott turned to go sit down, he caught hint of a scent more common to ballrooms than kitchens. "Is that the perfume I gave you, too?"

Teresa nodded. "Mm, hmm." She smiled. "More ammunition for my war."

Scott found himself laughing again. "Excellent. I commend your tactics, Sergeant."

"Why, thank you, Lieutenant." She laughed back.

Scott took a seat at the kitchen table and savored the strong taste of his much-needed coffee. Within minutes Teresa set a brimming plate before him. "Thank you," he said as he eyed the carefully balanced mound of food. "Do you really think I can eat all this?"

"I know you can." She crossed her arms and stared down at him reproachfully. "You didn't touch the dinner I left out for you last night. Johnny didn't eat his, either. You men. At least I got Murdoch to swallow some soup."

"Sorry." Scott smiled up at her. "Too tired to chew. It was appreciated."

"You're welcome."

The pair glanced toward the staircase at the alert of heavy footfalls. "The bear's up," Scott deadpanned.

Teresa swatted playfully at Scott's shoulder as she turned to the stove. She returned with the coffee pot, topped off Scott's mug and filled another just as Murdoch entered the kitchen.

"Is that for me?" Murdoch asked as he limped stiff-legged to the table.

"Mm, hmm," Teresa said. "I'll have your breakfast ready right away."

"Thank you, dear," Murdoch said as he slowly sat down beside Scott. He took a sip of the hot brew. "You look pretty today."

"Thank you. I've been told that before," Scott said. He flashed a deliberately broad grin at Murdoch as he forked another measure of eggs into his mouth.

Murdoch stared at Scott over the top of his steaming coffee. He'd looked more than tired, but his eyes gained a mischievous glint. "Not you, son." Murdoch reached over and patted Scott's arm sympathetically. "I meant Teresa."

"Oh. My mistake," Scott said with mock disappointment, as Teresa giggled from the stove behind them. "She's taken up arms against our dreadfully depressing weather. I, for one, hope she wins a decisive victory."

“Here, here,” Murdoch said, as he raised his mug in cheer. His joviality was suspended as his arm stopped short. He pulled the mug back to a respectable distance, and a hand reached over to massage his bicep.

Scott knew better than to press his proud father about his physical condition. All the men on the ranch were tired and sore, and there had already been a fair share of sprains, strains, and broken bones among the hands. Thankfully none of the injuries had yet been very serious. But it was clear the older man was uniquely suffering from the week’s additional work. Scott concentrated on devouring his eggs as his father worked out the ache in his arm until he was finally able to once again sip his morning tonic without further sign of complaint.

Teresa returned with Murdoch’s breakfast and set it before him, then sat beside her guardian as she joined the men for her own meal. The three ate silently, mutually appreciating their relaxed company as they listened to the beat of a steady rain falling outside.

The brief minutes of peace were shattered as Jelly crashed his way into the room through the outside door. Teresa jumped in surprise. “Sorry T’resa,” the old handyman said as he stomped mud off his boots onto the stoop. He finally entered and closed the door behind him, only to start his now ritual rant against the elements as he shed his rain splattered coat. “I’m so gol’durn tired of all this wet weather! If it don’t clear soon I’m gonna hafta take swimmin’ lessons from Dewdrop. Don’t think I won’t have a few of the other hands joinin’ me. Never seen such a sorry mess a’ soggy, waterlogged, mud-covered cow punchers in my life. Why, if . . .”

“Jelly, would you like a cup of coffee and maybe a biscuit or two?” Teresa winked at Scott as she rose.

“Why, I most certainly would. Thank you very much.” Jelly joined the men at the table as Teresa prepared his breakfast. Always a good hostess, there was a rasher of bacon added to the plate when she brought it to the table along with the coffee pot.

“Miss T’resa, you sure do know jest exactly how ta take the chill outta a mornin’ like this.”

“You’re welcome, Jelly,” she said, as she filled the other men’s mugs along with her own.

Jelly ate and reported on the condition of the ranch, as relayed by the vaqueros fresh returned from the night watches. Scott asked a few questions, but overall found Jelly’s report pretty thorough. The information added together to equal yet another very busy day ahead.

“Murdoch, were you able to get that bridge repaired?” Scott asked.

“Yes. Finally. It’ll hold, too.”

“Good. I found three decent areas of high ground. We should start pushing some of the herd north today. It may take the rest of the week, but I think it’ll be worth it in the long run.”

“I agree,” Murdoch said. “The ranch isn’t going to dry out anytime soon.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “We’ll wait for Johnny.”

“He ain’t laid up this mornin’ on accounta’ his cold?” Jelly grabbed a third biscuit and took a bite.

Scott looked at Teresa who looked to Murdoch, all of them baffled. Murdoch finally said, "What do you mean? Is Johnny sick?"

"Reckon so." Jelly appeared confounded. "Don't know fer myself. There's a few of the hands that's ailing. Santos just happened to mention that Johnny'd been cough'n pretty bad yesterday. I also know Johnny ain't one ta miss a meal, so I jest figured since he weren't here partakin' a' T'resa's good food that maybe he'd went and let this weather get the best of him."

"We haven't seen Johnny yet this morning," Teresa said. She faced Murdoch and Scott. "Did either of you see him last night?"

"No," they replied in unison.

Teresa stood and pulled her bright shawl tightly around her arms as she set her hands on her hips. "Well, I'm going to go check on him. If Johnny's sick, I'm not going to let him claim he's not. It would be just like him to run himself into the ground before doing anything about it.

"You men! I don't know why you feel a need to deny the fact that you're capable of getting sick!"

Indisputably guilty as charged, the three men watched in awe until the young woman disappeared up the staircase and her determined footsteps faded. Scott finally said, "I wouldn't want to be Johnny right now. If he is sick, Teresa's going to make him wish he was dead for not telling her right away."

"Amen to that," Jelly concurred. "She's gonna chew him out fer sure."

The men shared a hearty laugh. "It is amazing how she can manage to run roughshod over him," Murdoch said. "I have to admire Johnny's patience, though. He'll whine, beg, and try to bargain his way out of her fussing before he finally loses his temper. But she'll back him down. Johnny can give as good as he gets with most men, but not Teresa."

Murdoch's wide smile thinned appreciably as he turned to Scott. "We may not be able to count on having Johnny's help today."

Jelly developed a wicked little grin. "We got work ta do, that's fer sure, but you think we got time for one more cup of this here coffee? I know it ain't a kindly thing to appreciate another man's misery, but I sure do like watchin' Miss T'resa take Johnny to task. His reputation don't mean nothin' when it comes ta a showdown with her! Sure is a sight ta see."

Scott rose to get Jelly his coffee. "Remember, a couple of months ago, when he cut his arm on that barbed wire? Teresa insisted he'd open the stitches if he didn't keep it braced." Scott almost spilled coffee over the table as he refreshed each man's cup and chuckled loudly. "She chased Johnny all the way to the barn trying to get him to wear a sling, before he finally threatened to poke her with a pitchfork if she took another step toward him."

As Scott set the coffee pot back on the stove, the men's laughter was abruptly interrupted. "Murdoch! Murdoch!" Teresa's voice was frantic as she bounded down the stairs.

Murdoch reached the staircase just as she rounded the corner. “Johnny’s bed wasn’t slept in last night.”

The mood immediately sobered, the implications serious. “Are you sure?” Murdoch asked. “Yes, very sure. I changed all the bedding yesterday, and left a fresh nightshirt out for Johnny on top of his pillow. It’s still exactly where I left it.”

“Did you see him at all yesterday?” Murdoch asked Scott.

“No,” Scott said. “After I left you at the bridge I was all over the north range, but I never ran into him.”

Murdoch clutched his ward around the shoulders in a hug meant for reassurance, but the look he shot Scott was anything but convincing. “Don’t worry, honey. We’ll go talk to the hands and find out who saw him last. He may have simply stopped at a line shack for the night. You look around inside and see if you notice anything else.”

“I’ll go see if Barranca is in his stall, and meet you at the bunkhouse,” Scott said. “Jelly, gather the men and we’ll join you in a few minutes.”

Teresa hugged her colorful shawl closely as she headed toward the great room. The men moved off with purpose, the warmth of the morning giving way to a chilly apprehension, and the depressing gloominess of another rainy day.



*‘Please. Not much longer...’*



Never a patient man, Murdoch stomped across the muddy courtyard, emptying puddles along the way with his heavy tread. He spied Scott coming out of the barn and quickened his step.

“Scott, what did you find?” Murdoch’s call was gruffer than intended, and he told himself to calm down. The lighthearted banter from the morning breakfast already seemed years ago, buried in the past under a ton of anxiety about Johnny’s wellbeing.

“Barranca is in his stall,” Scott answered. He matched his father’s rapid pace without falter as the men met. “Johnny had to have come back to the ranch sometime.”

“Except Teresa didn’t find a sign that he’d been anywhere near the house yesterday.” The pair continued together toward the main bunkhouse.

A drenched vaquero ran into the building three steps ahead of the Lancers. Scott closed the door behind them. Jelly and Murdoch’s long-time Segundo, Cipriano, stood nearby. The large single room was packed from wall to wall with ranch hands. Most stood, but others had crawled up onto the top bunks for a better view. A jumble of conversations dwindled quickly to silence.

"You all know why you're here," Murdoch said as he pulled off his hat and whipped it against his dripping slicker, sending a chaotic pattern of rainwater onto the door behind him. "Johnny didn't come home last night, and I want to know why. Jelly, did anyone see him this morning?"

"No, sir."

Murdoch faced his Segundo. "Cip. Barranca is in the barn. Was Johnny riding him when he rode out with you yesterday?"

"Sí, Patron," Cipriano answered. "I come for you before dawn, but Juanito wake before I could knock on your door. I tell him there was much flooding in the south pasture and we must move the herd to higher ground. He say to let you sleep, he will come. I saddle Barranca while he dress."

"Who else saw Johnny yesterday?" Scott asked.

It sounded like a simple direct question that would lead to a quick answer for where to find Johnny. But Murdoch shared an incredulous look with Scott as a loud chorus of "me" and "I did" burst out from well over half the men in the room.

"Well, Cip saw Johnny first," Murdoch said. "Who saw him next?"

All hell broke loose as, in rapid-fire succession, each man eagerly presented his piece of the puzzle on Johnny's whereabouts.

"Me, Luke, and Del was with them cows in the south pasture," young Jake offered.

"Mike an' me caught up ta him 'round nine or so," Will spoke up. "Was lookin' for downed fences. Didn't have no trouble findin' any. Johnny said just to fix 'em enough to keep the stock Cip was movin' from spreadin' out too far. He said it was stupid to do much more than patch since them fences was gonna fall down again anyways from the look 'a the ground."

"Told us the same thing." Frank claimed his turn. "Me an' some others was workin' the fences, too. Johnny said when we finished to go help Cipriano get that herd pulled out of the mud."

"He no like to do it, but Señor Johnny made me let go the horses we had corralled in Eagle Canyon," Jose offered next. "He say there no time to break them, so we catch them again later."

"Johnny helped me rope some stupid cows out of a stream near there that was swellin' bad . . . must a' been 'bout noon or so," Leathers said. "He left pretty mad . . . them cows was near drownin' and his slicker kept gettin' in the way, so he pulled it off so we could get the job done. It ended up floatin' away downstream."

"Musta been why he took my poncho when I put Barranca up for him," Charlie said.

"When was that?" Murdoch asked.

The tall lanky cowboy stared up to the ceiling as he thought hard on his answer. "Was 'round two or so. I was just ridin' out to find one of ya'll," he pointed at Murdoch, then Scott, "when Johnny rode up. Word come in that the fence over by Dave Murphy's spread west 'a here was

real bad damaged. Johnny said he'd take care of it. Took my poncho an' horse . . . my sandwich too!"

A few of the hands laughed, but Charlie turned downright distressed. "Johnny told me to go get me another one for myself, and to thank Teresa for makin' 'em for the men. I done forgot to tell her. I'm real sorry, Mr. Lancer."

If Johnny weren't missing, Charlie's lapse of memory might be considered a trivial thing. Murdoch should have been angry with the man for his forgetfulness, but he found himself touched by the sincerity of the hand's apology. "Don't worry about it, Charlie."

Murdoch was amazed at Johnny's activities over just one morning. He'd had such a hard time getting Johnny to understand the needs of running and maintaining a spread as large as Lancer. Murdoch hadn't thought his impetuous and stubborn younger son would ever catch on to what was important to Lancer's success. It took him by surprise that all Johnny's decisions on behalf of the ranch had been sound judgment calls. *'I need to let Johnny know what a good job he's done . . . but first we have to find him.'*

"Okay, that tracks Johnny's morning," Murdoch said. "He left Charlie around two and headed toward the Murphy fence line. Who was working over there?"

"Me, Santos, and some others, Mr. Lancer," Hank said loudly. "We was tryin' to sort out Murphy's cows from ours. Johnny come by . . . must 'a been 'round three or so, and told us to just let 'em mix, we'd sort 'em out once the weather cleared. He worked with us figurin' out which fences to fix so's them cows wouldn't get themselves into no trouble. Left some of us to watch the cattle in that area . . . sent the rest to check the fence line on the way back to the bunkhouse. Johnny told 'em to come back and spell us after they got some rest."

"Santos," Scott called out. "Jelly said you heard Johnny coughing pretty bad yesterday. Is that right?"

"Sí, Señor Scott." The vaquero stepped forward a pace. "He say it was nothing, but I didn't like the sound though. He not feeling well, for sure." Several men who'd seen Johnny nodded their heads in agreement.

Murdoch's concerns continued to mount. "Where did he go when he left you?"

"He talk with Señor Murphy about the fences and cattle," Santos said with certainty.

"I seen 'em when he come back from there," Jim offered eagerly. "Johnny said Dave's wife was sick and he was shorthanded, so it was okay by him to go ahead and let the cattle mix. By the time Johnny got over to us it was well dark, maybe nine or so. He stayed a piece, then went on along."

"He must'a run into us on his way," Tom spoke up. "We'd just split up with Cisco and some of the other boys. Was spreadin' out to pull night watch for them others that was ridin' herd all day."

“What time was that?” Murdoch felt himself getting agitated. His question carried more than a hint of impatience.

“Probably ‘round ten-thirty,” Tom said quickly.

“He come over to us when he left you,” Cisco said. “The cattle we was watchin’ was on good ground, but *mighty* skittish. Johnny stuck with us for quite awhile before settin’ out.”

“What time?” Murdoch implored.

“Had to have been at least two . . . maybe three.” Cisco’s head dipped, then shook over his uncertainty as he faced Murdoch. “It was real late, and dark as could be. What moonlight we’d had couldn’t be seen no more for the clouds. Johnny didn’t want to leave . . . even lit down under a tree for a bit and tried to sleep. But he was coughin’ a lot, and said he was gonna get the cattle all spooked again if he stayed. So he grabbed a lantern an’ headed home.”

A deafening silence enveloped the bunkhouse. No other hand volunteered any further information about Johnny’s movements over the prior day.

Each and every man in the room – not the least of which were Murdoch and Scott – understood how serious Johnny’s situation might be. There was no line shack in the area where Johnny was last seen. He’d been out in the open in bad weather throughout the day and alone most of the night – and had clearly been falling ill.

“All right men. That leaves Johnny southwest of the hacienda. I want you all mounted and ready to ride in fifteen minutes.”

There was a flurry of movement as the men grabbed for gear or headed straight out the door.

Spun emotionally off-balance, Murdoch couldn’t move, suddenly very tired. His mind swirled with grim probabilities and critical decisions.

“We will find him.”

Murdoch faced Scott and saw the strength of conviction he needed. “I know.” He stiffened his back.

“I’ll let Teresa know what we found out,” Scott said. “Maria should be here by now. They’ll pack what we’ll need.” He joined the exodus of men from the bunkhouse.

Murdoch set his hat on his head. A young cowboy, recently hired, approached the doorway. He had his head down and a fist at his mouth as he fought with a hacking cough.

“You there,” Murdoch called and pointed. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Clint,” cough, “sir.” The smooth-cheeked cowhand tried to face Murdoch, but his illness won out. He coughed fiercely into his hand.

“You’re not going. Stay in the bunkhouse today.” Murdoch considered his command an end to the conversation, and turned to leave.



“But . . .” Cough.

“That’s an order!” Murdoch’s bark was so forceful two other cowboys stopped to stare.

Although hired to do a man’s job, the kid was just that, a kid. Clint looked from one cowboy to the other and then ducked his head. He wilted down into himself as his arms crossed over his chest.

The reaction was so akin to Johnny’s manner that Murdoch’s breath caught in his throat. He motioned for the other two men to leave with a tip of his head and took a step closer to the boy. “There’s no shame in it, Clint.”

Clint’s eyebrows rose with doubt as he peered up at Murdoch.

Murdoch placed a hand on the kid’s shoulder. “You’re sick and we have more than enough men. Stay inside. It’ll be fine.” He wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince, himself or the kid, but there was no way he could let the young man go out in that condition to search for his own ill son.

The kid again looked up askance, but nodded his head – as he coughed, sealing the decision.

Murdoch patted Clint on the shoulder one last time, then left the bunkhouse, his thoughts once more on Johnny. *‘We’ll find you, son. Just hang on.’*



*‘I ain’t gettin’ out of this on my own. I need . . . my . . . family.’*



Teresa stood on the veranda with Maria, sheltered from a persistent drizzle, as they watched Murdoch, Scott, and a large group of ranch hands ride out to begin the search for Johnny. The quiet left behind was a disconcerting contrast to the frenzy of activity that had just taken place. Scott had given his report, and the women had spent a frantic fifteen minutes gathering supplies. There had been no time to dwell on the bad news, the possibility that Johnny might be very sick, or injured, or . . .

*‘No! Don’t even think it. Please let him be all right,’* Teresa pleaded.

There was movement. Teresa let her gaze shift beyond the depressingly empty courtyard. She spotted Jelly as he skated his way along the muddy trail from the bunkhouse to the barn. It only took a moment for her to guess where he was headed.

The old man had a special affinity for Johnny, but Murdoch had denied him permission to go with the younger men to search for his friend. *‘He needs to do something for Johnny. He’ll go check on Barranca.’*

Johnny's horse allowed no one else to ride him, and the man returned that loyalty by rarely allowing anyone else to care for the animal. He might have let Charlie stable him yesterday, but it was a sure bet that Johnny would have made certain that the job had been done right as soon as he'd returned.

Except Johnny hadn't returned.

Jelly Hoskins was not the only person who desperately needed to feel a lifeline connection to Johnny Lancer. The delicate party shawl was practically useless against the rain-cooled air, but Teresa wouldn't have traded it for anything. She hugged it close and swaddled herself in the warmth of her memories, as she prayed for Murdoch to find his son.



*'Oh, Dios... can't let that happen again...*

*'... can't sleep... gonna drown...*

*'... don't sleep... they'll come...*

*'... you'll see...*

*'... they'll come, just hang on... don't cough... stay awake...*

*'... hang on... don't cough... stay awake...*

*'... hang on...'*



"Okay, we start searching here." Murdoch sat high on his big chestnut horse, surrounded by Lancer's best men, Scott on one side and Cipriano on the other. "We need to cover as much area as we can, as fast as we can. Spread out, but not so far that you might miss something. We don't have time to backtrack."

The urgency was absolute, and the men primed. The rain had temporarily stopped, but ominous clouds billowed across the sky and into the horizon.

"Move out."

Murdoch rode in the middle of the long search line for miles as every ditch, pile of rocks, patch of scrub, and stand of trees was scoured along their path. The irony wasn't lost on the Lancer patriarch. For years, the land they crossed was all Murdoch thought mattered in his life. He'd used money and sweat to build Lancer, and shed blood – his and others – to keep the ranch his. It was his pride and joy, and anyone who would listen knew that.

*'Let it rot. Just let me find Johnny alive.'*

For the first time Murdoch knew why Lancer should be important to him. It wasn't for the conceit of possessing the land or power of command over the empire he'd built. He now had people in his life that meant so much more to him. The ranch may have brought them together, but it was having his family whole again that actually made the owning of it worthwhile.

*'My sons . . . Teresa. A family.'* Scott and Johnny working beside him was a dream he had hoped to fulfill for many years, and it had finally been realized. Only now Johnny was lost, somewhere out there on the vast land that the Lancers called theirs.

"Hey! I see a horse up ahead," a sharp-eyed hand shouted.

Murdoch was pulled from his thoughts by the prospect of hope, and prodded his own horse forward.

"That's the one I gave Johnny!" Charlie shouted as they closed the gap on the riderless mount.

Hank was closest to the horse and maneuvered toward it slowly. Murdoch and Scott kept pace as the rest of the men maintained a distance. As the three neared, the skittish horse limped away a few steps, reins dragging along the ground. Hank dismounted and let his own horse's reins drop. He walked toward the injured animal slowly, crooning quietly, hand outstretched before him. The horse settled quickly and lowered its head as it stepped forward to meet the cowboy.

Scott jumped down and checked the animal over, from saddle to hooves. "Gear's all intact. The injury isn't too bad, but probably painful." He looked up at Murdoch. "Johnny might be close."

Murdoch nodded. "Hank, do what you can for that horse." He pivoted his horse as Scott remounted his own. "We're in the right area," he called to the search party. "Keep moving."

Ten more long minutes passed in frustration. They found plenty of stray cattle scattered in patches along their trail, but not another sign of Johnny. Murdoch risked quickening the pace.

The frost of winter was a season past, but there was a raw bitterness to the air that made a man want to keep his collar buttoned to the top and his gloves pulled on tight. A capricious wind played a puckish game of tag, alternating bracing gusts with dead calm, or stampeding through the treetops to trample on the fresh spring growth before floating the tender young leaves to the earth on a gentle breeze.

The temperature fell perceptibly as a soft drizzle wafted into their path and veiled itself over the men. The moist caress was a cruel taunt, the threat of torrential downpours ever in Murdoch's mind, the continued inclemency of the weather a pitiless danger to Johnny if he hadn't found shelter.

Gray shadows appeared in the curtain of mist ahead of the search party. The amorphous shapes became horses and riders. The pair galloped forward and reined up before Murdoch and Scott, as the rest of the men continued the search.

"What's goin' on, boss?" Gilly asked.

“Did either of you see Johnny today?”

“No, sir,” Ben said, as Gilly shook his head.

Murdoch glanced over to Scott, who mirrored his own disappointment.

“Johnny didn’t make it home last night,” Scott explained. “We know where he was up until two or three. Did you see or hear anyone or anything after that? Anything at all?”

“There was some kind of ruckus,” Gilly said. He turned to his partner. “Remember?”

“Sure do. Sounded strange as hell in the dark.”

“What did you hear?” Murdoch asked.

The two men faced each other again, until Ben volunteered, “A big . . . kinda crash. Cracked and rumbled somethin’ awful. Sounded like one of them big oaks near Parson’s Gulch decided to come down. Didn’t go check ‘cause it was just too durn dark. Forgot all ‘bout it, ‘til now.”

With another glance Murdoch could tell exactly what Scott thought. “Show us,” Murdoch ordered sharply.

Not five minutes later the pair had led the group within sight of a deep gully the vaqueros referred to as Parson’s Gulch. Even from a distance it was impossible to miss the sprawling debris field created by an enormous fallen oak.

Long dead, the tree had stood for years as a stately monument to its former grandeur. The oak had finally surrendered to other forces of nature with a spectacular display of defiance. The roots of the hardwood giant had completely given way and freed themselves from the rain soaked ground. Exposed, they stood taller than a man, a contorted formation of jagged spikes jabbing at the sky.

The embankment that had anchored the massive base of the tree looked like a load of explosives had gone off underneath it. Dirt, rocks, and foliage were blown about the landscape. The displaced tree left a sweeping crescent in the terrain, the missing earth plunged into the gully. The expansive canopy of monstrous branches – turned leafless, dried, and brittle by time – had shattered as they’d hit the bank on the opposite side of the gulch, leaving shards of aged timber and mounds of wood dust scattered over a wide area.

Murdoch’s gut twisted unbearably. A vision of Johnny crushed and mangled came to him unbidden and tried to weaken his faith for finding his son alive.

The blurred image of horse and rider flashed before Murdoch, as Scott took off at a swift gallop. Murdoch kicked at his own mount, and the rest of the men followed.

With Scott’s lead, man after man abandoned their mounts at the perimeter of the tree wreckage. They spread out, headed upstream and down, and cautiously moved toward the embankment through the maze of detritus. The ground was soft, uneven, churned up into thousands of little waves by the hooves of hundreds of cows, very recently passed. The men took each step with

consideration and care. Boot heels seized tufts of loose grass as they sunk into the soil and pushed through the mire, only to have an inky layer of mud fold in behind to hold each victim in a tight grip.

Del and Jose were first to reach the gully rim. Murdoch watched helplessly as they lurched near the edge. The cowboys grabbed at each other to keep their balance, and together scrambled back as the earth threatened to give way beneath their feet and send them down into the gulch. Clumps of dirt dislodged by their escape splashed noisily into the water below. The rain drizzled to a stop as Murdoch tracked Scott's carefully chosen path exactly, until they stood side by side as near the edge they dared.

The old, weatherworn gully was steep sided and ran up to thirty feet wide and twenty feet deep in some places. It rarely held standing water for any length of time, except during the wettest of seasons. Like most of the streams and ponds in the area, the gulch was now flooded with water.

The bulk of the oak's expansive trunk lay toppled in the streambed and had formed a natural dam. Upstream the water sat deep and dark, pooled behind the obstruction. The stream cascaded over the fallen tree and flowed downstream in gently swirling eddies. More tree debris littered the gully. Oak branches appeared as suggestive shadows below the water's surface, or reached their twisted fingers high above. Whole shrubs and other trees, big and small, had been yanked from the ground and tossed into the gulch as well. Huge, newly unearthed rocks mixed with others long weathered along the sides of the craggy gully.

There were other shapes in the water . . . cattle. Lancer beef. At least half a dozen dead cows were visible amongst the wreckage. Some appeared as mere outlines, crushed and held underwater beneath the heavy oak timbers. One was impaled on the opposite wall, half in, half out of the water, grossly skewered through its neck by a branch. Others floated amongst the debris, fleshy evidence to the force of the destruction.

The men all instinctively silenced, became still, as desperate eyes scanned the chaos.

"Mr. Lancer . . . there!"

Murdoch and Scott both turned their heads sharply. Frank was downstream, beyond the towering roots of the oak. He pointed and then pumped his fist toward a tangle of branches, about fifteen feet from the tree trunk dam.

"Scott, can you see . . .?"

"No!"

Men cleared from their path, helped pull the Lancers from the mud's viscous grasp as they struggled to adjust their position, until the angle of their view revealed . . .

"Johnny. Oh, God . . ."

Toward the far side of the gully, barely visible amidst an embrace of bare tree branches, only one arm and his head still above the deepening water, was Murdoch's younger son.



*'... don't cough... stay awake...*

*'... hang on... don't cough... stay awake...*

*'... hang on...*

*'... hang...*

*'What?'*

Something was different. Johnny felt warmth on his face. It wasn't much, but he'd been cold for so long that the light ...

*'...touch?'*

... almost felt like ...

*'...fingers?'*

... on his skin. He was feeling ...

*'... someone's hands... holdin' my face.'*

Someone ...

*'... 's speakin' to me...'*

"Johnny."

*'... callin' my name.'*

Johnny shivered.

*'It's a trick... ain't real! Tired... just tired...'*

He wanted to sleep.

*'Stay awake!'*

He wanted to ...

*'...get home.'*

He wanted ...

*'... my brother... find me...'*

“Johnny!”

‘Scott?’



Johnny blinked.

It was a small gesture, but more of a response than Scott had gotten since reaching his brother’s side. “That’s it, Johnny. It’s Scott. Time to get out of here.”

Johnny’s eyes were open, but there was little indication he was aware of his surroundings. His head and the top of his shoulders remained above the water, supported by his left arm, wedged, apparently by Johnny himself, up to his armpit into the crook of a large oak branch. His gloved left hand drooped at the wrist, suspended motionless above the water. Johnny’s hat was missing, his wet hair a tousled mess. His right arm was tucked suspiciously between buttons into his gray wool jacket. The shoulder of Johnny’s right sleeve was torn at the seam, little bits of bark imbedded in the shredded fabric. Johnny’s face was a sickly pale blue-gray under a day’s growth of beard, and marred with an array of scratches. A deep black bruise covered his left cheekbone and stretched back into his hairline.

Scott stood next to his brother, balanced on a submerged log. The rain was absent, but with the sun still cosseted behind endless clouds, the water was left a murky mix of silt and sawdust. Scott couldn’t make out much detail past Johnny’s chest, but he could feel Johnny’s leg next to his own under the water, straddling another limb of the oak. Johnny hadn’t yet moved, except for an occasional irregular shiver that coursed through his body to send ominous ripples adrift across the water.

Scott pressed his bare fingers tighter against his brother’s face. “Johnny, look at me.”

Johnny blinked again.

“That’s it, Johnny. Come on, Boy. Time to go home.”

Another blink. “Sec-ott?” Johnny coughed and his eyes slammed shut, tight. “Th-hat . . . r-real . . . ly . . . y-you?”

It came out quietly, Johnny’s voice badly hoarse, but Scott had never been so pleased to hear his brother speak. He remained close and pulled a twig out of Johnny’s matted hair as he lowered his hands. “Yes, it’s me. Murdoch’s up above, waiting to haul you out of here.”

Johnny kept his eyes closed and shook his head feebly. “Can’t . . . if I mm-move . . . gonna ff-all ag’in . . . drown this time ff-er sh-sure . . .” Another ripple skimmed across the water as Johnny shivered. Another deep cough produced a telltale groan.

Frank stood on the same log as Scott, in back of Johnny. He grabbed onto a branch that dangled above him and waded forward a step. “He’s talkin’ cold crazy, Scott,” Frank whispered.

"I know. Get ready." Frank nodded, and Scott heard Jose and Charlie behind him as they splashed closer.

"Johnny, it's going to be okay. I'll get you out of here. First you need to tell me where you're hurt."

Johnny's eyes reopened. He moved his head slowly, the effort obvious just to turn far enough so he could look Scott straight in his eyes. "I knew you'd come," he said weakly.

Scarcely a year before Scott had no idea he even had a brother. Now he stared Johnny in the face and witnessed a depth of conviction that left him stunned. He'd had close friends throughout his life, school chums and fellow soldiers he would have died for. But no one had ever looked at him the way Johnny was now, with a serenity born from absolute faith. As tired, sick, and hurt as he was, Johnny had sustained himself with the thought that Scott would find him. It was a humbling moment.

"Came as fast as I could," Scott said quietly. "Now tell me where you're hurt so we can get you out of here."

"Busted . . ."

Scott waited, but Johnny's attention wandered. His head started to droop forward.

"Johnny, what's busted?" Scott's voice was firm but calm, but inside he was frantic, torn between a desperate need to get his brother out of the water and a desire to protect Johnny from further injury. "Johnny, what's busted?"

"Sh-shoulder . . . leg." Johnny closed his eyes again, and leaned his head up against the branch that supported his arm.

"How about your ribs?"

There was no answer.

Scott again placed a hand against Johnny's cheek. "Johnny. Did – you – hurt – your – ribs?"

"No," Johnny said, faintly, just as his whole body trembled convulsively. The violent shiver triggered a short bout of coughing that rose from deep in Johnny's lungs. He moaned as he clutched his right arm tightly against his chest and leaned forward. His chin dipped into the water.

"We move him. Now." Scott let his military training take over. He needed the reserve, the discipline to do what was necessary without emotion. He issued his orders with steadfast command. "Jose, unhook Johnny's arm from that branch."

Jose complied quickly. The young cowboy swam to the other side and with a grunt vaulted out of the water and mounted a branch opposite Johnny. He shinnied his way up until he dangled slightly above Johnny's arm. "I am ready, Señor Scott," Jose said.



“Go ahead,” Scott said. He wrapped one arm carefully around his brother’s back while the other hand reached over to grab hold of Johnny’s jacket sleeve.

Jose stretched down and grasped Johnny’s upraised hand. He lifted and passed it slowly through the crook of the tree. As soon as Scott had control, Jose let go and wormed himself down the branch until he dropped back into the water.

Scott pulled Johnny’s left arm across his body and ignored a low moan as he leaned in closer. “Johnny, you have to trust me now. We’re going to float you out of here. We won’t let you fall, and we won’t let go. Do you understand?”

Johnny nodded slightly. “Trust you.” His head sagged forward onto Scott’s chest.

“Johnny? Johnny?” Scott couldn’t see his brother’s face, only the top of his head.

There was a splash and then someone leaned over Scott’s shoulder. “He passed out, Scott,” Charlie said.

With his head lying so close to Scott’s ear, Johnny’s breathing sounded alarmingly labored. Scott’s concern flared, but he tempered it with the thought of his promise. “Probably best,” he said halfheartedly. Scott moved his arm up Johnny’s back. “Grab him, Frank,” Scott said as he cradled Johnny’s head and leaned him backward.

Many had volunteered, but Scott had chosen these men above others for their ability to swim well. The four worked together to carefully lift Johnny off his tree branch perch. A brief moment of panic threatened during Johnny’s first second of freedom, as his body dipped precariously low in the water. But the men were attentive and hands of support appeared just where needed to keep him fully afloat. Within minutes the rescue party had negotiated downstream through the last of the tree debris.

Now able to swim freely, Scott wished he’d put his gloves back on. He’d taken them off to attend to Johnny, and his fingers were growing numb. Despite the cloud cover the day had started to warm, summer determined to reclaim rightful dominance of the season over the recalcitrant spring. The air on Scott’s face was a pleasant contrast to the cooler water that enveloped his body and washed over his fingers as they supported his brother. Scott remembered the winters of Boston, and could imagine what a nightmare the hours spent in the cold night had been for Johnny. Fully aware of the effects of chill weather on a man, Scott reminded himself that Johnny was still shivering, a good sign despite the seriousness of his brother’s injuries.

Safety ever nearer, Scott realized how focused he’d been on Johnny. The din of activity caught his attention and drew his gaze another twenty-five feet downstream. Murdoch had kept the Lancer men busy. A primitive raft had been assembled and sat tethered against the steep side of the gully. Built from branches of the oak, it was an ungainly sight. Uncut timbers were lashed together and stuck out at various lengths. Several cowhands stood atop and proved the craft more than sturdy.

“Start heading over, men.” The swimmers followed Scott’s order and angled left with Johnny kept balanced between them.

As they neared the raft four men jumped into the water and surrounded Scott, ready to help. "Careful when we lift him," Scott advised.

The men took up station around Johnny. They floated him beside the raft, where another three cowboys knelt. They reached down and grabbed onto Johnny's left arm and jacket.

"On three," Scott said. "One . . . two . . . three!"

As Johnny's body disappeared up onto the platform, the raft bobbed precariously low. The counter momentum pushed Scott under the water. He took a single stroke and broke the surface, coughed up water and wiped a hand across his eyes. A pair of hands reached down in front of him and he took them in his own. His right foot found a log under the surface and he kicked off as the cowboy grasped him tightly and heaved him up onto the raft. Johnny was already being swaddled in blankets with ropes ready to be tied off around him.

Scott looked up, knowing whom he would see.

"How is he, Scott?" Murdoch called down from the gully edge, ten feet above.

"He said his right shoulder is broken, and one of his legs. I can't tell which one . . . left I think."

"He was awake? Able to speak to you?" Murdoch sounded a disconcerted mix of relief and concern.

"Yes, but he's unconscious now. We need to get him back to the ranch and warm."

Scott turned and looked down. Johnny was secured in blankets and ropes.

Jim stood up from Johnny's side. "He's ready, Scott."

Scott once again faced his father. "Murdoch, you can pull him up now. Slow and easy."

He couldn't make out the words, but Scott heard Murdoch's distinctive voice bark out commands above. As the lines pulled taut, he and the other three men on the raft crouched down around Johnny and helped lift him up, ever higher until they had to stretch to maintain any kind of hold at all. Johnny was suspended briefly, just out of Scott's reach, and then he was gone, pulled up and over the gully edge.



Murdoch leaned carefully over the edge and watched Johnny's body rise from the raft. He couldn't remember ever being more apprehensive. *'Except maybe when Johnny was born . . .'* Relieved to finally take charge of his son's care, Murdoch was at his side the second Johnny cleared the rim. "Get him over to the fire," he ordered.

They didn't even bother to remove the ropes, just carried the injured man cautiously over the mud until they reached more solid ground, where a bonfire glowed red and a bed of blankets waited. The ropes were untied and pulled away.

Johnny remained unconscious, but his body trembled all over as he shivered almost constantly. "Build up that fire," Murdoch commanded to no one in particular.

Cipriano knelt next to Murdoch. Together they unwrapped Johnny from the wet bundle of blankets and removed his gloves. They each took up a knife and began to cut away the soaked jacket.

"I have sent Santos for the doctor," Cip said.

"Good. Ben!" Murdoch called without looking away from his task.

"Yes, sir?"

"Are those bandages and splints ready?"

"Got 'em right here."

"Give me your knife, Tom," Scott said. Murdoch looked over briefly to see his older son kneeling beside Johnny's left leg.

Murdoch cut the buttons from Johnny shirt, then split the seam over his right shoulder and peeled the garment away. An ugly telltale bulge was found over Johnny's collarbone, the area discolored a reddish-purple. "That's busted for sure," Murdoch said. He looked up. "Scott, how's his leg?"

Scott had slit Johnny's pant leg up the side, and just finished cutting open his boot. Cip set his knife down and helped Scott expose Johnny's leg, which appeared bruised and swollen badly along the outer side below the knee. "It's broken, too," Scott answered.

Johnny trembled violently and moaned as his head tossed to the side. "Let's get him splinted," Murdoch said. "We'll start with his shoulder. Help me sit him up, Cip."

To their dismay, as soon as Johnny was upright he began a rough, resonant cough that jolted him back to consciousness and doubled him over in pain.

Murdoch knelt behind him and wrapped his arms tightly around Johnny's, bracing his injured shoulder against the jerking movement. It seemed minutes until the spasm passed, leaving Johnny breathing in uneven gasps and his body slumped from exhaustion.

His arms still tight around his son, Murdoch leaned his head down to whisper into Johnny's ear. "Rest, son. I'll get you home soon. Go back to sleep."

Murdoch looked up to find Scott staring at him anxiously. "He's all right. Let's try this again."

Father, son, and loyal friend worked quickly to get Johnny ready to travel. As they put a sling on Johnny's arm, Murdoch recalled Scott's amusing recollection from the morning: Johnny running from Teresa and the sling she'd once wanted him to wear. Johnny's need was now more than genuine and anything but funny. They ended up not only using a sling, but bound his entire arm tightly to his chest for additional bracing. His leg was secured with a sturdy splint below the knee. Finally he was cocooned in the last of the dry blankets.

While they worked Murdoch considered his options for getting Johnny back to the warmth of the hacienda as fast as possible. Travel by wagon was unthinkable given the weather conditions. A travois was already rigged, but bumping and yanking his son's broken body across Lancer felt impossibly cruel. He was pleased that Scott didn't question his hard-made decision when they set Johnny in the saddle astride Murdoch's horse.

Murdoch thought it sadly fortunate when Johnny remained unconscious throughout the awkward process of getting him mounted. They wrapped a rope around him and secured him to the saddle horn, and then Murdoch mounted behind and further supported Johnny in a firm grasp.

Cip sat his horse to Murdoch's right, Tom was on his left, Leathers behind, all prepared to help lead father and son safely home.

Scott's hand shook uncontrollably as he reached down to grab hold of the reins to Murdoch's horse. Murdoch noticed, and watched his older son closely. Soaked from head to toe, a shiver surged through Scott's body, his shoulders pulled close to his ears. Murdoch's paternal instincts took over like never before.

"Mike," he called to the nearby cowboy.

"Yes, sir?" The hand pulled his mount beside Cipriano.

"Take the reins of my horse and lead me home. Scott, I want you and every other man who was in that water to ride back to the ranch and get dry."

Scott turned in his saddle, stunned. "But Murdoch . . ."

"I mean it, Scott!" Murdoch's voice rose in misplaced anger. "I'll not have anyone else getting sick, least of all another of my sons! Have bedding ready in the great room near the fireplace, and stoke the fire high. Now go!"

Scott didn't move. Murdoch remembered how close the brothers were, and tempered his own emotions. "Scott, please. Go on ahead and have things ready for us when we get there."

Still Scott hesitated.

"We will be here, Señor Scott," Cipriano offered. "You do not have to worry about Juanito."

He still didn't look convinced, but Scott nodded and handed the reins of Murdoch's horse off to Mike. "Hurry home," he said, then rode forward a few paces. "Frank. Jose. Charlie. All you men who were in the water . . . we're heading back."

A dozen men assembled quickly and followed Scott, who rode off without a look back.

Murdoch heaved a heavy sigh, relieved that Scott had actually obeyed. He adjusted his grip around Johnny. "Let's go, Cip."

"Sí, Patron," Cip said, and the small group moved off as one.



The trip back to the hacienda was nightmarish for Murdoch. He knew Johnny had no business on horseback in his condition and second-guessed his decision to carry him so. He weighed the alternatives over and over, but always came to the same conclusion – there was no way to make the trip any easier, for father or son. Murdoch pressed forward and willed his mount to step carefully as he resisted the urge to pick up the pace. He didn't think Johnny would survive the ordeal if the two of them were thrown in a fall.

The rain fell intermittently over a landscape that was already dotted treacherously with patches of mud, loose ground, and deep puddles. Cipriano and the other men remained close to guide Murdoch's horse. Several times their hands reached out to steady Murdoch and his valuable burden, as the normally reliable mount lost its footing.

As much as Murdoch hated to see his son so helpless, he was glad Johnny remained asleep for most of the journey. Through the tightly wrapped layers of blankets Murdoch could feel Johnny's body continue to shudder from the severe chill that assailed him. Twice the riders were forced to stop when the conditions were roughest and the stumbling gait of the horse woke the injured man with a flare of pain. Each time Johnny stirred he had a repeat bout of that horrible choking cough. But Murdoch was right there to hold him steady until the spasm ended.

The Lancer Patriarch once again considered the land they crossed, and his thoughts from earlier in the day: *'Let it rot. Just let me find Johnny alive.'* His prayer, if it could be called that, had been answered, not so much through divine intervention, but from the dogged actions of the men of Lancer.

"Cip," Murdoch said quietly.

"Sí, Patron?"

"When we get back to the ranch I want you to gather the hands again. I meant what I said earlier. I don't want anyone else getting ill. The men need a break.

"Rest any man who's already sick. And don't let anyone work alone until conditions improve. It's not safe anymore. Double the men up and rotate them in short shifts. Just care for the stock. . . everything else can wait for this weather to clear.

"We don't need any more men badly hurt." Murdoch glanced down at Johnny. "One man is enough."

"Sí, Patron. One man is enough. I will take care of everything. You and Señor Scott take care of Juanito. We will do the rest."

"I know you can handle it, Cip," Murdoch said. "Thank you."

"It is my honor, mi amigo."

The men shared a quick smile.

Any other time Murdoch would have been offended by the thought that the ranch could run without him. But all he had to do was hear Johnny's labored breathing and the decision was clear where to vest his interest. He turned his attention back to the trail and his vow to get his son home.



Johnny drifted . . . in and out of a dense fog of consciousness. Familiar voices spoke to him and he tried to obey their commands, but it was hard . . . he was so tired, and every bone in his body ached, some much more than others. He tried to hide in darkness, but the pain continued to find him, turned dreams to nightmares as agonizing tendrils crawled through his leg, or woke him cruelly with a start as it clawed at his shoulder, digging into bruised and battered muscles to clutch at the shattered bone beneath. Each involuntary shudder of his chilled body sent a wave of torment coursing through him. His cough deepened, attacked at its own will, thwarting all hope for comforting stillness. The uncontrollable spasms grabbed and shook him from within, and he was too tired to fight back.

Murdoch's protective arms no longer encircled him. From a muddled haze Johnny felt his balance suddenly shift . . . his body begin to tip. *'Don't let me fall, brother!'*

"Easy, Johnny! Don't struggle. We have you."

Strong hands steadied him. *'C'n trust Scott.'*

"I have him, Murdoch. Go ahead and let go. Grab his feet, Jelly. Watch his leg."

His body swayed as they carried him and he tensed as the movement dared his injuries to speak louder. *'Don't cough . . .'* He kept his eyes closed, willed sleep to claim him, just for a little while. He felt warmth, smelled wood smoke and dry leather . . . a whisper of lavender. Home.

The pain in his shoulder flared without warning, radiated through his arm and upper back then lanced its way into his chest. He gasped at the intensity and his cough ignited, the jarring movement fueling the blaze that engulfed his shoulder.

"Get him over to the fire, quick."

"Don't lay him flat, he'll choke."

*'Oh, Dios . . . can't stop it . . . hurts . . .'*

"Hang on, Johnny. It'll pass. Take it easy, son. Breathe steady."

Protective hands again. They held him upright, braced his arm, tried to help.

*'Don't cough, don't cough, don't cough!'*

"Murdoch?"

“He’ll be okay, Teresa. Leave the room . . . watch for Sam. Jelly, let’s get him out of those wet clothes.”

“Scott an’ me’ll do it. You go get dry yerself. We got ‘im. Don’t we, Scott? We got ya, Johnny.”

*‘Thanks, Jelly . . . tired . . . gonna sleep . . . have to sleep . . . okay to sleep now . . . home . . .’*



Warm. He was warm. Blessedly warm. And still. Johnny once again floated out of the darkness to linger in a languid semi-consciousness, buoyed by the realization that he was no longer shivering. He finally felt in control, at peace.

The serenity was shattered as something prodded his shoulder. Johnny drew in a sharp breath before he could stop himself. He felt the cough wake like a startled bull and start to buck. He didn’t bother to try to stop the rampage, knew from too much recent experience that the effort would be useless.

Instead he took comfort in the hands once more ready to support him, to try and calm the beast for him. Johnny actually would have smiled if he hadn’t needed most of his energy just to keep from choking – or passing out. He wasn’t alone anymore, and that thought offered him a different kind of serenity that no amount of pain could overcome.

Johnny had lived only two years at Lancer before his mother stole him away. She became his existence. After she died he had spent a whole lot of years on his own, convinced he’d one day die that way, too. But then Murdoch had found him and called him home, where Johnny had uncovered his mother’s lies that had threatened any previous hope for reconciliation with his father. The truth made Johnny think he could remain at the ranch – finding he had a brother made him believe it. He really wasn’t alone anymore, and he liked the sound of that . . . the *feel* of that.

The bout of coughing tapered off and finally stopped, although Johnny could feel the congestion still milling about in his chest, ready to rear up and kick him again. He kept his eyes closed and set his concentration on steadying his breathing, willed the pain in his shoulder and leg to disappear, at least lay low; give him one more minute of peace.

He realized he was propped against something. Someone.

*‘Nope. I ain’t alone no more.’* This time he did smile. At least he thought he did. A little.

“Johnny?”

Teresa. She sounded worried.

*‘Bet I look like hell . . .’*

“Nice to know you can still smile, son.”

Murdoch. He sounded close. Worried too. Johnny's eyes remained shut as he gathered his strength, but he gave a weak nod. "Tryin'." Johnny was hard pressed to recognize his own voice, the single word uttered in no more than a gravelly whisper.

"Sorry about that, Johnny. Didn't mean to hurt you."

Johnny had to think about that voice for a moment. "Sam?"

"Yes, it's me. Open your eyes Johnny. Come on now."

He didn't want to . . . was too tired and what energy he'd rallied was fading fast. He craved sleep – got a shove from his lungs instead as another deep cough welled up fast and burst its way loose. His body jerked, and he couldn't stifle a moan as another wave of pain enveloped his shoulder. *'Madre de Dios, make it stop!'*

A hand lifted his chin. "Drink this, Johnny." A glass was set against his lips. He guessed what it was, expected it, actually wanted it – he just hoped he could swallow it down before the next cough came to call. He opened his mouth and prayed, kept on praying as the glass tipped ever more, stopped praying when it was empty and pulled away.

"I'll let that take hold before I examine your shoulder again, Johnny. Rest easy for a bit."

Sam. *'Good ol' Doc Jenkins. He'll fix me up. Done it before. He...'* The laudanum latched onto Johnny's fatigue and barely settled before it slowed him up considerably, sent his mind back into a fog. But it took the edge off his pain, so he didn't much mind.

Johnny relaxed against that someone still behind him, and opened his eyes. He found himself surrounded by fretful faces. "Sorry to worry ya'll," he managed in that wisp of a voice he had left.

"Glad to have you home, son," Murdoch said.

*'Glad to have a home,'* Johnny thought.

Now that they'd given him help to sleep, he didn't want to. But his body readily surrendered to the effects of the opiate. On the verge of unconsciousness, he regarded those around him. Teresa had that fancy party shawl he'd given her wrapped around her shoulders. He thought he managed another smile.

"Teresa . . . you look mighty pretty," Johnny said, and then he fell asleep.



The night was quiet, the rest of the household asleep. Father sat solitary vigil beside his son's bed, a lamp set low to merely glimmer in a gentle wash over Johnny's face. Murdoch took advantage of the peaceful moment and unabashedly studied his son's features. For the first time since his rescue, Johnny looked serene – whether from the small doses of laudanum he continued to receive or from sheer exhaustion, Murdoch didn't care. Johnny was going to live, Sam had assured that afternoon, and that was all that honestly mattered.



Sam's proclamation was a welcome end to what had been a tension filled week for Lancer. Johnny had avoided a fight with pneumonia, but his cold had given them a battle nonetheless. The hacienda echoed with the sound of Johnny's incessant coughing. Sam, Jelly and Maria had put their heads together and tried every medicine and folk remedy they could think of to tame it. Johnny preferred the mixture of whiskey, honey and lemon . . . but it was a syrup made by combining wild cherry bark, honey and yellow root that had proved the better therapy. A hot brew made from bee balm leaves came in a close second.

The bedroom was permeated with the smell of vinegar. Once Johnny had gotten past the sharp odor, he actually looked forward to sessions with his head stuck over a steaming pot of the pungent liquid. The therapy had gone a long way to reducing the bronchial spasms that had shaken him so violently. When Johnny had joked about knowing how it felt to be pickled, the family knew he was on his way to recovery.

On his way, but it was going to be a long road. Johnny remained weak, his appetite was poor and his injuries were nowhere near mended. He hated his growing beard, but Sam suggested not shaving until the deep scratches on his face healed.

The only good news about Johnny's worst injuries was that his fibula had broken cleanly and, of all the bones in the shoulder, he'd broken his collarbone. Johnny had privately admitted that he was most concerned about any lasting damage affecting the use of his gun hand, but Sam was optimistic that full movement to that arm would return. In the meantime the doctor was taking no chances, and Johnny never complained about the decision to keep his arm totally immobile, tightly bound to his chest.

Weakened, unable to use his right arm, and with his left leg in a heavy splint, Johnny couldn't do much on his own. But so far he hadn't bucked much, to the relief of the entire household. However, bets were already being placed for how long Johnny would remain quietly compliant.

*'Patience is a virtue,'* Murdoch mused. *'God, give us all strength.'*

Johnny gave a little cough, and his head turned slightly on the mound of pillows that propped him nearly upright – another order from the sage Doctor Jenkins. It wasn't long until his eyelids fluttered open.

"Hey," he said drowsily, followed by another small cough.

"Hey yourself," Murdoch said. He reached over and picked up a glass of water off the bedside table, then helped Johnny lift his head to take a long drink.

"Thanks," Johnny said. He cleared his throat as Murdoch reset the glass.

Johnny looked over toward the window of his bedroom. The drapes were closed. "What time is it?"

"One . . . maybe one-thirty," Murdoch said. He smiled. "Why? You got someplace to be?"

Johnny smiled back. "Tired of me askin' that question already?"

“Yep.” Murdoch’s smile widened. “Face it, son, you’re not going anywhere for awhile, and you need all the rest you can get.”

“I know, I know,” Johnny said, followed by another cough. “I’m just sick of losin’ track is all. Feel like I been missin’ whole days.”

“The sun was out all day yesterday. If it looks the same today, I’ll ask Sam if we can open your window for a bit. How would that be?”

“Freshenin’ this room’d be just fine. Might let you do it even if he says no.”

Murdoch laughed – and appreciated the fact that he finally could. “Well, let’s at least give the good doctor a chance to offer an opinion, shall we?”

“Ain’t got much choice, do I.”

“No. No you don’t.”

Johnny stared at the ceiling as his left hand played with the edge of a blanket.

Murdoch picked a thick book up from the table and raised the lamp wick a turn. “Do you want me to read another chapter?”

Johnny worried at that blanket a little faster. “We get past that fight in the castle yet?”

“Yes,” Murdoch answered warily. *‘Three times, actually.’* “But I don’t mind reading it again if that’s the last part you remember.”

The hand left the blanket to rub at Johnny’s eyes. “Best not. That laudanum’s got my mind all muddy. No need wastin’ your time.” The hand flopped to the mattress with a telling thud.

Murdoch set the book back onto the table, and leaned closer to his son. “Johnny, don’t get frustrated. You’ve come a long way in a week. You’re doing well, but it’s going to take time for you to heal.”

“It ain’t right you gotta sit with me like this.” Johnny’s voice rose and his cough flared. Murdoch stood and sat his son upright. The spell ended quickly, and Murdoch offered another sip of water before he laid Johnny back. He looked exhausted again, his eyelids heavy, his arm limp at his side.

“Do you need some laudanum, son?” Murdoch asked as he watched Johnny closely.

Johnny shook his head slightly in reply.

“Go back to sleep then. We can talk more in the morning.” Murdoch sat back in his chair. For a moment it appeared that Johnny would comply as his eyes closed.

“I’m sorry, Murdoch,” Johnny said quietly.

“What for?”

Johnny turned his head and faced Murdoch. He was calmer, but his voice was filled with regret. "Gettin' laid up like this. Leavin' you short handed is the last thing you need right now. An' you and Scott havin' to sit with me ain't . . ."

"Johnny, stop it. Once you're finally up to it, I'm interested in hearing the whole story. But I doubt very much that you asked to be tossed into that gully in the middle of the night. I'm actually proud of you, son." Johnny looked at him, confused. Murdoch leaned forward again. "That's right. The day before your accident you made a lot of important decisions, good decisions to keep this ranch running. Your getting hurt was partly my fault. I was pushing you and Scott . . . all the men. It took you getting injured to open my eyes to that."

"I've already told Scott this, and I'm telling you now – there is nothing on this ranch worth more to me than you, Scott, and Teresa. I never intended the cost of owning Lancer to include the lives of my children. I want you to always remember that."

There was silence between the men for a moment, as Johnny mulled over Murdoch's words. "I really appreciate you thinkin' that, Murdoch," Johnny said. "There was a time when . . . well . . . that don't matter much anymore, I guess. But I hope you ain't sayin' I can't ever protect our property. I will, you know."

Murdoch smiled. "I know you will, Johnny. But protect yourself first, and get yourself home."

Now Johnny smiled. "I was tryin' . . . just kept gettin' sidetracked. You built a big ranch, Murdoch. Don't know how you done it on your own."

"Stubbornness. Pure Lancer stubbornness."

Johnny's eyes struggled to stay open.

"Go to sleep, Johnny. That's an order."

Johnny's smile widened as his head nodded slightly. "Thanks for finding me," Johnny said quietly, and then his breathing deepened as he fell asleep.

Murdoch sat back and contemplated those few words over and over in his mind . . . *'Thanks for finding me.'* Had Johnny meant locating him in the gully – or searching for him all those many years after his mother had taken him away? Either way, Johnny's appreciation meant a lot to Murdoch. He'd called his estranged sons home to Lancer, and both had chosen to stay. They'd had a rocky start, but finally, out of a near tragedy, had come a strengthening of their bond.

*'I have no idea how I managed it, but I finally have my family together.'*

Murdoch heaved in a great breath of relief – and let it out with a chuckle. *'Murdoch Lancer, you are one lucky son of a . . .'*

