

HOMEcoming 2006

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS



LANCER CONVENTION
OCTOBER 5, 6 & 7

SOUVENIR MAGAZINE

The pen sketch artwork throughout the zine is courtesy of

Shelley Hunter

who dedicates her work to the memory and inspiration of

Jeannie McClure

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HOMECOMING 2006



LANCER CONVENTION BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Hello again!

Can you believe it? This is the third annual Lancer Convention! It's an amazing fact that a television show is the cause of this, especially a show that has been off the air for decades! Just think about it - where were you thirty-five years ago? A few pounds lighter and moving a bit faster, perhaps, but it's a sure bet that most of us were watching a pair of brothers riding around their California ranch getting in and out of all sorts of trouble and we were loving every minute. Some of us, though, may not have even been born yet, and that, too is an amazing thing. We all connected with those fictional characters somehow and as a result, they meant enough for us to meet here and now to talk and live Lancer.

So, as we explore the Easter roots of our favorite show and meet some friends face - to - face for the first time, remember what made it possible: dedicated Lancer fans like you.

I wish you loads of fun and camaraderie and adventures you will always remember with fondness.

Welcome to Boston!



Sincerely,

AJ Burfield

Poway, California

September, 2006

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LANCER THEME SING ALONG

BY JEN AND MOE

Convention 2005 Challenge, First Place Winner

[Who are we kidding? We're the only one's who entered! We're such geeks. . .]

**Johnny's so lovely
In his tight leather pants
The girls do some swooning
When he shows his stuff off at a dance.**

**Scott came from Boston
He's kind of uptight
But with Johnny's influence
He is shaping up just right**

**There's Murdoch and Teresa
And Jelly Hoskins too
And lots of Marias
And quite a few Julies too**

But it's the boys we hunger to view!

I CAN MAKE IT . . .

BY LARAINÉ VAN ETTEN



The High Riders had crested the hill and were assigned their tasks by their leader, Day Pardee. Each Rider knew where to go and what to do in their ultimate goal—to overtake the Lancer ranch.

Johnny Madrid rode amongst the High Riders, and he, too, knew where to go and what to do in his ultimate goal—to save the Lancer ranch.

As the Rider's scattered to wait for the word from their leader to attack, Johnny made his way to Pardee. He hopped off his horse and walked toward his old friend, now an enemy. Pardee leaned against a tree branch, overlooking the vastness and beauty of the ranch as he finalized his plan in his mind. Johnny looked at Pardee's back and hesitated, for just a second, before he spoke.

'Well, this is it, Johnny Boy. It's now or never . . .'

“Day?”

“Yeah, what is it, Madrid?” Pardee asked, half-interested, not bothering to turn all the way around.

“It ain't Madrid.”

“What?” Pardee was interested now, turning around and looking at Johnny, with a puzzled, almost comical look on his face.

"Too late now . . . I've done started it. Just get it said . . .'

Coolly, calmly, Johnny Madrid stated a fact.

“This is my land . . . and I want you to get off . . .”

“Your land? You know . . . the Lancer?” Pardee asked, recognition kicking in.

A slight nod and smile came from Johnny.

'He's pissed . . . stay alert . . .'

“Get him! Get him! Kill him!” Pardee’s voice broke the serenity of the early April morning.

Shots rang out, and Johnny instinctively grabbed his gun, intending it for Pardee. But when Colley, one of Pardee’s slow-witted henchmen, got in the way, Johnny’s plan was changed and his efforts were averted from Pardee to Colley.

Colley’s shot missed, but Johnny’s aim was right on target. Colley went down, but Pardee was aware of Madrid’s betrayal and Johnny knew he was a target for Pardee’s own quick, sure-fire shot.

'Dammit, Colley, you son of a bitch . . . why'd you get in the way?'

Johnny quickly spurred his golden Palomino into action.

“Come on fella! You can do it! Get me home, Boy!” Johnny called out to the golden horse.

'God, I wish I knew this horse better, wish he knew me better. Sure hope he ain't spooked by all this gunfire . . .'

As the horse galloped at full speed, Johnny turned around and began shooting at the riders behind him as the smell of gunpowder and the noise of gunshots filled the air.

'Good, got one . . . another! God, I never felt so vulnerable in all my life. Where's Pardee? Ain't worried about the others, but Pardee can get me . . . he's almost as good with a gun as I am . . .'

Just then, a bullet whizzed by Johnny’s head.

Damn, that was too close. . . .

And another slightly nicked his shoulder.

'Well, there's another one to add to my collection of scars . . . Come on, fella! Get me home! God please, get me home!!'

Just then, the white hacienda came into view.

'Gracias . . . there it is! I wonder if they hear us coming, if they know I'm coming. Dios! I wonder if they know what I'm doing!!!! 'Cause I sure as hell don't . . .'

Another bullet brushed by Johnny.

'Another one too close for me . . . I need to get home . . . now!'

Johnny continued his backwards shooting, while at the same time, riding at full gallop a horse with whom he was not familiar, but somehow, trusted.

'Good goin' fella . . . you're doin' great!'

The hacienda grew larger as Johnny got closer, and he breathed deeply, for just a second.

"I think we made it, Compadre! I think we'll be all right!" he shouted above the gunshots.

But his relief was too soon in coming.

'Damn, the fences, I forgot about those. I don't know if you can jump it, Boy . . . but we got no choice. Go for it!'

The palomino jumped one fence, then the other, both times landing with a loud grunt from Johnny.

The hacienda was there, in front of him. He could see the vaqueros, and he could see the two figures he knew were his brother. And his father.

'Hell, they ain't shootin'. . . they must know it's me! Hey, I think I made it! Just a little further and I'll be safe, I'll be ho . . . '

The explosion knocked him off his horse with such a force the world went black for a minute. Then his mind awoke before his eyes could open.

'What happened? Where am I? I've been shot . . . again . . . never been back shot before. What if I can't move? Can I? . . . Thank you God, I can still move. What's on my back? What is that warmth I feel? Blood? It's oozing out of me. Please, don't let me bleed to death . . . I still hear gunshots . . . well, Madrid, don't you look good? Laid out here dead while the old man and the greenhorn fight your battle for ya . . . old man ain't never gonna let ya stay now. Say I didn't earn my keep . . . well' I'll show him. Get movin, Madrid . . . ya ain't done yet . . . '

He slowly opened his eyes and sensed someone running from behind—one of Pardee's men. He had the audacity to jump over Johnny, like he was some forgotten carcass left in the desert.

Johnny shot him.

'That'll show them . . . '

He perched himself up on his right elbow and began shooting.

'Don't know if I'm hittin' anything . . . kinda hard to see . . . but at least I'm trying. God, my back is burning . . . Hey! What's that! Someone's grabbin' me! Hurting me!'

Johnny felt himself being dragged, then found himself perched under a large oak tree; for now, safe from the line of fire. He looked up and saw Scott, his brother, aiming and shooting with a rifle.

'Thanks. Got me outta the way for now. You know, you're pretty good with that thing . . .'

Just then, he spied his father, Murdoch, shoot one of Pardee's men that was aiming for his sons.

'Hey, pretty good shot, Old Man. Hmmmm, guess these two ain't that bad after all. But this is all wrong. I'm supposed to be watching their backs . . . they're not supposed to be watching mine. Guess I'll be asked to leave when this is over. Wait a minute . . . where's Pardee? We're all sitting ducks! Where the hell is the bastard?'

Just then he saw Pardee, aiming at . . . he wasn't sure if it was Scott or himself Pardee was aiming at.

'Think he's aimin' for you, Brother . . .'

"Watch out!" Johnny managed to breathlessly warn his brother.

Scott reacted, aimed his rifle, and shot. Pardee fell to the ground.

'Way to go, Brother! You got him! That's better than I did on top of the hill . . . damn that Colley . . .'

"They got him! They got Pardee! Let's get outta here!" were the shouts of the High Riders as they realized their leader was down and probably dead. They weren't taking any chances.

Johnny watched as Scott finalized his attack, in military stance, aiming and shooting his rifle with an accuracy that impressed the downed gunfighter.

'He's pretty damn good . . .'

Johnny noticed the gunfire lessened; a calm seemed to be returning to the once serene morning.

'Hope it's over . . . think I might need some fixin' up . . . just a little. I hate the feel of blood on me. Dios! My back hurts . . .'

He saw his brother walking toward him in a confident, victorious stride.

'Here he comes . . . what should I say to him? Thanks, maybe . . . I don't know, I just can't let him know how much I'm hurting . . . stay cool, get control of yourself, Madrid. You've been in worse spots than this.'

Scott stood above Johnny, looking at him with a grin a mile wide.

'Boston, that's the silliest grin I've ever seen in my life. You're happy with yourself, ain't ya? Yep, you one upped the mighty Johnny Madrid. Guess I need to say somethin' . . .'

"Good shootin' . . ."

'Dumb Madrid, really dumb . . .'

"Thanks, Brother. We've about given up on you, Boy," Scott replied, the grin never leaving his face.

"Well, you had your plan, and I had mine," Johnny answered, hiding the pain as two blue eyes sparkled.

'Don't ever call me 'Boy' again . . . Guess I better get up, make my way back to the house.'

Johnny stood up, the pain burning through him. He grabbed onto Scott's sleeve, and was soothed by his brother's gentle words: "Easy. Take your time . . ."

Johnny looked ahead and saw his father.

'Can't let him see me fall, can't let him see my weakness. I'll walk back on my own. Just stay close, Scott . . .'

"I can make it," Johnny told his brother.

'Yeah, like hell I can make it . . . One, two, God, it's a long walk to the house. I feel the blood running down my back . . . five . . . six . . . You close by, Brother?'

Johnny let himself fall into the waiting arms of his brother. He knew he was being carried, and he hated it.

'Feel like an old sack of potatoes . . . the old man will really make me leave . . . ain't much use to him now . . .'

But somehow, he couldn't fight the pain anymore, and he really didn't care. He let himself go limp; he knew Scott was carrying a load of dead weight.

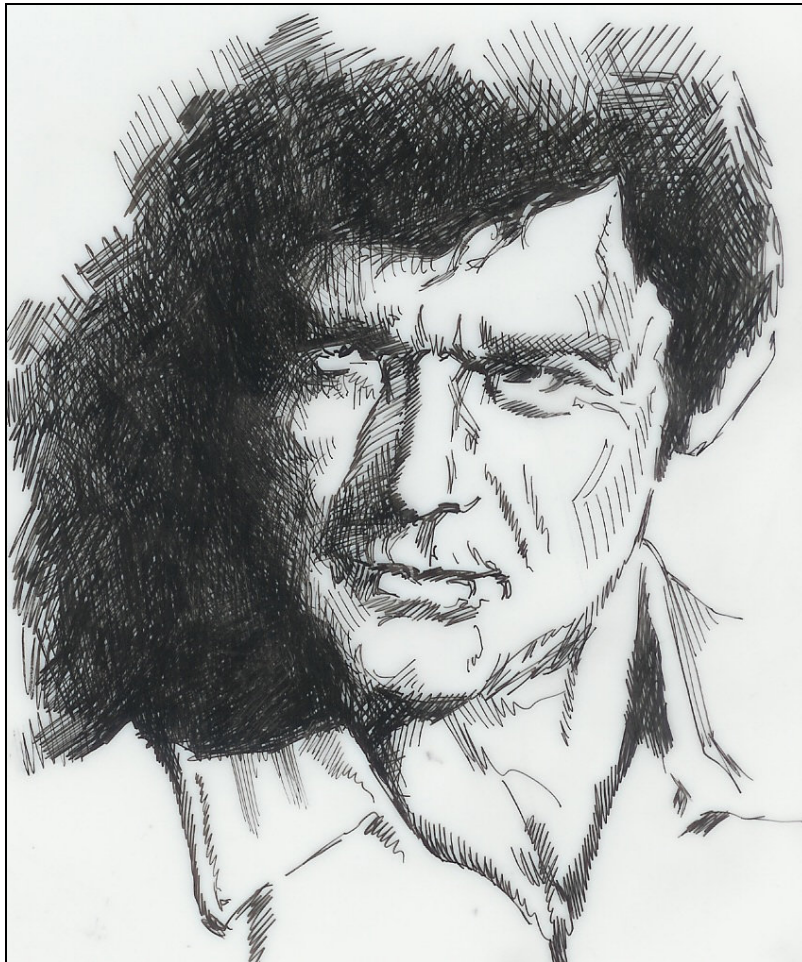
'Hope you're strong . . .'

He studied the ground as he was slowly carried, literally upside down. His eyes grew heavy, but he couldn't help but notice the trail of droplets that he left as the blood dripped from his back and neck.

'I'm gonna die . . . but I can't fight it no more. At least I'll die around people who care. . . least I think they do.'

As his eyes slid shut, the pain too much to bear, Johnny Madrid thought one last thought:

'Thanks, Brother. Glad you were there for me. Dios, I have a brother! What do ya know . . . Think I'll sleep now . . . See ya, maybe . . .'



TARGET PRACTICE

BY MAUREEN



"Just take *one* shot, Johnny! Wastin' one bullet won't kill ya."

Johnny sat on the tailboard of the supply wagon and slowly, deliberately, took another bite out of the apple held in his left hand. He needed the distraction to help control the temptation, rein in his temper. If he couldn't, there were seven vaqueros there to serve witness . . . them, and one fool. Sixteen eyes total just waiting to watch Johnny Madrid come out and play. Only thing was, when Johnny Madrid drew his weapon it was never for fun any more. Hadn't been since he'd fought his first gunfight. Killed his first man. Making light of or showing off his abilities with a gun wasn't Johnny's style. Not unless he was interviewing for a job. And Johnny's occupation was no longer that of gun hawk.

What Johnny considered himself to be now was rancher – third-owner of one of the biggest spreads in California. That is, until some yahoo would come along and find out who he had been. Challenge him, like now, with a game – or worse, in a fight to the death. Neither proposal much appealed to Johnny. Both left a bad taste in his mouth. He spit out a seed and tossed the rest of his apple into the nearby creek to drift downstream, out of his life.

'If only Madrid was that easy to get shed of.'

He wiped his hand on his pants and looked around at the other men. All were silent. All knew who Johnny Madrid was, heard about his reputation. All knew that Johnny Lancer just wanted to be let be. All . . . every one of them. Except for the yahoo . . . the new man . . . the dog that wouldn't let go of a bone.

Johnny's day had started so . . . normal. Lead a crew out to the Lazy Creek bridge, get it repaired, go home. *'Home.'* Lancer. *'Home.'* Sounded good. If everyone would just let Johnny Lancer be . . .

The canteen the yahoo had set as target, heart high in the crook of a nearby tree, stood as a damning symbol to Johnny's past. And he didn't like it. Didn't like it one bit. He'd already told the yahoo to take it down once, in reply to the dog's first request that Johnny quick draw on it.

'Quick draw . . . on some thing that can't shoot back. Ain't my way. No challenge. No threat.'

When the dog had barked a second time, Johnny had simply, quietly, said "no." But like a

stupid animal without the good sense to stop biting at the tail of a coiled snake, the yahoo had asked that third time.

Johnny stretched his left foot down until it hit ground. He lowered himself off the wagon and stood relaxed. He tried to keep his voice light. "Back to work, boys. Lunch is over."

The men immediately obeyed. Hauled themselves off the ground. Shoved that last piece of sandwich into their mouth. Picked up their tools to head back to the bridge. He didn't look directly at any one of them, but Johnny took notice of each man . . . especially the yahoo – who hadn't moved . . . until his fingers twitched . . . and he licked his lips . . . and he adjusted his stance . . . and . . .

Johnny's gun was aimed at the yahoo's chest before the man realized he'd actually been ready to draw down on Johnny Madrid. The dog's hand hovered next to his holster. The tip of his trigger finger just barely caressed the handle of his weapon.

No one moved. Nothing seemed to move.

"You still want me to waste a bullet?"

"N – n – n – no . . ."

"You're fired."

"Y – y – y – yes. S – s – sir."

Johnny knew he'd be the talk of the bunkhouse tonight. The boys would tell the tale, each taking a turn to spin their version, speak in hushed tones about Madrid's sight-defying speed, the fluidity of his draw, his remarkable calm. But that's as far as it would go. Lancer had a good set of ranch hands, tried and true and loyal men who knew Johnny Lancer better than Johnny Madrid. The night would be filled with their enchantment of having lived briefly in the presence of the legend, *Johnny Madrid*. But tomorrow would bring just another day of cowboying beside Johnny Lancer.

But the yahoo . . . Johnny didn't know if that man's tale was done being told yet. Some men didn't appreciate getting showed up . . . made to look the fool, however deserving of the brand the man may be. Johnny would have to watch his back for a few weeks.

Rancher or gunfighter – he could be either. But the one thing Johnny Madrid Lancer never wanted to be was target practice.

BUTTERCUP 'N STINKY'S
BLUE SKIES FOR WILLIE SHARP EXAM



Okay, everyone, sharpen your #2 pencils and put on your thinking caps. No cheating!

- 1) In the beginning of this episode, Scott catches a large fish. What does he do with it?
 - a. He buries it under some leaves.
 - b. Throws it back in the lake for his brother to shoot.
 - c. Makes fish 'n chips for everyone.
 - d. Change its name to Ferguson and sue for 'sole' custody.
- 2) What are Scott's thoughts when he comes back to find his fish missing?
 - a. "Whoa! That fish is slipperier than I thought!"
 - b. "Holy Fish Sticks!" (See #1c above)
 - c. "Has to be that dang Hellmouth again."
 - d. "I better file a MFR." (Missing Fish Report)
- 3) How does Johnny try to get his fish?
 - a. He hits it over the head with a stick.
 - b. He glares it into submission.
 - c. He offers it a small speaking part in next week's episode.
 - d. He shoots it.
- 4) Willie won by—
 - a. A nose
 - b. Two fins
 - c. Three vertebrae
 - d. Four scales
- 5) What will the winner of the fishing contest win?
 - a. Hat money
 - b. Three days and two nights in sunny Las Vegas
 - c. A larger part in next week's episode
 - d. Dewdrop
- 6) Jelly says to Willie, "I'm sorry I pressed you, Boy. I could—"
 - a. smack myself over the head with a fish.
 - b. call for a script rewrite, but I'd be ignored anyway.
 - c. bite my tongue off.
 - d. bite your tongue off.

- 7) When Willie says who his grandfather is, Johnny says, “Kansas Bill Sharp. He tamed more towns than—”
- Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp all put together.
 - Marshall Dillon and Marshall Craddock all put together.
 - Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny all put together.
 - I did.
- 8) Why does Scott offer to take Willie to go find his grandfather?
- Because he hopes he’ll be able to take Willie to see an orthodontist friend on the way there.
 - Because it said so in the script.
 - Because Willie doesn’t have any shoes to wear.
 - Because he knows the first one to offer gets all the camera time.
- 9) The name of the town is
- Ox
 - Onyx
 - Lummox
 - Jinx
- 10) What is the name of the man who runs the town?
- Colonel Sanders
 - Colonel Andrews
 - Colonel Klink
 - Hey, you!
- 11) What’s the name of the saloon in town?
- Black Jack Saloon
 - Purple Pansies Saloon
 - Texas Hold ‘Em Saloon
 - Nine Card Stud Saloon
- 12) Finish Kansas Bill’s phrase: “Cut the head off a snake and—”
- “it’ll be really, really pissed.”
 - “you’ll get snake guts all over your hand.”
 - “it’ll die.”
 - “the rest of it will wiggle right out of town.”
- 13) Why is Scott asked to leave town?
- For opening a bordello without a license.
 - For opening a McDonald’s without a license.
 - For skipping bail from his R.U.I. arrest. (Riding Under the Influence)
 - For discharging firearms within the town limits.

14) What odd thing did you notice about this episode?

- a. That for a town who's never had a Marshall they sure did have a nice jail ready.
- b. That no one thought it was odd to leave this young kid alone in a run-down, rat-infested cabin over night. Where was DCFS anyway, huh?
- c. That Scott didn't look a bit more beat up after being dragged by a horse repeatedly up and down the town's main street.
- d. That Johnny knew who Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp were, especially as they didn't really have a reputation until the middle late 1870's into the 1880's.
- e. That for a little kid, Willie sure can gut and prepare a fish darn quickly.
- f. That the gunfighter who came in hoping to take on Kansas Bill Sharp sure seemed to back down too easy.

15) What's your favorite line in this episode, and why?

- a. "Summer's pay for a split-second's work."
- b. "You're not going to take the easy way out and drown."
- c. "Who are you?" "Your conscience."
- d. "You're not soaking wet, but you're almost dried out."
- e. "And he thought he wasn't worthy of you."
- f. "Then you can come back here and get as drunk as you like, but the legend that stays with the boy."
- g. "C'mon. I'll buy you some clothes. The horses are beginning to complain."
- h. "Where's your gun?" "I drank it."
- i. "It appears to me, Mr. Andrews, that you have a pathological drive to own people."
- j. "You haven't insulted me yet. You know how to compliment a man."
- k. "You bought a man with a bottle. Now I'm buying him back."

16) Write a paragraph describing in detail Mr. Andrews' psychological disorders. Be sure to use long technical terms and many references to traumatic childhood disorders and abnormal behaviors. Also make sure you add in what stage of development according to Freud's Psychosexual Development stage, that Mr. Andrews was unable to complete (oral, anal, phallic, latency, genital). In your personal opinion was Mr. Andrews clinically sane, or did he suffer from one of the following (please specify which is the dominate psychological problem if problems were comorbid): Post Traumatic Stress syndrome, Bipolar Disorder, Compulsion, Anxiety disorder, Agoraphobia, Acute or Chronic Stress Disorder, Schizophrenia, Anorexia Nervosa, Delusion Disorder or Brief Psychotic Disorder. Please add why you believe he has the disorder/disorders and explain your assessments (structured interviews, semi structured interviews, social, environmental assessments ... MMPI test... etc). Also, for extra credit, explain what you think the best course of treatment for Mr. Andrews. (Example, Day treatment houses, half way houses, Psychotic Hospitalization or psychotherapy are just a few!) Enjoy!

Extra Credit Math Problem

Given that:

X = the number of shots Scott fired from the first revolver

And

Y = the number of shots Scott fired from the second revolver

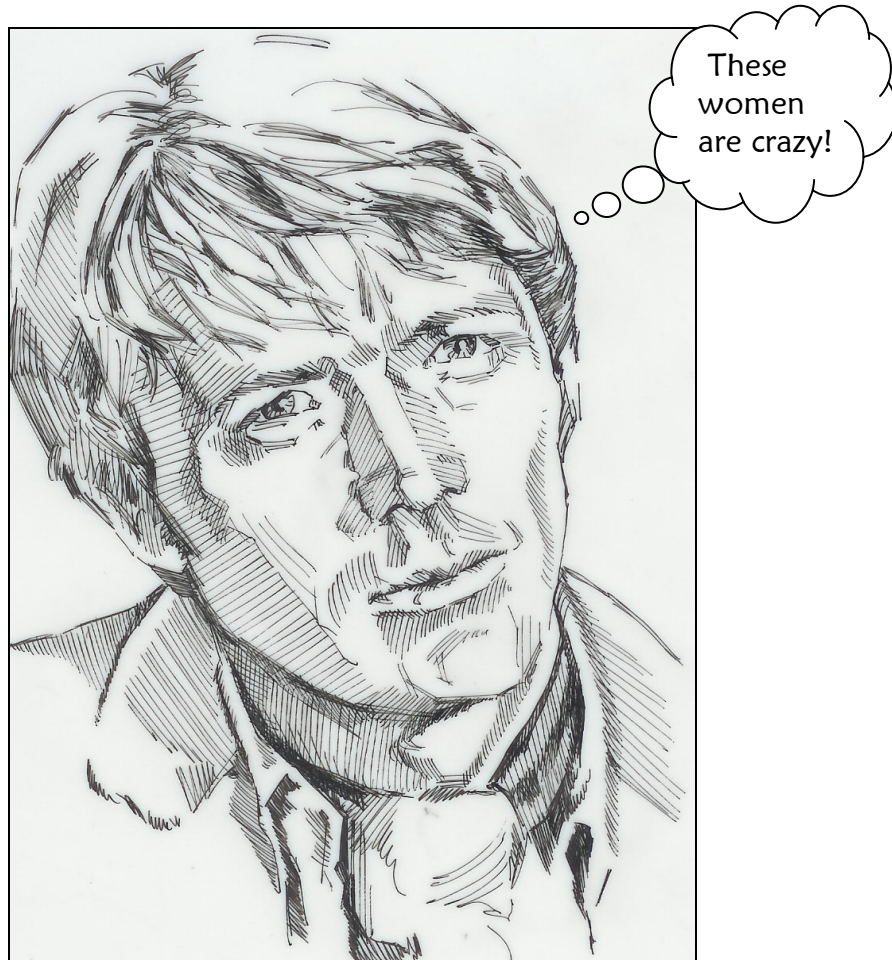
And

Z = the number of shots Scott fired from the carbine

Solve for N:

$$X + Y + Z = N$$

You'll find that the answers to this exam exist only in your mind . . .



KEEPING SCORE

BY KATHY KOOISTRA



It was the second night in a row Scott Lancer had missed supper with the family and Jelly didn't like it. He didn't like it because he didn't like the reason for it and the reason for it was yappin' again, grating on his nerves.

"We sure had a great time today, didn't we Johnny? I gotta tell ya I've never seen so much beautiful horse flesh in one place. I could'a watched them for hours. You sure have a beautiful spread here Mr. Lancer...."

Rick Munson never seemed to shut up. Was it just a week ago he had shown up at Lancer to "pass some time with his old pal Johnny" as he had put it? It seemed a lot longer ago than that to Jelly and he was growing weary of the interruption it had made into their normally predictable routine.

What grated on him the most was what it was doing to Scott. With Johnny busy entertaining, Scott was the one picking up the slack - something Jelly knew he was glad to do for his brother - but something that Jelly thought was becoming a bit much. Scott was working from sunup to sundown, handling the assorted work crews and making sure everything was being covered and nobody seemed to be noticing but him.

He had said as much to Scott the night before when he had found the boy in the kitchen alone, picking at the plate of food that had been saved for him. Scott had told him to calm down about it - said Johnny worked as hard as anybody around the ranch and certainly deserved to have some time to spend with an old friend.

While Jelly agreed with that he still felt it was pretty presumptuous of this Munson character to just amble in here and expect that he could have Johnny all to himself as if pulling him away from his responsibilities would have no consequences. And if truth be told he was getting a little annoyed with Johnny too for not realizing what effect this was all having on his brother.

And now tonight again, for the second time in a row, Scott was out working late and going without his supper. "The boy's too thin to begin with," he huffed to himself. "He don't need any help gettin' thinner!"

Mercifully their guest had stopped talking long enough for the meal to finish and now he and Johnny were making their plans for the night. "Seems to me ya might want to wait long

enough for your brother to get back and see if he wants to go with you," Jelly said pointedly to Johnny. "He might like to do a little relaxin' too ya know!"

Murdoch caught Teresa's eye from across the table and smiled. They knew Jelly was not overly fond of Rick Munson or anyone for that matter that he saw as coming between "his" boys. With some tender nurturing, the brothers' relationship had developed into a strong, close one and Jelly was not about to let anything interfere with that if he had anything to say about it. Murdoch cast a bemused smile in the direction of his blustering number one ranch hand as he picked up the plates and headed to the kitchen on the pretense of helping Teresa with the dishes. He was going to stay out of this one.



They were still in the kitchen when Scott came in through the back door. The sky had darkened now and with it had come the familiar quiet of day's end. His son was moving slowly and Murdoch couldn't help but notice the weary slump to the normally straight shoulders and erect back.

"Another long day, son?"

Scott smiled quietly as he glanced down. It was a habit Murdoch had come to associate affectionately with his oldest and he couldn't help but smile to himself as he recognized again the warm feeling of familiarity he now shared with his sons and the simple pleasure it gave him.

"Things took a little longer than I expected," Scott said, looking back up at his father with tired eyes.

Murdoch nodded knowingly. Things had a way of doing that on a ranch of this size. "I'm afraid we've already eaten. Johnny and Rick are anxious to get going to town."

"That's fine. I'm really not that hungry."

If Murdoch had been aware of Jelly's earlier appraisal of his oldest son's slender physique he would have been in full agreement. Although slim by nature, Murdoch often worried that Scott was too thin. Where Johnny always seemed to be popping something into his mouth, it seemed that whenever Scott was tired, preoccupied or worried, his appetite was the first thing to go.

"You really should eat something, son. We've saved you a plate."

"I will," Scott reassured him but headed for the stairs anyway.

Murdoch could see his son was tired and knew he really should just let him go but couldn't resist the impulse to stop him. "Going up already? At least come have a glass of brandy with me. Johnny's about to leave and we'll have the house to ourselves. I'd like to hear about your day." He'd missed seeing his son at dinner the past few nights. Days on the ranch were busy and afforded little time for leisurely conversation but evenings, when they all came together at the table and talked, made up for it and it never felt quite right when one of them was absent. It had become his favorite time of day. He liked nothing better than sitting back and listening to the sound of his children's voices.

Scott returned Teresa's sympathetic smile appreciatively as he slowly followed his father into the great room. He really just wanted to get cleaned up and settle down with a good book but it wasn't often he and his father got to spend time alone and Murdoch seemed to really desire it tonight. And, if he was honest, maybe he did too. He hadn't really had too many people besides himself to think about before coming here and while there were definite advantages to that it was at times a rather lonely existence. Being part of a family might mean putting your own agenda on hold once in a while but it was worth it.

Johnny and Rick were gathering up their things to leave as they entered the room. "Hey brother! You finally made it! " Johnny said looking up with a grin. "What's the matter? You slowin' down in your old age? You shoulda had that job done two hours ago easy!"

Scott answered his brother's affectionate teasing with an easy smile of his own. "Yeah, I'll have to do something about that, I guess," he said quietly.

Jelly, who had been biting his tongue all evening except for his earlier hint to Johnny, could stand it no longer. "He would'a been done two hours ago if he hadn't first had to take care of the chores somebody else forgot to do before takin' off on some joyride this mornin'!"

"Jelly..." Scott sighed. He knew Jelly harbored good intentions but he wished sometimes the handyman would just let them speak for themselves.

Johnny turned his attention from his brother to Jelly. "Who?!" he asked indignantly.

"You!"

"Me?!" It was clear Johnny was at a loss over what Jelly was referring to. "What'd I forget to do?"

"Oh, let's see! Could it 'a had somethin' to do with all them bales 'a hay waitin' to be stored away? Things like that don't just take care of themselves, ya know!" It was apparent Jelly was warming to his subject, getting more and more fired up as he went along.

"All right, all right." Murdoch didn't try to hide the weariness in his voice. "There's no use going on about something that's already done." With a remonstrative look at his younger son he continued on however, "Johnny do try to remember that, guest or no guest, there

are some things that have to be taken care of around here? I hope you're remembering that tomorrow you and Scott need to get that creek bed up in the north pasture cleared. Spring rains are coming soon and I don't want any problems with flooding up there."

A noticeable silence greeted Murdoch's warning and Johnny cast a quick look at Rick before looking bleakly back at his father. "Oh."

"Oh?"

"Uh, yeah. I just promised Rick we'd ride out to Oak Ridge tomorrow. "Thought we'd do a little fishin' at the lakes up there."

"Johnny..."

"Um, Mr. Lancer?" Seeing that his friend was going to need some support on this one, Rick Munson interrupted before Murdoch could go on. Putting on the most sincere face he could muster, the young man continued. "I've only got another day or two and then I'll be leavin'. All I've heard Johnny talk about for the last coupla days is how good the fishin' is around here and I'd really like to give it a try." With a nod toward Scott he added with a smile. "I hear you're the fisherman in the family, Scott. Caught some nice ones Johnny tells me."

"Look, Rick..." Murdoch began, but this time it was Scott who interrupted.

"Murdoch, I can get the job started in the morning. We can get it finished by supper if Johnny joins up with me around noon." Turning to Johnny he added, "It won't give you as much time as you might like, but Rick can at least try his luck for a little bit."

Johnny nodded appreciatively at his brother and then looked questioningly at Murdoch. "Is that all right Murdoch?" and then added with a shrug and an impish smile, "I did promise."

Murdoch sighed resignedly. Scott really was being much too gracious about all of this but then he really wasn't surprised. Both of his sons were very generous, hardworking young men, never selfish with their time, and he knew as Scott did, that Johnny would be doing the same for his brother if the tables were turned.

"All right. All right. But remember - noon, Johnny. I want that bed cleared by tomorrow!"

"Noon - got it," Johnny echoed with a smile. Turning his attention to Scott he gave his brother an affectionate slap on the arm. "Thanks brother. I owe you one."

He seemed to hesitate then for a minute. He had been running out a lot since Rick came and he did miss talking with his brother. "Why don't you come to town with us, Scott? We'll wait while you grab somethin' to eat."

Raising his hand in protest Scott just laughed. "No Johnny, really. That's okay. I don't think I'm up for much more than a hot soak in the tub and a good book tonight. You and Rick go. I'll catch you next time." He saw no purpose in adding that he felt a little like a third wheel when Johnny and Rick got going on things from the past or that listening to them only reminded him of the fact that he and his brother had none. Johnny didn't need to know that or, for that matter, that there was more than one reason for his willingness to be working so much.

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"What about tomorrow then?" Johnny asked and a mischievous smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You could show us how it's done."

Scott couldn't help but laugh at the thought of trying to keep his restless brother and his equally impatient friend quiet long enough for a fish to bite, but a quick look at his father was enough to tell him that Murdoch didn't think much of the idea of both of his sons taking the morning off and he knew that to keep the peace somebody better be up in that north pasture bright and early in the morning.

"I think we better leave things as they are, Johnny. Maybe the four of us can take some time for fishing again when things quiet down a little. I'd still like a shot at that new hat."

"C'mon Johnny. We already wasted enough time here tonight. We've got a lotta ground to cover." Rick Munson's impatient voice broke in on the brothers.

"Yeah, yeah, okay Rick. Just hold on a minute, huh?" Johnny started to turn, then hesitated again. "Hey Scott? Thanks for takin' care of that hay this mornin' for me, huh?" Blue eyes lit up in a warm smile and with the slightest nod Scott answered, "Not a problem."

With a nod in return Johnny turned and with Rick in the lead, walked out. Scott stood watching him go and Jelly stood watching Scott. It was evident the young man missed having his brother around these past few days but Munson had said he was leaving in a day or two and Jelly thought then things would get back to normal. He sure hoped so. Normal was how he liked it.



The house was quiet when Murdoch finally ascended the stairs himself. Johnny and Rick weren't home yet. He didn't know how these young people did it - what was it called - burning the candle at both ends? He shook his head. Had he done that too at their age? He thought he must have, but then again, it seemed so long ago he really couldn't remember.

Making his way to his own room he thought of his other son. Scott really had been working too hard lately and it was starting to show. He made a mental note to himself to be sure and thank Scott in the morning for all the extra work he had been doing for his brother these last few days. He'd have to make it a point to give his oldest a day or two off when their guest left and things returned to normal.

As he made his way down the hall he noticed Scott's door was standing slightly ajar and a light was shining from it. Had Scott stayed up late after all? Murdoch smiled. Probably reading. He knew all too well that when Scott got interested in a book he couldn't put it down. But when he rounded the corner the sight that met him caused his smile to warm and his step to slow. There lay his son, fully dressed, sound asleep on top of his covers. Too tired to even pull them back Murdoch thought. He noticed Scott's supper untouched on the table by the bed but had to smile when he saw the biscuit with one bite out of it still in the boy's hand. He must have been asleep the minute he hit the pillow.

Moving closer to the bed, Murdoch allowed himself the sight of his grown son lying there so quiet and still. Almost absentmindedly he let his fingers track lightly over the thick blond hair, being careful not to waken his sleeping boy and smiled at the thought of how far they had come. This was a moment he appreciated. A moment when without observation he was free to give in, even just this little bit, to the emotions his sons brought out in him. These feelings that were still quite new to him, feelings he probably would deny with a scowl if called on, but feelings he nonetheless recognized as becoming more and more a part of his daily life.

All too quickly his thoughts were interrupted by the picture of a five year old little boy looking up at him with big blue eyes. It was the picture he had carried with him of this son for years. His only picture. Almost without warning the regret of the years swept over him again. How many nights had he missed with Scott? Putting him to bed, watching him sleep? How could he have been so foolish as to listen to Harlan Garret when the old man had said he would leave Scott in Boston if he really loved him?

Murdoch now knew all too well that if he had really understood what loving his son meant back then, he would have had him with him. That nothing could have kept him from that. That no court battle or threat of one could have stood in the way. It hurt now to think that Scott had known that. All his years growing up, Scott had known that and had lived with the pain it caused.

That his son had forgiven him, had allowed their relationship to grow without explanation for all of those years, spoke volumes as to the young man Scott had become and standing there, Murdoch suddenly felt undeserving of his forgiveness.

He wondered if the day would ever come when those feelings of regret and remorse would pass. When the sight of his son would bring only pleasant memories instead of these unkind ones. He trusted that it would. He trusted that time would allow it. He trusted his son for it.

The late night breeze blowing through the open windows suddenly brought a shudder to him and he pulled an extra blanket up from the foot of the bed to cover his sleeping boy.

"Sleep well, son", he said softly. "Tomorrow's going to be another big day."



"Another big day, huh?" Jelly stood rocking back and forth with his hands in his pockets watching Scott saddle up. "Think you'll get it all done? Murdoch ain't gonna like it if you don't."

Mischievous eyes turned toward the old man. "Now Jelly, you sound like you're a little worried. What's the matter? You afraid Murdoch's going to take it out on you if things don't go to his liking?" Scott hid the smile from his face. He hated to admit it but he loved getting a rise out of Jelly. There was something almost like a game about it and the often disgruntled handyman made the winning so easy. "If you're worried, why don't you come along and help?"

"Got my own things ta do - you know that. Just don't want you gettin' in trouble with the boss is all."

"Well, I appreciate that, Jelly, but there's no need to worry. You know as well as I do that Murdoch's bark is worse than his bite. Anyway, we should have no trouble getting things done by supertime - especially if I can convince Johnny's friend to lend a hand. I kind of think it's time he earns his keep around here a little bit, don't you?"

"Huh! Don't expect that to happen none too quick! Knowin' him, he'll prob'ly just stand there with his hands in his pockets, talkin' your ear off while you do all the work. Some people are like that, ya know."

Scott smiled, turning to leave. "Yes, Jelly," he said fondly. "I do know."



The bearded old man straightened, trying to ease the stiffness in his aching back. He'd been busy in the barn all day, taking care of all those little things that had a way of never getting done on a place like this, as busy days stretched into busy weeks. Going from one mundane task to the next his thoughts had strayed back to the conversation of last night and he smiled with satisfaction to think of the boys working together today. It was a good thing he had opened his mouth and helped the boss see what was going on. Sometimes he just didn't know what this place would do without him there to keep things straight.

His thoughts had strayed further than usual today and he'd found himself thinking about his early days here at the ranch. He wasn't proud of the way it had all come to be but he was

grateful that it had. His life had changed dramatically when he had come to Lancer. Despite the bad start, he had found a generous, forgiving family here - the family he had never had, and it had not been long before he'd felt like one of them.

It was the boys that pulled at him the most. They were good boys, the both of them. Boys to be admired and respected for the young men of principle and character they had grown to be. He'd often thought that if he'd ever had the opportunity to have sons, he'd have wanted two like these. In fact, it had startled him to realize one day that without even realizing it, he had come to love Murdoch Lancer's sons as if they were his very own. Of course, he had no intention of ever telling them that. He'd gotten quite good at hiding that little hum that started up inside of him every time the boys were around ...

"Hey, Jelly."

.....and today would be no different.

"Johnny."

Jelly's expressionless gaze traveled on past the boy's shoulder and the two horses being led into the barn. Following it, Johnny turned, and approached the rest of the way walking backward.

"What are you lookin' at?"

"Nothin'. Just wonderin' where your brother is, is all. He comin' right behind you?"

Johnny gave a slight shrug, turning back. "Scott? I don't know. Haven't seen him all day. Why?" The all too familiar scowl that never seemed to be far from the old handyman's face greeted him. Johnny returned it with a quizzical look of his own. "What?"

"You haven't seen him all day." There was just the slightest hint of annoyance in Jelly's voice. "Like I don't know you're just tryin' to get me all riled up and excited so's the two of you can have a good laugh together."

"The two of us. Who? Me and Rick? Why would we want to do that?"

"No, not you and Rick!" Jelly was clearly sounding more and more annoyed. "What would I care what he does?"

"Then who? Me and Scott?! Jelly, I just got done tellin' you I haven't seen Scott all day!"

With a look of sheer exasperation the old man opened his mouth, as if ready to let fly, and then stopped. He sagged just a little. "You mean that too, don't you?"

It was Johnny's turn to sound annoyed now. "Jelly, what are you going on about? I've been gone all day with Rick and Scott's been doin' what? - somethin', somewhere for Murdoch, I'm sure. You know, if you've got something on your....."

Johnny pulled himself up short, a bleak look settling suddenly on his face. "Oh, shit."

The frustrated curse hung for a moment. "The creek. - I was supposed to meet Scott at the creek." Raking his fingers through his dark hair, he looked forlornly at Jelly. "I forgot."

The old handyman rolled his eyes. "You forgot. - You forgot. Seems like you've been forgettin' quite a lot lately, don't it? You'd think after.."

"All right, Jelly. All right. I get it" The interruption wasn't without some aggravation. "I messed up - again." His hands on his hips, Johnny blew out a disgusted breath. "I take it Scott's not back yet?"

"Would I be lookin' for him, if he was?"

Johnny looked downright disgusted, although Jelly wasn't sure at just who. "No. I guess not." Throwing up a hand he let it fall to his side. "Alright, well then, there's really only one thing for me to do, isn't there? " Pulling himself up into his saddle he smiled forlornly. "Tell Murdoch and Teresa not to hold dinner for us. I got a feelin' we'll be eating late."

Following the horse and rider out of the barn, Jelly recanted his earlier mood. "Here." He handed Scott's jacket up to the other Lancer son. "Weather's changin'. You best take this along for your brother. He left it this mornin' and I figure he might be needin' it before you both get back."

Johnny grinned down at the gruff exterior. "You know, Jelly. Sometimes I don't know what we'd do around here without you lookin' after us."

With an air of righteous self-importance the old handyman tugged on the front of his vest, straightening his shoulders and looking for all the world like the prized cock in the hen house. "Yeah, well, just don't you go forgettin' that neither," and then called rather indignantly after the retreating back, "and a word of thanks now and then might go a long way too!"

Turning to head back into the barn he smiled satisfactorily to himself at the exaggerated, "Thank you, Jelly," that came floating back to him.



Scott sighed, pushing his hat further back on his head. It was time to face the fact that this creek bed was not going to get cleared today - at least not all the way. It had proven to be a

bigger job than he had anticipated and he had known already by late morning that even with Rick's help he and Johnny were going to have trouble finishing up by supper.

Now with the late afternoon sun making its way slowly to the horizon, and his brother's apparent forgetfulness, it was nothing short of a lost cause. He knew he could stay and keep at it for a few more hours until darkness fell, but even with that the job wouldn't get done and it might only serve to make Murdoch more disgruntled than ever. He decided the best course of action would simply be to call it a day and start over with his brother's help in the morning.

He smiled wryly to himself. There would be no doubt about that. His brother would be there to help him, of that he could be certain. There would be no more days off, Murdoch would make sure of that. He had to laugh at the thought of the scene sure to transpire in the great room later tonight. "Oh little brother, I'm glad I'm not you," he said out loud with a smile. "I wouldn't trade places with you right now for a month's wages."

The thought had crossed his mind earlier that Johnny's absence could be the result of something more than forgetfulness but he had quickly discarded that worry. He had seen how easily his brother and Rick had fallen back into the camaraderie they had shared, and he knew something like that lent itself to forgetfulness about time and responsibility. He understood it. It had happened to him on more than one occasion when he'd been with friends and although it brought that twinge of regret again over what he and Johnny had missed, he didn't begrudge it of his brother. They had been working hard ever since arriving at Lancer and he was glad for the respite his brother was enjoying right now from it. He could identify with the need for it and how good it must feel. He did remember with some satisfaction however the smile that had crossed Johnny's face the night before when he had mentioned their hat contest from a while back. It was a reference that Rick didn't know. It was, Scott suddenly realized, one of the memories that he and his brother were slowly starting to build themselves and it warmed him to think about it.

It wasn't the only thing he'd been thinking about. For whatever reason, working alone today, his mind had been wandering. He'd found himself revisiting little things that had occurred since his arrival here in California. Maybe it was the quiet. Maybe it was that small part of him that had grown accustomed to working with his brother and was now missing him just a little. He didn't know but it satisfied him to realize how nice it felt. How comfortable.

Tugging his gloves free, he tucked them absentmindedly through the back of his belt, as he looked to where his horse stood quietly grazing. Knowing he was in for a full day's work he had taken the saddle from his horse's back early in the morning, allowing the animal to roam and graze comfortably. At least one of them would be well rested for the ride home.

He'd always appreciated the power and grace of a good horse and looking now at his own he remembered the day he had picked this beautiful animal to be his. He'd noticed him right away, having seen the challenge offered in the toss of the head and the flare of the nostrils.

Cip had noticed too. Cip had, in fact, in his quiet way, noticed a number of things about both the horse and the young man watching him, things that no one else had seemingly taken the time yet to do.

Scott had been down at the corral for the better part of a morning, watching this new addition to the stable, talking to him, stroking the soft muzzle whenever the animal would come close enough to allow it. Cipriano had walked over and with a knowing smile asked if he'd wanted to take a chance on this spirited one.

He'd answered that there seemed to be a few things he was thinking of taking a chance on, to which the *segundo* had nodded his approval. The question had finally been asked of the horse himself then, "What do you say, Chance? Do we take one, you and me?" and Chance is what it had been ever since - a good fit - a good partner - a good friend.

Scott whistled and the sleek chestnut lifted his head, responding without hesitation to the familiar sound.

Leading the animal down to the creek bed Scott let him drink, before heading back to where his saddle and blanket lay by some fallen logs. It had been a comfortable place to lay back for a nap after eating his lunch at noon and he was almost tempted to steal another quick one before heading back, but the thought didn't linger long. It would be just his luck Johnny would choose exactly that moment to show up and accuse him of sleeping the day away and he knew he'd never hear the end of it. Besides, the temperature was changing, and although he felt no need to button the shirt sleeves he'd rolled up earlier on his dark blue shirt, he had forgotten his jacket, and he didn't really want to be stuck out in the cold without it. Better to just get on his way.

Still smiling at the thought of the scene sure to unfold in the Great Room later that evening, Scott scooped up the blanket lying next to his saddle. Turning to lay it across the strong back, he sensed a definite change in his mount and gave the skittish animal a reassuring pat, speaking quietly to him as he straightened the blanket.

"Easy. Easy. We're going."

Thinking back on it later, he would remember the almost surreal aspect the next few moments took on. He'd felt more like an observer than a participant - reaching for the saddle, hearing the unmistakable warning, feeling the searing pain - all of it almost in slow motion, yet all of it happening within seconds.

He'd gone for his gun instinctively, shaking the rattler off as he did, the snake's body jumping when he twice found his mark. His reflexes had continued to govern the moment. Without any hesitation he'd grabbed for his saddlebags, grateful that they had not already been thrown over his horse's hindquarters before the frightened animal had taken off in a desperate attempt to get away from his fear.

His sharp knife had cut the flesh cleanly, quickly. Drawing on the wound, he'd spat out blood, ignoring the unwelcome taste of iron in his mouth. He'd repeated the necessary action a number of times until he felt he'd done all he could. Taking up the canteen that lay at his side, he'd irrigated the wound thoroughly. Tying off the bandana to act as a tourniquet was the last desperate action to staving off the threatening effects of the rattler's poison.

Other than for the initial bite, he hadn't felt any pain. Until now - and now he felt it plenty. His arm was throbbing and seemed almost on fire. He wondered how much of that was the result of the bite and how much was the result of his own treatment. He'd known from a young age what to do for a snake bite, he'd just never had to do it before and he wasn't sure he had done it right. He figured it wouldn't be long before he'd know. He also knew it wouldn't be long before the snake's poison would start to take effect. He needed to think clearly while he still could. His horse was gone. If he tried to walk home he'd never make it, of that he could be sure.

He knew that as the poison took effect he'd be hard pressed to remain standing, let alone stay on a direct course home. He'd run the risk of losing his way and laying somewhere unseen along the path, possibly never being found until it was too late.

He leaned back against the upturned saddle, keeping his arm low and still. He'd have to watch the tourniquet and make sure he loosened it from time to time, but he could better stay here where he knew someone would come looking for him and where he wouldn't do further damage as the poison worked. Here where he knew he could be found.

He closed his eyes as a shiver ran over him. It must be getting colder he thought. And he must have worked harder than he had realized because suddenly he was very tired. That was it, wasn't it? He wasn't sure but as he lay back further into the saddle at his back he figured it was another thing he'd know before too long.



Johnny reined in his tired mount, mindful of the miles Barranca had traveled in this long day. He had hoped when he'd left Jelly that it wouldn't be long before he'd meet his brother coming home, but that was starting to look like it wasn't going to happen. Even though the sun was fast losing its place in the sky, he knew there were a couple of hours of light left - enough light at least for a man to get in some extra work if he needed to. And he knew Scott. Scott would use whatever hours he had - especially if he was close to finishing.

All the more reason to get out there then. He owed his brother some time. He'd send Scott home and finish up himself. After all, it was only fair that Scott should be the one sitting down to supper on time tonight.

His stomach growled at the thought. He was hungry and had been looking forward to tasting some of that fine trout he and Rick had caught today. He had to admit he was kind of glad now that he had sent Rick up to the house with their catch before taking the horses to the barn. After being with his friend all day he needed this little bit of peace and quiet. He kept forgetting how talkative Rick was and he was realizing just now how much he missed the comfortable quiet he was used to with Scott.

Thinking over the day's fishing, he had to smile. It was a wonder he and Rick had caught anything at all. Fishing and talking didn't go together any better than fishing and guns did. Scott had finally gotten through to him on that point, although it had taken a lot of perseverance and patience. - Perseverance, patience - and quiet. Yup. Three things you needed to be a successful fisherman. Guess it was no wonder then that his brother was so good at it. To his way of thinking, Scott had all three of those things down pat.

Johnny let out a contented sigh. These were the first minutes he'd had to himself all week. They felt good. Just as good as the week itself had felt. It had been good to see his old friend again. They shared a past and that was important. It was part of who he was. But it wasn't all that he was and he understood that a little bit better right now moving along in the quiet at this leisurely pace. He had enjoyed this week because Scott had worked to make sure he could. He smiled again. Fishing wasn't all his brother had down pat. Right about now it was looking to him like Scott had this brother thing down pretty good too. He'd learned a little about fishing from Scott just by watching. He figured he'd just learned a little about being a brother the same way.

Barranca started and the sudden action pulled Johnny from his thoughts. The horse had heard it and so had he. That all too familiar sound of gunfire - distant but unmistakable and coming from the direction he was headed. Scott.

Sparing an anxious look to the distance, Johnny urged Barranca into a gallop, finding it suddenly necessary to cover the miles between himself and his brother as quickly as possible. Pushing the already tired animal as much as he dared, he told himself that the shots he'd heard didn't have to mean anything and he knew there was truth in that. It was probably Scott himself who had fired the shots and there could have been any number of reasons for it. He could have been trying to break up a stubborn clump of tree roots or maybe some other uncooperative piece of brush. Hell, his brother could be shooting at rabbits for all he knew. He could just see Scott bringing them in too, telling everybody he'd figured he better provide something since they'd all starve if they had to depend on the day's catch for supper. That was probably it. Scott's little idea of a joke. There was no reason to panic.

He worked steadily at the distance between them, frustrated that it was taking him so long. He'd only just reassured himself again of his brother's sorry sense of humor when a sudden movement up ahead caught his attention. Scott's horse, head bent to crop at the tall grass, was slowly making his way towards him. Choking back the knot that suddenly forced its way into his throat, Johnny slowed his own mount and approached the roving animal carefully so as not to spook him. "Easy." Gathering up the loose reins he ran his hand down

the familiar white blaze. "What are you doing out here like this, old man? Huh? Where's Scott?" He could explain the shots if he tried hard enough but he couldn't explain this. "All right, brother," he let out into the empty space, "Now you've got me worried. You better have a good reason for all of this." but the words did little to ease his worry. Putting spurs to horse, Johnny headed for the creek bed. He needed to get there and something told him he needed to get there soon.



It didn't take long to spot him. Scott looked to be asleep. Had it not been for the horse he'd trailed behind him for the last few miles, Johnny would have believed in fact that he was. But his brother knew horses, there had never been any doubt about that, and letting one get away from him was not his style. No, he wasn't asleep. But what then?

"Scott?"

No response came for the soft inquiry or the light touch that accompanied it. Concerned, Johnny's eyes tracked down his brother's chest. Allowing his hand to follow, he stopped at the sight of the bloodied arm that lay cradled and supported in the other. Experience brought immediate recognition for the telltale signs and drew anxious eyes back to the pale face and then beyond. The rattler lay still, just a few feet from them. The shots.

"Johnny."

It was only a whisper but it was enough. The sound of his name, so softly spoken, brought Johnny's focus back to his brother. Brushing his fingers over the thick blond hair that lay scattered across Scott's forehead, he anchored them in the damp hairs at the nape of his brother's neck. His voice was even, reassuring. "I'm right here Scott. It's all right."

Shifting ever so slightly, Scott turned his head towards the familiar voice although his eyes didn't open. "My arm."

"I know. I saw it." Johnny wiped his thumb over the beads of sweat collecting on his brother's warm cheek. "Looks like you did a good job on it." A smile flickered despite his worry. "Looks like you did a good job on the rattler too."

The gentle ribbing was enough to force Scott's eyes open. Fever, however new, was already in them but so was a smile and that went a long way to reassuring his worried brother. "You're not the only one who knows how to use a handgun, you know."

Johnny's own smile broadened. "I'll remember that the next time I think about doing something that makes you mad." He sobered just a little, biting down on his bottom lip. "I'm gonna have to take a better look at it, Brother."

A nod was all the permission needed. Taking as gentle a hold as possible, Johnny lay the damaged appendage across his leg. Scott's arm was already an unhealthy shade of black and blue and there was significant swelling around the bite. It was hot and looked incredibly painful. Easing the tourniquet off, Johnny carefully fingered the ugly wound. The action caused Scott to flinch but he didn't draw back, concentrating instead on holding his arm still for his brother's inspection.

"Sorry." Johnny hadn't missed the determined effort put forth by his brother not to move nor the sharp intake of air that had accompanied it.

"It's alright. It can't be helped."

A memory flickered bringing the smallest of smiles as Johnny spared a quick look for his brother and then at the darkening sky. No, it couldn't be helped.

Black clouds, coupled by the waning hours of the day, were giving extra urgency to getting out of there and getting out of there quickly. It was beginning to look like they'd be weathering more than one storm tonight and he had no desire for either of them to do it wet and cold. They needed shelter.

Johnny knew they'd never make it home before everything, weather or otherwise, hit - not riding double and not with Scott in the shape he was already in. It made more sense then to head for the line shack that had provided him and others needed shelter from time to time out here in the far north pasture. It was closer and although it wouldn't be the best of accommodations, he doubted Scott was going to care very much about that. They'd find a bed there and whatever else they needed to make it through this difficult night. There would be nothing else they could do now anyway, not even at home. Scott was just going to have to ride this out. It wouldn't be easy Johnny knew, but he had no doubt Scott could do it. Any man who could ride out a year in a Confederate prison and all of the atrocities that had come with it, could ride out a snake bite. He just hoped his brother had managed to get some of the poison out before it had begun to do its damage.

"Scott?" His brother had settled back down against the overturned saddle but the struggle had already started. The fever was beginning to climb, however slowly, and his breathing was starting to come harder. The effects of the poison had taken firm hold already and Johnny knew Scott was feeling none too good about now. "We gotta get out of here, Brother. There's a storm comin' and you don't need to be out in it."

Scott swallowed, trying to hold back the nausea that was quickly setting in. "It's a long way home."

"Yeah, I know. That's why we're not goin' there. I think we oughta head to that line shack not too far from here, how 'bout you? It's not the best of solutions but it'll do."

Scott nodded. He was tired. Tired and hurting and already too sick to care what they did. He was more than willing to give all decision making over to his brother. "Help me up." Sliding a leg up he started to struggle forward but Johnny pressed a hand to his shoulder. "Just give me a minute, okay? I need you to lie still a little longer. "

Scott made the effort to focus on his brother's activities, wondering if the dizziness and blurred vision he'd been experiencing for the last while was causing him to see things. It almost looked like Johnny had worked apart a bullet and was pouring gunpowder onto the wound. "What are you doing?"

"Tryin' an old trick I've seen used on snake bites. It's supposed to work like a charm." Keeping a wary eye on his brother he added, "It's gonna hurt some though."

Scott's eyes closed briefly. "It already does." Getting them open again he fixed a steady gaze on his brother. "Go ahead."

There was trust in those few words and Johnny didn't miss it. Scott was turning this all over to him and counting on him to do what he himself no longer could. Well, he'd willingly let his brother carry him once or twice since they'd met. Now he was more than ready to do the same in return.

"All right. Hold still." Not wanting his brother to have any time to think about what was about to happen, Johnny quickly struck the match he'd pulled unnoticed from his pocket and set it to the powder. And then he simply held on as Scott twisted away in pain.



Johnny eased his brother down onto the thin mattress. They'd gotten there fairly quickly but so had the rain, leaving them both cold and wet. Well, they were out of it now. Looking around he knew this had been the best decision. Besides the much needed bed, there was wood for a fire and enough food and water to meet their needs. He also knew it had been better for Scott than if they had pushed for home. The miles to the shack had taken their toll but they had at least been short and now Scott could give all the strength he had to the fight ahead, instead of putting it into what would have been a long ride.

And Scott would fight. He knew that and ever since his earlier little foray into the field of medicine he had felt oddly reassured that his brother would win. He'd replayed the scene now at least a dozen times, each time catching himself smiling despite the seriousness of the situation. The cry that had escaped Scott's lips as he'd lit the gunpowder had been more a strangled expression of disbelief than of pain - in fact it had been as close to a laugh as anyone could get while in that bad a shape. Scott had curled in agony, drawing his knees reflexively to his chest, his arm held tight in his good hand but his words, choked out through labored gasps had been laced with something at least close to laughter and had allowed the ridiculousness of the situation to give much needed relief. "God, Johnny! Are

you crazy?" Almost despite himself Johnny had laughed out loud at Scott's uncharacteristic outburst. Wrapping his arms around his brother's lean frame in an effort to help him to his feet, Johnny had assured him that they probably both were but it was only after he had promised never to hang out his shingle or share his secret with Sam that Scott had finally allowed him to get him up and on their way.

Johnny smiled again but this time it was not simply at a memory but at the very form of his brother. Anyone who could see even the least little bit of humor in any of this got his vote for making it and he would do everything he knew to help that along. "All right, brother. Let's get to this."

As quickly as he could Johnny got a fire going. He'd already removed Scott's boots and wet jacket and covered him with a warm blanket. He was going to have to remember to thank Jelly again for sending Scott's jacket along. He'd used it to cover his brother while they'd ridden, and it had kept at least the worst of the rain off of his already shivering sibling. Grabbing for the metal basin previously left lying on the table, he filled it at the pump and set about ripping up an old shirt he'd found. It would serve the purpose of helping to cool his brother down. A cool rag on the wound would help ease some of the pain too.

He filled a pitcher with water and snatched a single glass from the shelf. "Scott?" Kneeling beside the low cot that served as the only means of rest in the small structure, he tried to rouse his brother. "Scott? Come on brother, I need you to wake up and drink a little for me."

Scott shifted. Fevered eyes opened to fix on those fired not by fever but by worry. "Hey." Johnny smiled his encouragement. His light touch on his brother's blond head helped to anchor Scott in the moment. "Can you take some of this for me? We've got to get some liquids into you if we're going to bring this fever of yours down."

Supported by Johnny's arm, Scott managed a few swallows before turning away. As gently as possible, Johnny lay him back against the one thin pillow, and turned his attention to the basin. He lay the cool rag on his brother's hot forehead.

And so it went. The long night stretched on for what seemed an eternity. Johnny never left Scott's side, fighting as desperately as his brother for every bit of ground gained, battling even harder when it seemed that Scott couldn't. At times Scott was agitated, his heartbeat frighteningly fast, fueled as it was by fever and the adrenaline in his system brought on by the snake's venom. During those moments Johnny could do little but hold on to him, assuring him that everything was going to be all right, that he wasn't alone.

"You're doing good, Scott. You hear? You just hold on."

At other times the precious balm of sleep, however exhaustive, would quiet Scott's unrest and Johnny would gratefully use that time to bath his brother's face and chest with cool water, offering small sips of liquid as Scott could take them.

Slowly but surely, after what seemed like endless hours of worry, the moments of calm stretched into longer periods until Scott quieted fully and slept. Reassured that the fever was no longer climbing, Johnny lay the cloth aside. He grabbed at a stool that lay discarded on the floor and brought it to his brother's bedside. Leaning forward he rested his head in the crook of his arm, wearily closing his eyes. How long ago had he left the ranch looking for Scott? Had it really only been just the evening before? It seemed like a lifetime. It certainly felt like they'd been through enough to fill one.

"It can't be helped." The words came back to him as he drifted off for what little sleep he might be able to find before darkness lifted. The very first words his brother had ever spoken to him, repeated today unawares. He wondered if Scott realized it. He doubted it. He doubted Scott was going to remember much of any of this. "It can't be helped." No, there are a lot of things that can't be helped he thought. Like falling on top of somebody when a stage starts up suddenly. Like causing someone pain for the greater good of helping. Like coming to care for a man in a way you never imagined you ever would.



The morning sun found its way under the closed eyelids, forcing them open to what lay around him. It took a moment to focus but when Scott did, it was on the face of his brother.

"Mornin'." Johnny's voice was quiet but the smile that lit up the deep blue eyes and tanned face spoke volumes. Scott registered the vague impression that those smiling eyes were also very tired and the face lined with worry.

"Is it?" Scott's own voice was hoarse from pain and fatigue. He was so very tired and the struggle to keep his eyes open seemed to be a little too much right now. He gave it up and let them slide closed.

Johnny was talking. He'd been talking all night. At least it had seemed to Scott that he must have been because every time he'd struggled awake it was his brother's voice he had heard. He listened again to the soft rhythms that had seen him through the dark. "Yup. You made it through. You had me worried once or twice but you did it."

Scott didn't move, didn't even try to look around him again or search for his brother's face. It just felt too good to lay there against the pillow and know that there wasn't a thing he needed to do or think about. His brother was there, willing to do it for him.

"You don't look so good," he managed.

He didn't have to bother looking to know his brother was still smiling. He could hear it. "Maybe not, but you should know, you look worse."

A slight shudder ran over him, then quieted. "I can believe it."

He heard Johnny move and felt strong hands bring him up to meet the water he was craving. "Need more?"

He nodded and drank again. "Thanks."

"No problem. There's plenty."

"I didn't mean just for the water."

"No? For what then?" There was no mistaking the self-castigating sigh. "For dumping all that extra work on you all week - or for almost killing you yesterday with my snake bite remedy?" The smile again, but this time it was fading and he opened his eyes because he knew he needed to.

Those tired eyes were fixed intently on him. "I should have been there, Scott. I'm sorry."

"Johnny..."

"No, listen. I'm not sayin' it would have changed things or made any kind of difference. I'm just sayin' I should have been there. It was where I was supposed to be... with you. And I'm sorry if I forgot that for a while."

Scott nodded and Johnny knew he understood. His brother looked worn out and was a long way from being done with this but the worst of it had gone and taken with it the fear of losing what was probably the best thing he'd ever known. It was time to go home - with his brother.

"Come on. What do you say we get you home to your own bed, huh? I'm bettin' a better mattress and a nice comfy night shirt would feel real good about now."

His brother smiled. It wasn't much of one but it was enough. "Good luck finding one."

Johnny returned the smile only this time his didn't fade. "Not to worry brother. I've got plenty you can borrow."

"Thanks - I think"

"No problem. Didn't anybody ever tell you that's what brothers are for?"



"Good seein' you again, Rick."

It was early, the morning sun just starting to show itself in the eastern sky. With a full day ahead and the promise of clear weather Rick should make good time. He was already a day or two late getting started, and needed to be on his way. Hopefully the job he had lined up in Marshall's Creek would still be waiting for him when he got there.

"Thanks for helpin' out these last couple of days, huh?"

"Hey, what are friends for? Sides, it's been a real experience workin' with your friend Jelly while you've been busy. Likes to talk, but he's okay. Taught me a few things that just might come in handy some day."

Johnny smiled at the thought. "Yeah, well, give Jelly an audience and he'll take advantage of it, that's for sure."

"Well, I didn't mind a bit." Rick paused only briefly, nodding towards the hacienda. "You've got a good thing goin' on here, John. A real good thing. I'm happy for you. You deserve it."

Reaching out Johnny grasped his friend's hand in a firm handshake. "Don't make it so long between visits next time, huh?"

"I won't. I promise. In the meantime, you take care of that brother of yours, ya hear? I'm glad he's gonna be all right. I gotta admit I like knowin' you got somebody like him at your back."

"I'll do that. I'd say I owe him one anyway."

Rick smiled, gathering up his horse's reins. "You know, Johnny. You might think talkin's the only thing I've done around here all week. But I gotta tell you, I did some listenin' and watchin' in between and after a week of it, there's one thing I can tell you for sure." Swinging up into the saddle, he looked down intently at his friend. "You're brother? He ain't keepin' score. And for that alone, my friend, I envy you."

The crunch of gravel behind him roused Johnny from thought as he watched his friend leave. A warm smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and with a tilt of his head he turned towards that voice he knew all too well drifting now from the shadows of the veranda. He could just imagine the look on the whiskered face that accompanied it.

"Man knows what he's talkin' about, I'd say. Might pay ya ta listen when he talks."



AUTHOR'S NOTE



Johnny's remedy for rattlesnake bites can be found at:
<http://sandiegohistory.org/stranger/frontier.htm>

"Rub the wound full of Gunpowder and then Pour on a good Charge on the top of all and then Put fire to it and Burn it that will Cure it on all dum brutes"

- *Campo storekeeper Luman H. Gaskill (San Diego County)*

CHANGING DIRECTIONS

BY CINDY CARRIER



ONE



“You’ll be dead before you’re thirty.”

That declaration, issued so matter-of-fact from Scott’s lips, still kept appearing in Johnny’s mind.

“You won’t even leave a small ripple. It’s the only good thing that’s ever happened to you in your whole life and you’re going to get up and walk away from it. And all for nothing. But I guess that’s all you’ve got going for you from now on.”

Maybe it had been a challenge, maybe not. Hard to tell with Scott; his newfound brother, Johnny had discovered, had a good poker face. There hadn’t been any plea to return to the ranch, no desperation in his brother’s tone. Just those words, those damned calculating words, somehow urging him to reconsider his decision. He could have kept going after Wes died and the horse was tamed, just ridden south as planned with his freedom intact. Wes would surely have approved of that. As for not leaving a ripple, well, there was an odd strength in that, and one he’d tried to hang onto. It meant he didn’t have to care – about his life or his death, or that of others. He didn’t have to consider feelings or consequences or responsibility. It meant he could keep things from growing permanent. Any mistakes would be his own, thank you very much.

But he hadn’t ridden away. He’d turned around and ridden back to the ranch to face his father, to admit he was wrong and to ask for another chance. Big brother had kicked little brother’s rear end, and Johnny Lancer moved. Lancer, not Madrid, he reminded himself now as he waded a little ways downstream to tug at a stubborn collection of brush. And it was Johnny Lancer working in this muddy creek alongside his reticent brother. Madrid had all but disappeared on this warm afternoon.

So he was back, working under a peace offering of sorts made by his father. Surprising that the old man was suddenly so willing to let work drop to chase after another band of horses. At first Johnny thought it was just Murdoch’s way of apologizing. But then he’d wondered what had changed Murdoch’s mind when his father had been so adamant about chores and jobs and times. And then he wondered if his brother had anything to do with Murdoch’s change of tune. Well, for now his father was going to let him try his hand at developing a line of equine stock. <<That’d be more than a ripple,>> Johnny said silently to his brother’s back.

“Shoulder still bothering you?” he asked instead, just to get the build up of thoughts out of his head. The bullet wound had been light and Scott hadn’t even commented over it. But Johnny still felt an onrush of guilt whenever he thought about it, like now. He’d been the one to bring the trouble with the Strykers right up to the hacienda door, and Scott had been shot for it. All because Johnny Madrid was lounging about in town with Wes, trying to shake off what had been Johnny Lancer. And then Scott had appeared and Madrid hadn’t played too well against him – well, maybe that was because it was Johnny Lancer trying to do the talking through Madrid. And in the end it had been Johnny Lancer who had returned home, dragging Madrid’s shadow with him. Dragging it ever since, it seemed.

Scott straightened from where he’d been clearing some brush. “It’s fine,” he replied, his tone inviting no further discussion. He took a few breaths as he gazed about, then wiped his sweaty cheek on an arm and bent forward again to pull at the detritus brought down river by the spring rains, the very creek that Johnny had told him about while they’d had that “visit” in town. They’d been at the project for almost a week as Johnny had predicted. Today they had brought a crew for the last of it in order to finish up before the weekend, even provisioned themselves for an overnight stay, if necessary.

That whole business with Stryker crowded back into Johnny’s mind, quickly filling it again. He’d returned to the ranch, shut his mouth and did his job, but yet he sensed Scott and Murdoch were watching him, waiting for him to find another reason to bolt. To give up and walk away, to decide that he was better as Madrid than Lancer. They hadn’t said anything to him, but he felt it in their halted conversations when he tramped into the room, in their careful dinner discussions. Even the vaqueros watched him; he felt their eyes on him as they worked together. Just waiting for him to fail. Scott in particular hadn’t said much to him in the three weeks since the incident. Johnny had made a clumsy attempt to apologize for that bullet just as soon as the Strykers were out of the yard, and cursed the resulting lack of sincerity his regret seemed to display. But Scott had just waved him off with some remark about family business and didn’t say anything more about it. Made it sound so easy when it wasn’t. Getting shot, especially if it wasn’t deserved, gave a man plenty of reason to lay blame.

Scott’s silence made the back of Johnny’s neck itch even now. <<Guilty,>> whispered a voice around to his ears. <<Guilty...>>

He shook it off, concentrated instead on the lean figure beside him. Confident Boston, efficient sort of man, maybe too efficient. Natural sort of leader – the vaqueros certainly seemed to like him, respect him even. Oh, a few hands had pressed him, played a few jokes on him but he never got too ruffled about it. He’d even laid a trap or two in friendly retaliation. Pretty quick with his tongue but he wasn’t much for displaying his fists. Until yesterday, anyway. Not that Winthrop was a good hand – he wasn’t. He dawdled, complained, slowed down when the work got too physical. Sort of like Wes. Yesterday Winthrop had laughed when Scott gave out the day’s assignment, told Scott he wasn’t going to dig postholes. Johnny thought of other holes the shiftless bastard could dig, but this was Scott’s situation and so he remained silent. Scott had only smiled in that way of his, the way

Johnny had seen that day just before the right cross tumbled him down the riverbank. And then Scott had let fly that fist again. Winthrop sat down hard and shook his head in surprise, his face reddening to the guffaws of those watching.

“You’re fired,” Scott had told the man. “Get your gear and clear out.”

Then Boston straightened his clothes, eyed each man remaining – Johnny included – and walked away. And the rest of them went to work, leaving Johnny to scowl at his brother’s retreating back and struggle with his own grudging admiration for the man. Not that he wouldn’t have helped if Scott truly needed it, but so far his brother needed very little help with anything. Scott was a better worker, better leader, helluva rider, and so far he hadn’t missed a call to breakfast. Hadn’t fumbled over any task inside or outside the house, except maybe for his initial choice of clothing. But he’d quickly fixed that. Hell, he even got shot better than everyone else. Got patched up and just kept working. Made it all look so easy.

Efficient Boston. Johnny scowled. He rarely compared himself to others as a man. He knew what he was capable of as a gunfighter, and judged others by his own skill. But he could not apply his experience to his brother, and that was disconcerting enough to make him feel threatened. And he didn’t like that sort of feeling at all. Generally Madrid took over at that point, but for now there was nothing for Madrid to take on. And if this was the result of trading Johnny Madrid for Johnny Lancer then maybe it wasn’t worth it. It was easier when he wasn’t thinking of permanence, wasn’t chewing on notions of staying. He could leave anytime, Johnny told himself. Anytime at all.

The thickening silence felt like a cold shadow looming between them. Scott sure wasn’t showing much of himself these days. Oh, Johnny knew some about his brother – Scott’s actions said he was a good and fair man, hard at times, but honest. He was kind to Teresa and Maria, gave Murdoch a good amount of respect, but hadn’t said much to his new brother since the shooting. Not that they had to like each other. Blood didn’t mean much after a lifetime apart. It took time to get to know a man, to trust him. Johnny wasn’t sure just how much he knew or trusted the man now beside him.

There was too much in his head again, and it was seeping down into his limbs, making them quiver. He had to move, say something, do something. Madrid’s shadow materialized beside him in the heat. <<Ask him, will you?>> he complained. <<Be done with it – not that you don’t already know.>>

“What you said that day in the saloon,” Johnny said to Scott, grabbing at another twisted branch and flinging it behind him. “I guess you don’t think much of me, huh?”

Scott turned to face him, one brow raised quizzically. Then he bent to task again. “On the contrary,” he replied, gloved hands tugging at a rotted branch. “I think – a lot – about you.” The wood worked free and he stopped again to issue a shrug, his stare direct. “I don’t believe you give yourself much credit, Brother.”

Was that a compliment or an insult? “Well, in my experience,” Johnny began in a lazy tone to cover up his uncertainty, “a man doesn’t get too far by showing off his pride.”

“Really,” Scott commented. He swiped at a trickle of sweat working near his eye. “Then what do you call standing before another man with a gun in your hand?”

“I’m not embarrassed by that,” Johnny shot back. Compliment, hell. Dammit, why did he even start this conversation? Madrid smiled and quickly retreated, leaving Johnny suddenly very exposed. “You were a soldier-boy, weren’t you?” Johnny continued. “Didn’t you do the same thing – stand before another man with a gun in your hand?”

“Yes,” came the even reply; Scott glanced briefly down and nodded. “I did something similar.”

He didn’t say the rest of it; the part that Johnny was sure was there. <<But I didn’t take any pride in it.>> And why wouldn’t he be proud? His side won, didn’t they? If he did the job then he should be glad of it, proud of it. He’d killed the enemy, bought victory.

<<I was good at my trade,>> Johnny reminded himself, giving an armful of muddy brush a savage tug. Had to be, to survive. Only now that wasn’t his trade anymore. Now he was...a ranch hand. Trying to be a good one, a useful one, someone reliable, depended on. Trying to shove Johnny Madrid out of the way and call upon this other part of him rarely used – Johnny Lancer. A man with a family and a home, a regular job with regular pay. And a need to measure up in his brother’s eyes.



TWO



He did think – a lot – about his brother.

Scott leaned back against the rock where he’d taken his break and worked the pill down with a swig of water from his canteen, but knew it was no use. He’d waited too long, and by nightfall the fever of the ague would be evident. Damn the timing. Damn the War, he amended to himself.

He watched Johnny standing awkwardly by himself, scuffing the dirt and clenching his fists. That aura of hesitancy about his brother tugged at Scott. Johnny had ridden in a loner, distrustful but confident. Now he seemed to have traded that for loneliness and uncertainty, wanting to stay but unsure how to make the change of direction in his life complete. And wondering, Scott guessed, whether it was all worth it. From what Scott had seen, Johnny Madrid Lancer was a good man, passionate and proud, stubborn but loyal to what he believed in. A good man to know. That’s why Scott had lobbied so hard to keep his brother from leaving with Wes. He hated to see his brother give up so easily, hated to see Johnny miss the opportunity to gain what was rightfully his. He liked Johnny, truly liked the man.

Scott sighed to himself. The comment about pride had been unintentional and he shouldn't have let it slip, wouldn't have if he'd been well. Too caustic, a friend had once told him, and that was without any illness – or alcohol – in him. He supposed his sarcastic bent was more pronounced since the War, and the end of his experience with it. Not many knew of that last year spent nowhere near a conventional battlefield, yet still in battle – for survival.

He took another drink of water then capped the canteen. The first hard shivers of the ague went through him. He straightened his jacket and then shook them off. The malaria had killed several, many of those already weakened by typhoid and dysentery. He'd shivered and sweated endlessly until the prison physician had grudgingly passed out quinine tablets. He'd only had one other relapse, about a year after his return home, whereupon his grandfather had insisted he kept a supply of pills with him. Scott now gave his grandfather a long-neglected thank-you; the medicine might just be enough to get him home tomorrow still upright. And he had a flask of whiskey stowed deep in his saddle bags as an additional aid, if necessary.

He again studied his brother, dark and muscled, wary and always ready – for something. Now Johnny was also simmering with an anger that was looking for an excuse to erupt. The other side of him – Madrid – had been in plentiful attendance these past three weeks, causing Johnny to alternate between temper and sulkiness as he worked to reconcile the two. If truth were told, Scott would rather have both sides of Johnny, Lancer and Madrid, beside him in a firefight. But not this seething mix of a stranger working beside him today. Scott didn't want to admit that he was sick of Johnny's brood, but he was. He had enough to do without double-guessing what Johnny was fishing for – it seemed his brother used skepticism for every word or action. Maybe Murdoch had seen something that Scott hadn't about Johnny. Maybe Johnny really didn't belong here.

"Dammit," he said aloud, not wanting to believe that.

He wished that Johnny would get over his guilt or fear or whatever it was that was gnawing at him and find a place for that shadow that walked beside him. Just get it off his chest and be done with it, even if that meant being on the receiving end of his brother's blow-up. Though Scott had to admit to himself that he was not well enough to weather any sort altercation if it came soon. And this would surely be the time Johnny would turn on him; men like Johnny could sense weakness of any kind in a man, and use it to an advantage. And just what would they be fighting for? Johnny's war was with himself, and Scott refused to be at blame for any of his brother's misguided ideas about whether he should return to his past. He'd gone to town and sought out little brother, hadn't he? Told him in so many words to admit his mistake and get on home where he belonged. And Johnny had come home, finished his job with the Strykers, worked up a truce with their hardheaded father and stayed on. But there was a new distance between them and it had to do with that shooting, the one that no one blamed Johnny for, but that the young man seemed to expect. And as the weeks passed, Johnny had become more and more conflicted. Might be worth that fight, Scott thought to himself, to rediscover that part of his brother he had quickly come to know.

The crew was eyeing him, waiting for orders, though Johnny was still facing away, head bent, eyes apparently studying the interesting array of dust between his boots. Slowly Scott rose, tested his steadiness, and suppressed a fresh shiver. He approached the group, his brother standing out against the others in that pink shirt of his. "If I had the strength, I'd let you have the first punch," said softly aloud to that pink back. "I'm not going to give up on you, not yet, Brother. Though you are testing my patience."



THREE



Madrid was laughing at him, sweaty and smelly, his sleeves torn by snagging branches, hands loaded with scratches, feet hurting. Madrid had been doing a lot of that lately, popping up somewhere off to his left, snickering at the evidence of hard work and beckoning him with a lazy finger to walk off and follow. Dammit, how he wanted to sometimes. Like now. But the crew needed him, needed his muscle and his grit. And those stupid cows needed him to help get this water downstream. His cows, Johnny corrected himself. Even though he might be working like a ranch hand, he was a part owner of all this. Ranch profits meant money in his own pockets. And for all the hard work, the regular pay was welcome. He'd even put some in the Green River Bank for safekeeping, along with that one thousand Murdoch had initially given him, under the name of Johnny Lancer. Good to diversify your funds, Scott had told him with a nod. Johnny could only nod back. Diversify your funds – if that meant putting it in more than one place then he guessed he was doing the right thing, since he also had some stashed behind the headboard of his bed.

After finally clearing the creek, they'd moved to the main river upstream to check for any further potential blockage. Here they found a collection of toppled trees, likely uprooted from the last storm. Two hung precariously over the steep riverbank, and another one was leaning drunkenly atop them. Three smaller ones lined the torn and slippery banking. The river here was deep and swift flowing. It could absorb a few fallen trees without much impact, but the goodly current could beach them at the shallow spot they had just opened.

"What about it, Johnny?" Scott had asked him as they stood assessing the situation. "Send them down or haul them up?"

Johnny had eyed him, wondering if Scott really wanted his opinion or if his brother was just using that damned polite way about him. So he'd hesitated, but Scott only waited in silence, his face carefully neutral, though Johnny could sense a trace of impatience in his stance. But still Scott said nothing, didn't show any challenge in his eyes, didn't give him that skeptical lift of a brow. He just stood there, wiped at an occasional smear of sweat on his cheek. "Pull 'em back," Johnny finally nodded.

Scott gave him a grin and a nod and they went at it, first securing the trees with rope lines. The wagon team was enlisted to haul back the leaning tree, their other mounts to keep the lines taut and prevent the others from sliding into the river below. Johnny ducked back under the lines and trotted to the edge of the bank to help signal the removal. Scott, he

noticed as he jogged into position, was doing the same but from a location away from the bank, ready to second his motions. Johnny waved and Scott repeated the gestures and the team was drawn back. The tree swayed and moved, then rose. Funny how they had set themselves up like this, working together without discussing it. Easy, natural, without any words of explanation. Felt surprisingly good to understand each other. Moreover, it felt good to be asked what to do and have his decision accepted. To be in charge, to have others follow his lead. Sort of like Madrid in a range war – took the same sort of thinking. Only he didn't have to dodge any bullets on this particular job. Johnny glanced over at his brother. Maybe he'd judged Scott too quickly. Though they hadn't spoken much lately, there'd been no surliness in his brother's tone, no condescending attitude – there hadn't been since that day in the saloon, not until that jab about pride earlier today. And even then it seemed to have fallen unexpectedly out of Scott's mouth, as if he'd been caught in a bad mood about something and hadn't really meant it.

<<Not likely,>> Madrid silently told him. << He's just testing you. Trying to prove you wrong. You had him shot, boy. He ain't going to forget that.>>

"Shut up," Johnny muttered aloud, gesturing for the tree to be raised again, saw Scott imitate him.

<<Bigger slice of pie when there's only two.>>

"No," Johnny said to the heated afternoon air. Family business, that's what Scott had said about Stryker. Don't give yourself enough credit, he'd said.

<<Pride...>> Madrid reminded him.

A man had to have some pride to be good at his trade; Johnny showed it by the way he wore his rig, the way he faced an opponent. It wasn't bragging – it was confidence. And his brother knew all about confidence, didn't he? He was so damn good at all he did. Johnny looked over at Scott again, then slid his gaze to the others. They were all working attentively, but somehow Scott seemed to be the most focused of the group. Helluva worker, ol' Boston. Always seemed to get the job done to the old man's satisfaction. Murdoch was spare on the praise, but he did acknowledge a good job when he saw it. And Johnny hadn't been above trying some of the things Scott did, just to see if it worked for him, too, like assigning work tasks before the crew headed out, and double-checking the work when one hand declared it to be finished, just in case it needed a little extra adjustment. And even though Murdoch might not have realized what his other son had done, dinner sure had been better when the told man wasn't ranting on about all the things that weren't right.

<<Quit fooling yourself and sell out,>> Madrid cajoled. <<Be easier than doing all this crawling. They don't want your kind, anyway.>>

"No," Johnny said again.

<<He's watching you. Looking to see you fall, boy,>> said Madrid, pointing to Scott. <<Unless you can make him fall first. Hell...>>

He heard a rope twang as it snapped free, then another, heard the shouts of the men following. Saw the tree suddenly straighten and waver. Watched transfixed as it rushed through the air. Felt the whoosh as it toppled ever closer – closer to him. It filled his sight – there was nothing but that hot, faded sky and the green and brown tree blocking out the baleful sun. Time inexorably slowed, just like the moments before a gunfight. In a way he was facing an opponent, waiting for that flicker, the cue that told him that the commitment had been made. He couldn't make his own move until then – until now –

Something crashed into him, swept him off his feet, tumbled him sideways. It held tightly, shoving him toward the edge of the banking. It was beating and breathing as it grasped him, warm and alive, encased in a bit of brown and green – the tree – no, a jacket, and gloves...

They hurtled over the embankment, felt a moment of weightlessness, then crashed hard into the river. The splash felt magnificent, shockingly cold against the warm day, and then they were sliding through slippery arms, down and down in a rush of water, sinking deeper, losing air, drowning...

Johnny clawed free and stroked upward. He broke the surface quickly. "*Jesus y Dios!*" he gasped with a splutter, tossing his head to whip the streaming dark hair from his eyes. "What the hell, Boston?" he declared, furiously treading water. "Next time don't shove so hard."

"I'm sorry," came back the call from his right. He turned as Scott splashed to his side. "Seemed to be a good idea at the time." Scott tread the choppy water lightly, making Johnny feel clumsy in comparison. "Besides, I didn't want to have to explain."

"Explain what?" Johnny coughed out.

"Explain to our father why you got crushed by a tree when I was only yards from you."

Damn him for trying to find it funny, though by now he should be used to his brother's penchant for wit at a time like this. Though there seemed to be a protective edge to Scott's tone that Johnny hadn't noticed before. "Could have got yourself crushed," Johnny pointed out. <<Then who'd have to do the explaining?>> he thought, thinking how easy it was between Scott and Murdoch. Madrid obligingly popped up and smiled at him.

But Scott affected a grin. "Then I guess we're both lucky." He ran a wet hand over his running face. "Are you all right? Anything broken? Bleeding?"

"I'll let you know as soon as I can get out of here," Johnny told him. They swung their gazes upward; some of the men were leaning over the banking, calling down to them. "*Dios, tengo frío,*" Johnny said through a chill that made him shiver.

“If that means this water is cold then I agree,” Scott said. “What’s this, spring fed?” Then without waiting for a response he called up to Isidro, “Send down a line.”

By the time they had been hauled up onto the bank a fire was being lit and blankets handed out. Johnny flapped a hand of thanks for the help, coughed again, swiped an arm over his face and hair. He turned back to lean on his elbows and stared at the tree now hanging over the embankment in a position similar to its mates. The tree that had nearly crushed him – and his brother – to death.

Scott was already on his feet, stripping off his sodden cropped jacket, peeling his bandana away from his throat. One glove was stuffed in his back pocket, fingers pointing upward; the other was missing.

“Well?” he asked, putting his hands to his hips and looking down to his brother.

Johnny squinted up at him. “Well what?”

“Anything broken?”

Johnny rolled, climbed to his knees and felt a bruise rising along his ribs where his brother had grabbed him. He glanced over himself, wet and sandy, shirt and pants clinging uncomfortably. “Guess not,” he said, looking back up.

He felt it then, that sense of expectation that he should have said more. And now Scott was giving him that lift of one brow; in silence, his brother turned and walked to where Isidro had the campfire going.

“Wait – hey.” Johnny hurried to catch up, stepped around to halt his brother’s stride. He dropped his gaze and shrugged, then looked up. “Thanks.” He glanced back. “That was a mighty big tree.”

Scott allowed a nod, and a little grin snaked about his lips. “You’re welcome, Brother.” His hand reached out, swatted Johnny lightly in the midsection with a watery smack. “Don’t scare me like that again, though. I kind of like having you around. Might as well take a break,” he announced to the crew and moved off.

Family business. Just like that day with Pardee, just like that day in the saloon. Scott had just stepped in and saved Johnny Madrid’s hide. No, Johnny Lancer’s hide. Thoughts quickly filled up Johnny’s head again. He ran a hand over his wet hair to smoothen it, pressed fingers to his temple. He’d had people come through for him before – people who had cared enough not to let him die. Their aid was genuine, but temporary. It wasn’t family. It wasn’t his brother, looking out for him. His brother. Kept a pretty good eye peeled for trouble, Boston did. Could work a rifle, hold his own in a fight. Sure could run fast, too.

Madrid's wariness rushed back over Johnny, instantly darkening his thoughts. Just because he was grateful to the man didn't mean they were suddenly close. Besides, what did Scott know about a family, anyway? He didn't have any brothers or sisters, either.

<<I kind of like having you around,>> he'd said.

<<Probably just being polite – that's the way he was raised,>> Madrid commented.
<<He didn't really mean it.>>

They couldn't just instantly become brothers. Not even a rescue from a falling tree was going to ensure that. Johnny didn't know how to be a brother anyway. He sure wasn't a good one by this show of stupidity. Scott had rescued him – again. First Pardee, then Wes, and now this.

Johnny made a sound and walked away – why should he care what Scott thought? And why did it suddenly matter?

<<Watch your back,>> Madrid lightly warned.

But Johnny turned away from him, too.



FOUR



Isidro sidled up to Johnny. "He shivers still," the older vaquero said quietly, making a vague gesture toward Scott.

"How?" Johnny asked back, squinting up at the sun. He shook out his half-dried shirt one more time then slipped it on, the remaining dampness cooling his heated torso. "It's hotter than yesterday – we're all baking out here."

"He remains cold – see?"

Johnny saw Scott hitch then straighten. He frowned and a curl of guilt tightened in his gut.

<<You getting soft?>> Madrid asked him.

"His business," Johnny said to Isidro, glancing down to attend the buttons on his shirt.

"Johnny," the older man cajoled. "He is your *hermano*, *compadre*. He just saved your life. He deserves your concern."

"I'm right here," Johnny told the older man. "If he wants something all he has to do is ask."

"Pride, *compadre*," Isidro told him. "He is in charge, no?"

It'd be so easy to just turn away, shrug it off, keep it from attaching itself to him.

"I'll just make it worse if I go over there," Johnny said. But he looked over at his brother again. The man had saved his life – Johnny owed him something for that. Family or not, he owed Scott.

"The water was cold – he could be sick," said Isidro.

Sick now because of him – shot because of him. Johnny swore and eyed Scott – the good brother. Knew how to do everything just right, didn't have anything to sully his shining reputation. Didn't have any shadow of the past that clung to him. Even that Boston living hadn't made him soft. It made Johnny feel all the dirtier – and for a good minute, completely envious. Dammit...

"Johnny..." Isidro prodded.

He found his feet moving in Scott's direction, all too aware of the smile working across Isidro's face.

<<You're a damned fool,>> Madrid told him and faded.

"You all right?" Johnny called as he hesitantly approached his brother. "Isidro thought maybe something was wrong."

Scott's glance was sharp. "Fine – I was just thinking."

Johnny shrugged, feeling quickly foolish. Isidro and his damned concern. "The men are waiting."

"Then start without me. I'll catch up."

"Okay..." Johnny hesitated, his glance going over the other man. A few shivers, nothing more. He looked healthy otherwise; didn't have much color to begin with, anyway. And he kept himself pretty well covered; being so fair he tended to burn easily.

"You can handle it, can't you?" Scott demanded.

"Yeah, I can handle it," Johnny retorted, irritation making him warm. "I don't need you telling me what to do."

"Fine, then. Get going." Scott turned. "I'll just..." He wavered and then stumbled.

"Hey..." Quickly Johnny caught his arm. The heat bleeding through his brother's sleeve was unexpectedly strong. Isidro was right – he was sick.

Scott gained his feet quickly. “Don’t concern yourself,” he retorted, lightly pushing away.

“Boston, if you’re not right...”

“I asked you not to call me that,” Scott snapped. He closed his eyes and took a breath. Then he opened them again, but kept them to a squint. “We need to finish with these trees,” he continued in a controlled tone. “Chop what we can and take it back for firewood.” He looked up and Johnny followed his gaze. The sky was deepening to gold under the slanting sun. “Might as well make camp tonight – head back tomorrow.” He rubbed a fist over one eye then straightened, his features following. “That all right with you?”

Johnny stared hard, weighing the rebuff, debating whether he should ask again. “Sure,” he said in an easy tone. “No need to ride back in the dark. Scott...”

“There’s work to do,” Scott interrupted. “Let’s not waste time.” He moved off, his shoulders stiff and high, his fists clenched at his sides.

Johnny’s moment of worry gave out. He understood; stay out of it. Well, fine. Why should he care anyway?

<<That’s right – stop wasting your time,>> Madrid huffed at him.

They weren’t brothers, not in a real sense. Scott’s moments of friendliness were just that – moments. That rescue today was just an obligation so he wouldn’t have to explain to the old man – that’s what he’d said. That remark about being scared was just another of his nice airs.

He hadn’t even talked about the shooting. Hadn’t said anything. The bouts of silence told Johnny a lot about that day and all the days since. Scott blamed him, didn’t like him. Saw him like everyone else saw him – a fast gun who had no business being a part of a family.

So why was he still here, digging at dirt and mud – warring with Madrid and feeling something more than guilt for the man who was his brother?



FIVE



“Well, you sure had us fooled, didn’t you?”

Scott swore to himself, the flask halfway to his lips. He hadn’t heard Johnny’s approach, hadn’t sensed much but the sound of his own drinking, the rapid pulse beating under his temples, the crying pain in his back. He’d brought the whiskey with him to try and numb some of the symptoms that the quinine would not, and hadn’t expected to have to explain.

Until now, no one had bothered him. Not even kindly Isidro whom, Scott was sure, had been assigned to this work detail on Murdoch's orders to keep an eye out for the inexperienced Lancer sons.

He looked up at his brother standing over him in the growing darkness and cursed that earlier display of weakness – Johnny had been drawn to it like a vulture to prey. "Leave off, Brother," he said. "This is none of your business."

"You and your fancy clothes, pretty talk, high manners," Johnny continued. He pointed at the flask held between Scott's fingers – he wasn't listening. "You're not any different than the rest of us, are you, Boston?"

Scott held back his retort at the recurring use of the irritating nickname. "Meaning that I bleed the same as you do?" he asked, finally lifting the flask to his lips, though a little voice was warning him not to be drawn into Johnny's anger. This wasn't about their differences – or was it? "Guess I already proved that, didn't I, Brother?"

"Yeah, you bled," Johnny said. "So what? You're dirty, too, as dirty as the rest of us. Stinking, smelly dirty, grit under your collar, dirt under your nails – and whiskey on your breath. Fine clothes and fancy talk can't hide all the stinking dirt you're wearing."

There was something else in his tone besides anger – disappointment.

Scott drank, swallowed fast to push the liquor down, hasten the fever, and burn it out. He had to get over the sweats by morning if he was ever going to finish the job and get home. But he eyed his brother standing there taut and ready for a fight, fists clenching and unclenching. Disappointment – that notion absorbed some of the fuzziness in his brain. What did his brother expect of him? Did Johnny look up to him? Then this surely looked like a fall from grace, to see the Boston educated dandy of a brother drinking like a ranch hand and nowhere near a saloon. Frustration wormed through Scott. He didn't want Johnny's admiration or even his jealousy – he wanted his brother's trust and friendship. <<I'm no better, Brother,>> he said silently to Johnny glowering before him. << The irony is that you are better than you believe yourself to be.>>

Scott wiped the back of his hand over his lips, waited for the wave of heat to finish assaulting him before responding. "Yes, I've been dirty, Brother," he finally said, refusing to get up. The whiskey had loosened his limbs, but wasn't nearly enough to keep him down; he'd drunk more, and more often, long before he ever came to Lancer. But the fever pretty well had him under. "I've sweated and starved and crawled. We're all men, Johnny. We all sweat and bleed. We do it for what we believe in, who we believe in." His lips lifted into a smile. "And sometimes that even includes wayward brothers."

"When did you starve or crawl?" Johnny sneered, and this time there was envy added to his tone. He was pushing too hard, way too hard. "You sit there half-drunk and expect me to believe--"

“Prison.”

He wasn't sure why he'd said it. To shut Johnny up, he supposed, to cut off his brother's misplaced anger and guilt, to squash that misunderstood dismay. And to expose his own plainness, if it could be called that. To show his brother, and the rest of them – hell, the whole world – that he wasn't so different.

Johnny was staring, his mouth slightly open, confusion narrowing his gaze. Scott saw his lips twitch, knew the question was coming, knew he would not refuse to answer it.

“How come?”

Scott rolled to his feet and tossed the flask to the ground; it landed with a clank into the dark at his feet. Incredible heat washed over him but he shook it off. “War, Brother,” he told Johnny. “Captured by the enemy.”

Prison, not some by-your-leave jail where you waited for the circuit judge to come and levy your fine, ate your three meals each day and lounged in relative ease, watching the dust settle. Where you didn't battle for blankets, or scraps of food, or even clothing. Where even sleeping became its own miracle. Jail was merely an inconvenience, maybe an embarrassment. War prison ate at a man, gnawed at his limbs and his mind, made him less than...

“For how long?”

Dammit, what was it going to take for him to understand? Scott turned and got in close, real close, but Johnny did not back up. “One year,” he breathed in his brother's face. “That's twelve months, Brother, three hundred and sixty-five days of torture. Is that dirty enough for you? Is it?” he demanded of his suddenly silent brother. The urge to hit was so strong he almost gave into it. He wanted to, hated to resist it when he knew it would feel so good, so damned good, to put a fist to this disconnect that separated them. But he curled his fingers into his palms – and waited.

Johnny broke eye contact first. He glanced down and stepped back. “*Madre de Dios*,” he exclaimed softly as his hands fisted onto his hips.

The fever resurged and swept over Scott, and the darkness suddenly became darker. He turned on his heel and his toe nudged the fallen flask. Savagely he kicked it, heard it bounce away and break. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Johnny flinch. Scott dropped back onto his bedroll.

Johnny was now watching him, those eyes raking in everything. “Is there something on my face that needs to be washed off, Brother?” Scott called over lazily, recovering enough to rely once again on his most effective weapon – his tongue. “If not then I'm tired and I'd like to turn in. Unless you have something else to discuss.”

Johnny straightened. His hands dropped to his sides. But he kept silent.

Scott eased the blankets back over his legs. "Good night, then," he said and rolled over.



SIX



"You was yelling," Johnny said in a careful, quiet voice. His left hand slowly reached out, drew aside the fully cocked Colt held all too securely in Scott's grasp. He hadn't expected to find a gun filling his brother's palm. Scott was fast, very fast, and even in the throes of semi-consciousness his grip was completely steady. "Scott?"

"Don't do that again," Scott spoke in a tight voice, releasing the hammer.

"Nope, don't intend to," Johnny answered in a rueful voice, dropping his hand as his brother returned the gun to its holster. He blew out a relieved breath, though the surprise still clung to him. "Bad dream?" he asked.

Scott sat back. "Since you always sleep well, I'm surprised you might recognize one," he said sourly, scrubbing an arm over his sweaty face.

His first reaction was to retort to the reference made about their first morning at Lancer when they were sizing each other up and brimming with confidence, swaggering with complete courage. But he swallowed it back, remembering his brother's ability with words. "Guess I stretched that a bit," he admitted a little sheepishness.

"You don't say." Scott lay down and closed his eyes. "Sorry I woke you."

Johnny shrugged. "It's all right, I was up."

Scott cracked one eye open. "So that's how you deal with it. I should try that." The rancor had left his voice now. He had to be still hurting, if not from that whiskey than from this sickness that still clung to him.

"Sometimes it keeps ol' El Diablo from getting in the way," Johnny added.

"Yes," Scott nodded, and something slipped from his gaze that eased his features. "I'd forgotten that."

"Got some coffee." Johnny glanced at the purple-gray sky and the widening yellow ribbon working up from the horizon; that fierce niggling that had been dancing inside him for weeks had calmed a little. "Like a cup?"

Scott shrugged but his eyes were open again.

Johnny retrieved the pot and two cups. He poured for his brother and himself. Scott sat up on one elbow, took the cup and sipped quickly. His face was sweaty again, his eyes pinched, his jaw tight.

“You all right?” Johnny asked him, setting the pot aside and dropping to one knee. He took his own sip.

“No.” Scott took another drink. “But I will be.”

“I guess something made you sick?”

“Yes – something.”

His business, Johnny reminded himself against the rebuff, then turned aside his feelings and concentrated, really scrutinized, his brother. Scott wasn’t exactly his physical self, that was obvious. Even in the chilly gloom Johnny could see that his brother’s face was pale and shiny, his jaw tense, his eyes dark with exhaustion. There were lines about his mouth that weren’t there before. Yet he wasn’t complaining. Just propped himself up and kept going in that stoic way of his. Prison, Johnny thought briefly. All that time had to give a man a certain amount of deep toughness, the kind that would always exist long after the hard times were over.

Scott drank again then put down his cup. His hand fumbled toward his inside jacket pocket. Johnny sat back on his heels and watched as he withdrew a metal vial, unscrewed the top and shook out something white – a pill. He shoved it into his mouth and chased it down with a gulp of coffee. “Quinine,” he said shortly. Johnny nodded – he’d heard of it used for fever. “Caught the ague,” Scott said.

“In the War?” Johnny guessed.

“In prison,” Scott corrected. He shrugged and looked down at the cup in his hand. His voice went soft. “The whiskey – sometimes it helps...”

So he hadn’t been plain drinking, not really, not like Saturday night. And he knew Scott well enough to know that his brother had a reason for the things he did; guilt twinged inside him.

“Sorry for accusing you...” he started.

Scott shook his head. “You didn’t know.” He let off a soft snort. “I was hoping no one would know.”

Three hundred and sixty-five days of torture, he’d called it. And a fierce sickness, to boot. Well, that might cause a man to seek a bottle now and again, for both the fever and any nightmares that might come with it. Johnny recalled a few bleary tequila nights himself,

when things had gone badly down on the border. Still, he had a hard time imagining this man – his brother – had endured all that time in captivity, sweating and starving and dirty. Probably had taken years to wash off the stink of that place. Maybe that's what made him so fussy about his looks and his clothes. And now some of that had come back with this ague – Johnny ducked his head as the guilt clambered up over him. First that bullet in the shoulder and then the dunk in the river – all because of him.

The silence rose up between them again, thick and awkward. As always, Johnny had a need to fill it. But not with the same sort of prickling questions and skeptical comments he'd been uttering. Maybe it was the bare gloom before him or the cold ground under him that had chiseled away at those sorts of thoughts, leaving the truth exposed. "Scott, I..."

Scott waved a hand but held his gaze. "Stop thinking it's your fault, Johnny. It's not – none of it is." He paused and let a smile rise from his lips to his eyes. "Although you can be a hazard to be around."

Johnny tried to return the smile but the words rang a little too true for his liking. And now there was a new throbbing in the pit of his stomach. He tried to ease it by swallowing, but it only pulsed harder. "Family business, huh?" he tried instead.

"Yes," Scott nodded, his eyes suddenly no longer tired, but vitally alert.

Johnny bit back the flushing creeping up under that stare. "You still gonna call it that when it happens next time?" he asked, unable to keep the challenge from his voice.

"Well, I'm hoping it won't become a habit." Scott declared. He drained his coffee cup and held it out for a refill. "That's three you owe me now? Not that I'm keeping count."

Johnny poured, though guilt singing through him was making the pot hard to hold. Madrid edged into view, wagging a finger at him. Johnny turned from the form. "Scott..." he started over dry lips.

"It's not a one man deal, Johnny," Scott said quickly. "Family just doesn't work like that."

"Family," Johnny spit out. He tossed his coffee aside and stood. "Does family mean getting hurt?" he demanded, pacing quickly.

"Sometimes," Scott nodded.

"You got shot because of me." Johnny took a few more steps through the scrubby brush and then came back. "Brought all this on..."

"You couldn't know what sort of revenge Stryker planned."

"I knew he wanted it." Johnny began walking again – his head was so full and his tongue clumsy. He stomped a little, stopped and bounced on jiggling knees. "Even before his boy died. I knew that boy wouldn't make it – gut shot...Stryker would want to hurt in kind." That's the way it was with him – always, it seemed. Men knew his kind, took delight in pressing him. How could he add family to that? It wasn't the commitment that scared him, but the responsibility for them. Already Scott had been hurt by his reputation, his ragged, dirty reputation.

"He could have gunned you down and been done with it," Scott pointed out.

"I wish he had tried," Johnny spat. "Instead he showed up at the house demanding an eye for an eye and me not even there." He laughed, short and harsh. "I was too busy being a whipped dog with my tail between my legs. The old man must have hated my guts at that moment." <<And you, too,>> he thought.

"Johnny, no one hates you..." Scott scoffed.

"It follows me, Scott." Johnny's fist punched the air. His voice was bitter. "That stinking smell – that gunhawk smell – it follows me wherever I go and it'll infect everything like it always has. You – you know things...I only know one this one thing and it don't work here. This family – it just won't work--"

Scott rolled up and strode to him, took him by the arms; his long fingers gripped painfully. "It will if you give it a chance," he declared.

Johnny shook his head and dropped his gaze, feeling suddenly defeated. "You don't realize..."

"But I do realize, Brother." Scott's grasp loosened a little, but he didn't let go. "You can't change your past – I can't change mine. And Murdoch, he can't change his either. None of us can. It's part of who we are. But you've got an opportunity to have something more – circumstances have changed. Give it time – I think you'll be pleased with the results."

"And men like Stryker..." Johnny persisted.

"Well, I'll watch your back, if you'll do a better job watching mine."

Johnny's head came up in indignation, but saw a friendly gleam in Scott's tired gaze. He could argue; his tongue was all ready for it, ready to give into his uncertainty and Madrid's beckoning finger. But a small piece of his mind resisted and he hung onto it. Maybe he could change directions without changing himself. Scott seemed to have done it, and believed that his brother could, too. Johnny realized that he'd come to rely on that decisiveness in the scant few months that they'd been together. Scott's determination and confidence was what had been pulling him along all this time, not because he didn't know what to do, but because Scott believed in him. In the man he was, not the reputation he

carried; Scott barely gave a nod to Madrid. Didn't seem to ignore him exactly, just didn't acknowledge him as a separate entity.

Maybe there was a place for Johnny Lancer here. Lancer not Madrid, though he knew that shadow was not going to go away any time soon. But maybe he didn't have to listen to it quite as much. After all, it wasn't like there was a lot for Madrid to do about the ranch. And then maybe Johnny Lancer could find a way to make more than a ripple out of his life.

"Might not be easy, watching my back," he said to his brother silently watching him.

"I think I can handle it," Scott replied.

<<Or die trying,>> Madrid scoffed silently to Johnny.

Well, three hundred and sixty-five days of torture had likely taught him a thing or two about surviving, Johnny figured. His brother was a pretty good shot with a rifle, and had grabbed that Colt with good speed.

"Okay, Boston," Johnny said, giving Scott a slight tap on the shoulder. "Let's give this back-watching a try."



SEVEN



Maria had greeted them with a smile and then an exclamation of surprise upon seeing what Scott was sure wasn't his best face. A rapid explanation in Spanish with Johnny translating let them know that Murdoch and Teresa had traveled to Morro Coyo and wouldn't be back until dinnertime. An opportunity to take a bath and a nap before they arrived, Scott decided, put this ague behind him until the next round in a few days, and hopefully then the symptoms would be easier. It was Saturday, he realized, but he'd gladly forego a trip to town for the luxury of his own bed.

"I'll take him for you." Johnny lifted Rambler's reins from Scott's lax grip.

"Wait." Scott pulled his rifle from the boot before Johnny moved off with the horses, then nodded gratefully and let them go. His cavalry training had allowed him to doze off and on in the saddle for the ride home, but every time he had awoken he'd spotted a glimpse of a concho-studded leg nearby and knew little brother was keeping a watchful eye on him, had even felt a guiding hand on his arm a time or two. It was Johnny who broke camp and got the crew moving, giving Scott a few more minutes to rest. By the time he had secured his bedroll to the saddle the group was ready to move out. Johnny fell back to ride beside him, saying little. But the silence between them was an easy one.

The yard was quiet but for the wagon rumbling toward the south barn, disgorging men as it went; they hustled about, eager to get any remaining chores done, bolt down some chow,

then hasten to wash and shave before heading to the saloons. A glance right found Johnny almost to the north barn door, ambling ahead of Barranca and Rambler in that loose-jointed way of his. As Scott watched Barranca suddenly threw his head back, nearly yanking the reins from Johnny's grasp. Rambler obligingly began to dance as well. Immediately Johnny firmed his grip on both sets of reins and spoke quietly to them. Scott shook his head – as much as he loved horses he hated their skittish nature. Then again, he really should be caring for his own mount, instead of letting his brother do it for him; that was one instruction from the cavalry that he had never neglected, and it had saved him numerous times. Propping his rifle against his shoulder, Scott headed for the barn. Maybe he'd still get a shot at the bathhouse, especially if Maria already had something simmering on the stove. Johnny would most certainly fill his stomach first.

The sun had lowered enough to cast a shadow of the barn onto the ground before the door, cooling the immediate area. Probably the shadow that had startled the horses. Scott stepped into the shade, allowed his eyes to adjust and propped the rifle against the wall in his customary manner. He never took the weapon into the barn with him, preferring to leave it outside while saddling and unsaddling his horse. Then he sauntered through the big door.

"I felt guilty--" he began, but the sight before him made him swallow the rest of his words.

"Good timing," growled Winthrop with a hard smile as he cocked the gun in his hand, the gun that was aimed directly at Johnny's head. Johnny was a tumbled heap on the floor, his upturned face already sporting a bloody gash across one cheek. Unconscious, had to be, Scott wildly hoped over a jolt in his chest as he searched the slack features for signs of life.

"Nobody pushes me around," Winthrop continued. Johnny's Colt filled his other hand and he used it to command Scott to raise his hands away from the gunbelt wrapping the younger man's hips. "Especially some new young pup from the East." He nudged Johnny with the toe of his boot, but received no response. But was that a shift of breath? Scott chanced another look as Winthrop spoke again. "I figured you'd come looking when this breed didn't show, just not so soon."

"Sorry to spoil your plan, then," Scott replied. Yes, there was a flicker of the lids and a curl of fingers. His brother was aware.

"Oh, it ain't spoiled, not by far," Winthrop boasted. "This breed here was just to make sure you came back, though I can't figure why you'd be so interested in your daddy's little mistake."

"He's my brother."

"That's what they say, though blood don't always make a difference."

"In this case, it does," Scott told him, resisting the urge to glance at Johnny. <<Take your time, Brother. We've got to work something out. It's not a one-man deal, remember?>> He settled himself and hinted at a grin. "Now, my friend, if you use a gun the whole ranch is going to hear the shot, so why don't you holster one of them and make me feel better?"

Winthrop smiled and kicked Johnny again, who, to his credit, did not make a sound, though he surely felt that boot against his side. "You let me worry about that, pup. Now, you throw your own gun over there." He indicated an empty stall to Scott's left.

His gun – Winthrop did not know about the other gun – his rifle – propped just outside the door. Johnny might have guessed, though. His brother had seen him pull it from the boot, and knew his habit of leaving it outside. Firepower, if he could just get to it. "And just what is your little plan?" Scott asked the other man as he carefully reached for the buckle holding his gunbelt. So far Winthrop did not object to him shedding it along with the Colt secured in the holster.

"Oh, I got one," Winthrop assured him. "You're gonna feel what it's like to be at the end of my fists, just like you did to me. And I'm going to shoot you first, for good measure, see how you bleed."

"I guess that's the important thing out here," Scott lazily commented, flipping the gunbelt away and putting his hands to his now bare hips. A surreptitious glance down revealed that his brother had noiselessly shifted onto his side. "Seeing whether a man bleeds or not. Why is that? To check on the color of his blood, you suppose?"

"Shut up," Winthrop growled.

Whatever Johnny was planning would have to be quick to relieve Winthrop of one or both of those guns. Surprise him, somehow, trip him, shove him, re-direct his attention and give Scott a chance to reach for that rifle. Johnny – Lancer and Madrid – wasn't a stranger to risks. Yes, that was how he'd do it, Scott calculated. <<No problem, Brother, as long as he shoots back at me and not at you.>>

"What now?" Scott prompted.

Winthrop gestured with a gun. "Out back."

Wrong direction. Scott laughed lightly, stalling. "That back door looks right out onto the road – you'll be in plain view of all those hands getting ready for a ride into Saturday night."

Winthrop's dismay was crossing his face as he realized his escape routes were closing off, the guns would cause a commotion, and he had two hostages to consider. He was either going to have to risk a shot or trust his fists. And by the way he held onto those Colts, he didn't seem too inclined to go at Scott without them.

"Turn around," he ordered to Scott.

With no choice, Scott turned slowly on his heel.

“Now!” Johnny shouted.

At the edge of his vision Scott saw his brother bolt up; Winthrop shouted in surprise and wavered. A gunshot boomed inside the barn. Scott dove through the door. His right hand snagged the rifle as he went down; he had it in both hands before he landed on one hip. Another shot whined out of the barn toward him. He fired back at the bit of faded chambray approaching the door. There was a yelp and the fabric collapsed. Scott rolled up, the rifle already re-cocked.

Johnny stumbled out into the shadow-filled yard, blood from the gash running afresh down his face. Scott grabbed an arm as he sank and guided him the rest of the way to the ground.

“Stay here,” he commanded, seeing Isidro and a few others hurrying up from the bunkhouse and headed back into the barn.

Barranca and Rambler were still shifting nervously in their stalls. Winthrop was on the floor where he had landed, holding a very bloody arm to his chest. Shattered bone, Scott guessed, by the way the other man was shaking in pain.

“Damn you,” Winthrop snarled, seeing him.

“Your choice,” Scott said, lowering the rifle but leaving it cocked. To Frank and Isidro approaching from behind he said, “Lock him in the guardhouse, and find Arturo to keep him from bleeding to death. We’ll settle this when Murdoch comes home.”

“*Sí, jefe*,” Isidro responded and he and Frank reached for the man.

Scott uncocked the rifle and gave it over to his right hand. He went to Rambler’s stall, calmed the still saddled animal with a soothing voice and a few pats even as his own weariness swept back over him. “We’ll get you taken care of, amigo,” he said to the horse and went out to check on his brother.

Johnny was still sitting on the ground, one hand pressed against his bleeding cheek and Isidro’s cousin Jorge standing over him. “Glad you didn’t miss, Boston,” he called to Scott, wincing.

Scott handed the rifle over to Jorge and squatted before his brother, letting the nickname pass without comment. “You could’ve got yourself shot,” he said, easing Johnny’s hand away from the gash and peering at it.

“Nah,” Johnny grinned. “That’s what I got you for – to watch my back, remember?”

“Somehow I didn’t think I’d be engaged quite so soon,” Scott laughed. But then he was glad of it because he knew it meant something to the both of them, more than it might mean tomorrow or the next day – or the ones after that. The test had been successful for

both of them. “Jorge, would you see to the horses? An extra measure of oats for their fright, if you please.” As the other man nodded and moved off, Scott examined his brother’s cheek again. “Looks like you’re going to get a black eye out of that.” He rose and held a hand out.

Johnny took it and let himself be hauled up. “Might give me some sympathy with the cantina señoritas,” he said, then sobered. “Though the old man...”

“He’ll understand,” Scott assured him. “After all, it’s my bullet in Winthrop’s arm. I’m just glad I guessed you right or it could’ve been worse.”

“For who?” Johnny grinned again as Scott steered him out of the shadow of barn and over toward the house. “You got good instincts, Brother.”

Brother, not Boston. “Thanks, Brother,” Scott returned.

They took a few steps in silence. “You figure blood does make a difference?” Johnny then asked him.

Scott hesitated just a fraction, knowing that there could be a very wrong way to answer. “Means something,” he returned. “Got us here, made us stay, unless that partnership paper did the talking for you.”

“Paper burns,” Johnny reminded him. “Blood don’t.”

Scott smiled at the fingers of trust being offered, even though he would have loved to debate whether blood could indeed burn, especially where Johnny Madrid was concerned. But that was for another time. “I guess you’re right there, Brother.”

Johnny rummaged under his waistband and came up with a folded bandana that he pressed to his bleeding cheek. “Thanks, Scott. You can have the job.”

Something dropped into place between them, settled comfortably.

“Thanks,” Scott laughed, unable to resist a little teasing, “but I see I’m already ahead – what, fourfold already?”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Johnny declared, giving him a playful swat on the cheek.

No doubt he would, and also find a place for Madrid’s shadow along the way.



AUTHOR'S NOTE



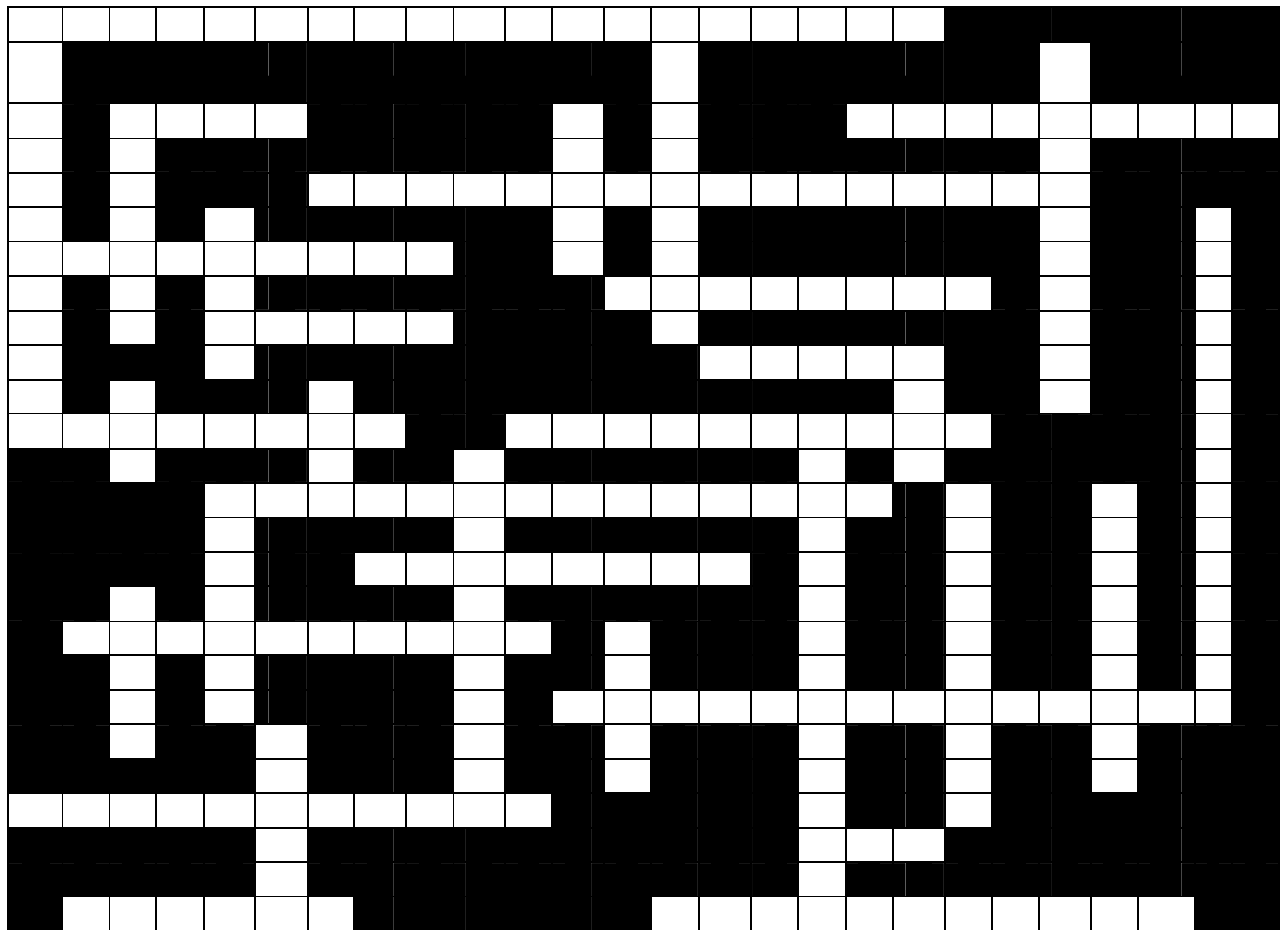
Special thanks to Sharon for her script of ‘Chasing a Wild Horse.’

BLACK McCLOINS Fill-In

BY JANET BRAYDEN



Bill of sale	Dram	Padraic McGloin	Jug	Sorley Boy
Borden	Education	Katie O'Toole	Peace	Spanish Wells
Brogue	Farming equipment	Lazy fat back	Pig	Squatter
Buttermilk	Fence	Little devil	Piglets	Strange little savage
Cattle rustling	Green Creek	Mathilda	Potatoes	Unfounded
Chicken stealing	Hog robbin'	Moirra	Roast	Vigilantes
Designs	Irish	No Irish Need Apply	Seed	Wires



COLDIE

BY JOAN MILLER



She was crouched low, peering out of the alleyway, around the dark corner of the saloon. She was relieved that no one seemed to notice her, but she tried to shrink even closer to the ground just in case. Settled at last, her body remained perfectly still, but her large brown eyes were in constant motion. After quickly scanning the busy street, they came to rest on two laughing young men nearby.

She studied the two carefully. One was tall, slim, blonde, and handsome, the other shorter, dark, attractive, and vibrant. They were loading supplies into the back of a large wagon, food supplies. Her mouth watered at the sight and the smell. Yes, the darker one had a sandwich in his hand, a meat sandwich. She sighed and had to force herself not to moan out loud.

The two of them were having fun at their work, joking and teasing each other, their voices deep and friendly, satisfying to the ear. She shut her eyes and focused on the pleasing sound. One of them must be the one, she was sure of it – but which? Her instincts seemed to be failing her. She was tired and hungry, and she had to decide. She needed help badly, but which of these men should she turn to? Usually she could tell who was safe and who wasn't – but not always. And any mistake on her part could prove fatal.

She slowly rose to her feet. It looked as if fate was making her decision for her. The fair young man was heading off down the street, as the other loaded the last of their pile of goods into the wagon.

She crept cautiously around the corner, stopping to make sure no one was looking her way. She knew she didn't look her best; she hadn't for a very long time. Her long golden hair was matted and darkened with dirt, and she needed a bath in the worst way, but she was determined to make the best impression she could. Silently she made her way across the street, and then stood waiting patiently, hoping desperately that he would notice her.

The dark haired man tossed the last item into the back of the buckboard and turned around suddenly, stopping abruptly in his tracks. "Who do we have here?" His voice had a gentle, crooning tone that she liked. She moved a step closer. His hand tentatively reached out and rested on the top of her head. He smiled at her, "Are you hungry, el de Oro?"

She stiffened at an unexpected voice behind her. "Who's your friend, Johnny?" She must be getting careless; she'd never even heard him coming. "Ain't she pretty, Scott? I was just going to get her something to eat."

“Here. She can have my sandwich. Teresa makes them nice and meaty.” She kept a wary eye on the newcomer as he tossed some envelopes onto the seat of the buckboard and grabbed up a bulky package that was laying there. The smiling man dug out an aromatic combination of beef and bread, and held it out to her. She hesitated a moment, then seized the hearty snack and wolfed it down.

“Good girl,” said the one called Johnny, gently smoothing her rumpled head. “Now, let’s get you into the wagon, so we can head home.”

“Johnny,” Scott spoke in a warning tone, one which caused her a flash of panic. They were going to leave her behind! She sighed and started to turn away. Why should she have expected any more from them? They had been kind to her, fed her, why should they do anything more?

She heard the frown in Johnny’s voice, “What? You think the Old Man’s gonna be mad?”

“You know Murdoch – he complains we’re always bringing in strays.” Scott moved to catch up with her as he spoke. “Wait up, Girl. Don’t go running off now.” She raised sad eyes to meet the sympathetic blue ones looking down at her.

“We can’t just leave her here.” Johnny moved protectively closer.

“You’re right, Little Brother. Help her into the wagon. I’ll be right back.” Scott headed for the street.

“Where’re you goin’?” Johnny lifted her off her feet and placed her carefully in the spot he’d cleared in the midst of the flour sacks and the bags of potatoes.

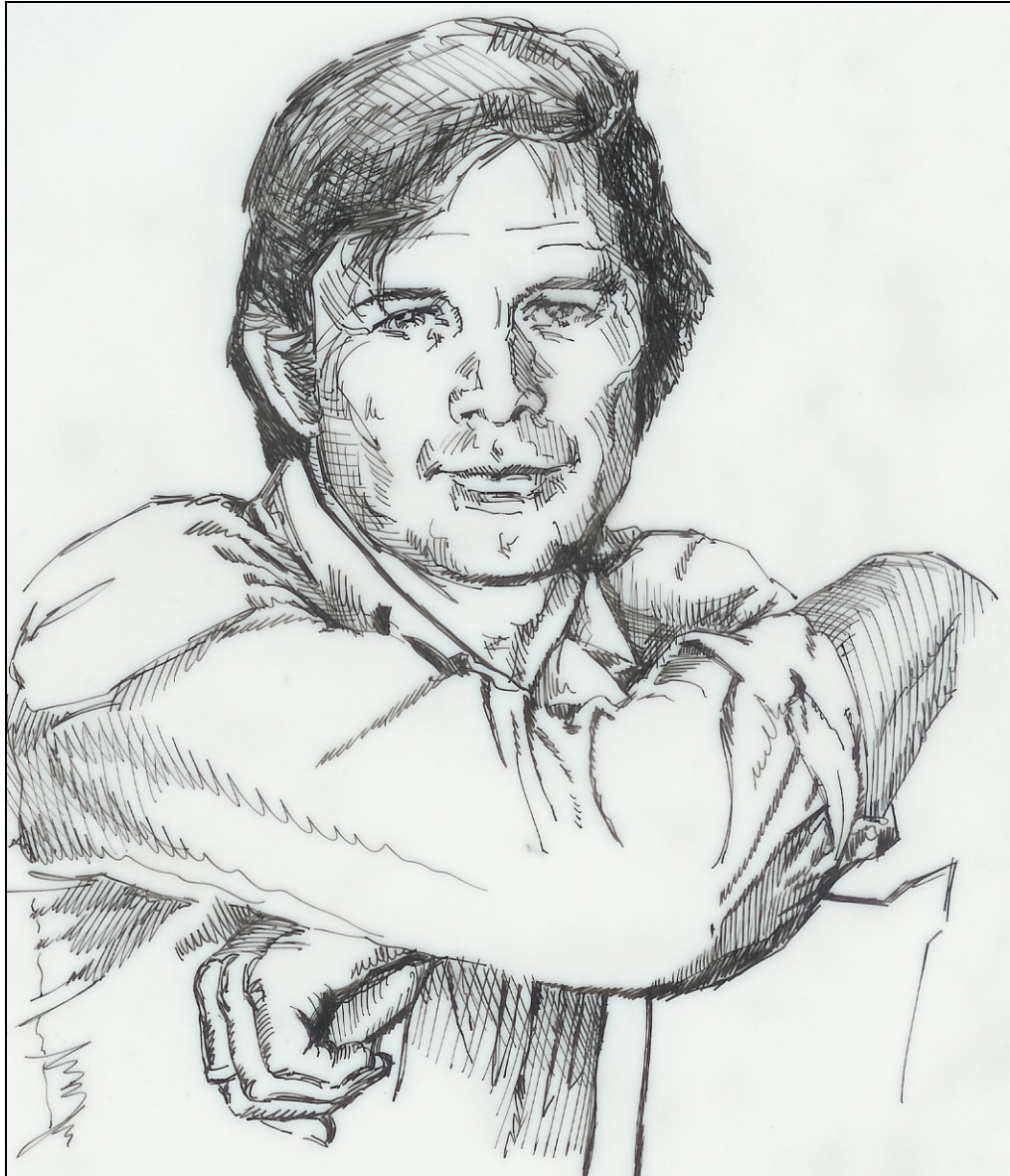
“To see if Val has any more of those Indian blankets for sale. We want her to be comfortable on the ride back to Lancer, don’t we?” Scott grinned sheepishly. Johnny grinned back, but sobered quickly, “What about Murdoch?”

Scott laughed, “We both know that Murdoch brings home at least as many strays as we do. And if we have to, we’ll just convince him it was all his own idea to have her stay. A bit of reverse psychology is just what we need.” Johnny wasn’t quite sure what his brother meant, but he had faith in Scott. He was sure the Lancer family would soon have a new member. He smiled happily as he dug another sandwich out of the lunch Teresa had fixed for them. To his delight, she made that one disappear even faster than the first one. Good thing his little sister liked to feed them so well, or there’d be nothing left for him and Scott to eat.

Scott appeared at his elbow with a colorful blanket. As they spread it carefully in the limited space available, Johnny said, “I bet Teresa’ll be glad to help get her all cleaned up pretty before Murdoch meets her. What do you think we should call her, Scott?”

“I think Goldie would be appropriate – well, after she has a bath anyway.” Scott smiled at her.

Goldie curled up on the soft blanket and sighed contentedly. Her instincts certainly hadn't failed her this time. She finally had a full belly and a name of her own. Her bushy tail thumped happily against the wooden floor of the wagon, as the young men each stopped long enough to give her a final pat before heading home. What more could a dog ask for!



THE WEAPON

BY LARAINÉ VAN ETTEN



The Weapon . . .

It had always been a part of Johnny Madrid, from the time he was very young. It was a natural. Like breathing. But it wasn't until he was the age of twelve that he realized how important it was to his being. To his very survival. And that is when he began to perfect it. To use it to his advantage.

Its very existence got him out of many a predicament, and people came around to his way of thinking when confronted by it.

The Weapon commanded respect; it could be deadly, or it could be a tease. It just depended on his mood, and who he was with.

People were awed at how well he could use it. No one, it seemed, could resist it.

The Weapon was well-taken care of by its owner, and it glistened when the need arose to use it.

And use it he did. To intimidate, tease, charm, and impress. And always, to protect.

The Weapon had never failed him.

Until now . . .

He should of known better, really. Should of known that he couldn't get by using the Weapon with these people. Not because of them. But because of himself.

He was too emotionally involved. After all, this was his Old Man, Murdoch Lancer, that he was playing this mind game with. And his brother . . . his older brother, Scott.

And Day Pardee. If it would have been any other ranch, any other person besides Murdoch Lancer, Johnny Madrid might of joined his old pal in his plan to take over the Lancer ranch. But it wasn't . . .

It was his land. His birthright.

His family . . .

And no one would take that from him.

He had let his guard down, for one fraction of a second. And it had cost him.

The bullet in his back didn't kill him, but it sure as hell felt like it did. So here he lay, in this very proper bed, being taken care of like a little kid.

And he was just too tired to use the Weapon on anybody right now . . . so he closed his sapphire eyes and fell into a deep, peaceful slumber.

Johnny knew someone was watching him sleep.

He opened his eyes and eventually they cleared enough to see his father. A large hand came toward his forehead, then brushed his cheek, and gently felt his neck and chest. The hardened face of the older man softened as he said, "Your fever is down, you're nice and cool. How do you feel?"

"Fine," came a raspy response. "I'm all right, really."

"You're a bad liar. Now . . . how do you feel?" the older man asked, his tone commanding an honest answer.

After a heavy sigh and a roll of the eyes, Johnny slowly told his father the truth. "Tired. And sore. My throat hurts . . . and I'm thirsty as hell. My back is stiff from lying in this stupid bed . . ."

All of a sudden, a glass of cool water appeared at his parched lips, and he drank it. Gratefully.

"Thanks," he managed to say. "You did ask."

"So I did," his father admitted, this time with a chuckle in his voice. After a few moments, Murdoch's tone turned serious. "The doctor says you'll be fine, but you need to rest. He said we need to fatten you up, though. You're a little too thin for his liking. Do you think you can manage some hot broth?"

This sounded good to the tired gunfighter, and he nodded yes. "Might feel good on my throat . . ." his voice barely a whisper.

"I'll get it for you," Murdoch advised. Then, as an afterthought, he said, "I have a . . . surprise waiting for you. When you're up to it."

Johnny looked at him questioningly.

“Do you remember the first night you were here? You were upset with me because I didn’t have any tequila.”

Johnny had to think really hard to break through the fuzziness in his brain. But he remembered that first night, barely. And he sort of remembered his annoyance that his old man didn’t have any tequila on hand.

“I think so . . . you said you’d order some,” he suddenly remembered.

“Well, I did, the next morning. It came in yesterday afternoon. Three bottles of the finest Coso del Rio Tequila you’ll find,” Murdoch proudly announced.

Johnny’s tired face suddenly brightened up, displaying a dazzling smile of pearl-like teeth that glistened.

“How? That stuff is hard to get, Old Man,” the reference being used affectionately. “Must of cost a pretty penny.”

His father winked. “I have my connections. Anyway, when you’re up to it, it’ll be waiting for you.”

“I don’t think my stomach will ever stop doing flip-flops.”

“The broth will help,” Murdoch coddled. Suddenly, he began to stare at his son, as he lay in the bed, looking so young.

“What are you staring at?” Johnny asked, the Madrid mask making an appearance.

“It’s just that . . . you have the most beautiful smile. Your whole face just lights up. Your . . . mother . . . had that same smile. You should . . . do it more often. Smile, I mean,” Murdoch stammered.

Johnny slowly looked down, displaying long, dark eyelashes. He wasn’t quite sure how to respond; so he looked up and saw his father’s face, which looked almost . . . loving.

Johnny couldn’t help but smile, it just came naturally. Like breathing. “Even with this stubble?” he asked, touching his face that bore a 5-day old beard.

“Even with the stubble,” Murdoch chuckled. “I’ll be back with your broth,” he said, then gently patted Johnny on the shoulder.

“Thanks,” came the quiet reply.

Murdoch left the room, and Johnny was alone with his thoughts. And it occurred to him that his father . . . the man that, through the years, he had shot a thousand times in his

mind, had made him smile. And he realized that maybe, just maybe, these people would accept the Weapon for what it was.

A smile.

His smile.

A glistening, dazzling smile that for the longest time had been a weapon he used to intimidate, tease, charm, impress, and . . . protect.

But this time, the smile came straight from the heart. A genuine boyish grin.

And it felt good.

The sapphire eyes of Johnny Madrid began to grow heavy, and he knew he would never make it to “soup time” with his father. But it didn’t matter. Because he felt safe here. He was warm and comfortable. And truth be told, he kind of liked being fussed over.

For now, anyway.

And as he slowly drifted off to sleep, a smile crossed over his handsome face. A contented smile. No weapon of protection was needed around these people. Not around . . . his family.

And he thought that he just might like living here . . .

