

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

### CHAPTER ONE

Laughter sprinkled through the crowd like confetti from the heavens while the string quartet played in the background. It was a perfect spring day. The estancia, adorned with flowers of red, yellow and white emanated the fresh newness of the season. The stunning visual display was accented with the heady perfumes the blossoms offered as their own wedding gift. Bright bunting draped the adobe walls and artfully designed food - arranged around a wedding cake centerpiece - contributed its own color and mouth-watering scent.

The bride glowed. The delicate lace veil was thrown back and cascaded over thick, dark curls. Entwined, the white lace and silky hair swayed gracefully with her every move. The proud and protective manner of the groom's devotion was expressed by the way he led her through the gathering of well-wishers. Blue eyes filled with passion found hers of rich, shining brown; when they connected, the spark of love that came from deep within their hearts flared hotter than the summer sun.

Weaving among a sea of friends, the newly wedded couple was enveloped with an aura of life and love. Her trembling hand lay snugly in the bend of his elbow, their reluctance to part marking the closeness of their bond. They turned as one to the sound of ringing crystal.

"Come up here, brother, and bring your lovely bride for a toast!"

The crowd cheered as the couple made their way to the head table which was crowned with a shining silver ice bucket from which protruded the largest bottle of Champagne it could accommodate. Two crystal flutes alive with golden bubbles were offered on their arrival, and they accepted them breathlessly. A third flute was raised in the hand of the best man and brother. The crowd fell silent, their faces bright with expectation. After a moment, the single Lancer brother lowered his glass, cleared his throat and spoke.

"I want everyone here to know that we at Lancer expect only the best from our land because we put our best into it on a daily basis, every day of the year. When we get something in return that is better than we expected, we know it's because of the

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combined effort from this family, those under our employ, and friends. This time, however, the return we've received in the form of this beautiful new sister and daughter is solely from my brother's efforts. When I first met her, I certainly wanted to help!" Laughter punctuated the remark. "However, I was warned off in no time flat. And believe me, after just a few minutes I knew the effort would have been pointless anyway. She only has eyes for my dear brother." More laughter and a few sighs came from the gathering. "And the best part is the rest of us still get to enjoy the return. Thank you, brother, for finally making something easy for me!"

As the crowd laughed and clapped approvingly, the groom turned to his best man and smiled affectionately, nodding his acknowledgement. The best man raised his flute again, the motion mirrored by the now silent guests, and turned to face the newly betrothed couple.

"Welcome to the family, Alexandra. May you and Scott have many babies to enrich all our lives even more."

Grinning, Johnny took a sip of the golden liquid, his eyes shining with pride. The guests cheered, the music started again, and Scott and Alexandra Lancer kissed deeply.



Teresa was well into the clean up the next morning when Johnny returned from Morro Coyo looking only a little tired but a lot weary.

"Everyone get off all right?" she asked, shaking tablecloths from the front porch.

Johnny handed off the buggy and horse to a ranch hand then pulled his hat from his head with a pained expression. "Yeah. I made sure they all got on the right stages, north and east." He slapped his hat against his thigh, winced, and carefully slid it back onto his head. "Wouldn't put it past ol' Harlan to manage to get Scott goin' east with him an' Alexandra headin' north all by her lonesome."

Teresa grinned at Johnny's sour expression, knowing that the previous night's alcohol wasn't the only reason for his condition; Harlan Garrett always managed to get under the boy's skin worse than a case of chiggers. "I still don't see what he could possibly have against Alexandra. She's from one of the best families in San Francisco."

"She could be from the Royal Family of England; if she's not from Boston, she's not good enough." Johnny quickly snatched an apple from a basket as it was whisked by on Maria's shoulder, headed for the kitchen. He polished it on his jacket sleeve before taking a bite then spoke as he chewed. "Probably didn't help she was part Mexican, either."

"Oh, Johnny," Teresa giggled. "You just love seeing that man suffer, don't you?"

"Me? Like seeing old Mr. Garrett suffer? Where ever did you get that idea?" he mumbled through a mouthful of apple, eyes innocently wide.

Teresa flicked the tablecloth at him and made him jump. She laughed, and he held the apple between his teeth as he plucked a wilted rosebud from an arrangement and playfully wrestled her while he stuck it in her ponytail. Teresa shrieked in delight, and then wound up the cloth to flick it again, but Johnny jogged out of range and threw her a kiss. "I'd love to dance, honey, but I gotta see what the big boss wants me to do around here. Hopefully it involves the barn or the back forty. This place is too busy for me!"

Turning to the house, the younger Lancer son swaggered his way through the busy workers who were sweeping, folding, washing and generally straightening up the estancia from the wedding celebration. He ran into his father who looked like he was also seeking to escape the business of clean up. His eyes held the same pain-induced squint that etched Johnny's face.

"The honeymooners get on the stage all right?" Murdoch put his hand on Johnny's shoulder and steered him out of the patio area.

"Yessirree, Murdoch, they got off just fine, even under the watchful scowl of ol' Harlan."

"That man's just never going to be happy." The Lancer patriarch slowed his pace when they got to the relatively serene surroundings of the barn. "Finally. Some peace and quiet," he sighed happily.

"What do ya got lined up for me today, old man? I mean, two days readyin' for a weddin' and not a bit of ranch work. Think it's all collapsed from neglect?" Johnny's tone was light as he went through the motions of saddling Barranca. "We could start at the east pasture. That fence looked kinda ragged when I was over there last week. You have other plans?" When Johnny didn't get a response, he turned to see what Murdoch was up to. What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

Murdoch stood in the middle of the barn, a gleeful grin on his face, holding fishing gear in his hands. "I've had other plans for three days, boy! Let's get out of here, shall we?"

Johnny's smile went from ear to ear. "Who am I to disobey the boss?" he said happily, patting his sidearm. "Got all I need right here! Let's go!"



The newlyweds returned two weeks later. Already familiar with Lancer and the people that made it a successful working ranch, Alexandra took her place at her husband's side as if she was born to the position. Teresa was thrilled to have another woman to share her men and life with, and Murdoch welcomed her happily into the fold with open arms. Johnny was tickled to have a new facet of his older brother's life to comment on: marriage.

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“So tell, me,” the younger brother said with a gleam in his eye shortly after their return. “How many kids you gonna fit in that room of yours, Boston?” He pointed at the ceiling with his fork, indicating the location of Scott’s now cramped bedroom.

Alexandra smiled, amused with the teasing tone, and glanced at her husband as he pulled out her chair for breakfast. “You mean ‘rooms’,” Scott corrected. “The house plan has four bedrooms.”

Johnny grinned as he dug into his eggs then drawled, “You don’t really think the old man’s gonna give you time off to actually build something on that plot of land he deeded to you two, do you?”

“Yes, the old man is!” Murdoch sounded unconvincingly insulted at the comment as he entered the kitchen. “And you’re going to have to cover for him while he does it, so get used to it.” The patriarch directed his comment to his dark haired son as he held up his coffee mug for Maria to fill. Then he pecked Teresa on the cheek and took his place at the table.

“And I just bet this is gonna take place during branding time, isn’t it?” Johnny grumped good-naturedly.

“You bet, brother,” Scott said lightly. “Our life will be designed to make things as inconvenient and uncomfortable for you as possible. It’s always good to have a goal in life, isn’t it, dear?”

“Why, yes it is,” Alexandra replied with a serious expression. “And Scott has promised to be home every night before dark and every weekend, haven’t you, dear?” She turned to her husband and fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

“Yessiree, I surely did. That means no more cattle drives, either!”

Johnny snorted, going along with the joke. “Well,” he said as he stood and snatched the final piece of bacon from his plate. “That means there’s only one thing to do, I guess.”

Scott raised his coffee and paused. “And what would that be, little brother?”

“After I’m done with that south pasture fencing, I’m headin’ into town and lookin’ for a wife. Next Sunday’s open ain’t it?”

The table rippled with laughter.



The next four months were busy, happy times. It took a while to put together building plans and assemble building material, but when that was done, Scott began working the ranch for half of the day and spent afternoons working with the building crew. Alexandra usually met him at the site with lunch and spent several hours at his side, helping where she could. She was a woman who was not afraid of hard work.

About the same time most of the framing was completed, Scott made the announcement that Murdoch was going to be a grandfather sometime around

Christmas. They were gathered in the great room after dinner, and Alexandra blushed beautifully, Scott's arm lovingly around her shoulders, as he shared the news.

"Hey, congratulations, brother!" Johnny was the first one to shake his hand and peck his sister-in-law on the cheek.

Murdoch's smile was as big as the man himself. He immediately produced the cut crystal glasses and began to pour helpings of the good brandy, last tasted on Scott and Alexandra's wedding day.

Teresa squealed and hugged Alexandra warmly. "Oh, I'm so happy for you two!"

"Uncle Johnny'," the youngest Lancer mused. "I could get used to that."

"Grandpa' sounds better to me," Murdoch said cheerily.

Teresa stood back, her forehead furrowed. "But I'm not really Aunt Teresa, am I?"

Alexandra immediately went to her side and took her hand. She smiled warmly. "Teresa, how can you say that? You may not be an Aunt by blood, but you certainly are an Aunt-by-heart."

"Which makes you sister-by-heart to Johnny and me! Makes perfect sense." Scott pulled the young girl in for a quick hug.

Smiling once again, Teresa kissed them both on the cheek and put her arm around Scott's waist. "Have you written your parents?"

"We sent letters this morning to my parents and Harlan," the blushing mother-to-be said.

"Woowee, ain't he gonna be thrilled!" Johnny commented with a cocky grin.

"Well, there's not much he can do about it, is there?" Scott's reply came with a resigned look in his eyes. Alexandra returned to her place at his side and held him close. Scott looked down at her momentarily and his expression returned to one of pure joy. "His loss. It's a shame."

"Maybe he'll come around." Johnny handed Scott a glass of brandy, then slapped his brother playfully on the shoulder and raised his crystal. "But I wouldn't count on it. He's as stubborn as you." With a playful wink, he tapped glasses with Scott and downed the brandy as Alexandra and Teresa giggled.

CHAPTER TWO

Late August was blessedly cool this year enabling Scott to work on the house several hours a day. His goal of having his first child born in his and Alexandra's home was still within his sights and, barring any other distractions, quite possible.

For several weeks now he and his wife had fallen into a comfortable routine. Scott, Johnny and Murdoch tackled ranch business in the mornings, with Teresa, Alexandra and Maria hustling to finish the daily chores around the estancia. By noon, the homestead was pretty much squared away and the evening meal planned so Alexandra would use the surrey and take a picnic lunch to the new house where she and Scott would have lunch and spend some time together. Sometime in the early afternoon she would return to the main house by herself.

Today, however, she was delighted to have company. Scott rode in on Barranca around noon and reined in by the barn. Surprised at seeing him on Johnny's palomino, Alexandra paused to watch him from the porch. A feeling of satisfied pride rose in her heart at the way her husband rode; he was easily recognizable by the way he sat a horse. His straight posture and polite manner, even when handling the workers, were two of the things that first attracted her and something she never tired of watching. She shaded her eyes from the noon sun with her hand and drank him in as he turned the horse over to a stable hand.

When Scott turned to the house, he saw her and burst into the smile that had sealed the deal for her so nearly a year ago. "Pack enough for Johnny, too, honey," Scott asked after pulling his wife in to a sweaty hug. "I'll be staying late today to go over the next phase plans, and I know you want to go to town. My generous brother offered to escort you."

"So that's why you're riding Barranca. Getting the afternoon off, is he?"

Scott nodded, refusing to release her even when her nose wrinkled at his smell. "That's right. Johnny just wants to make sure that horse is spoiled even more." Knowing how dirty he was, Scott grinned playfully at his wife's attempt to wriggle free before he loosened his embrace.

Alexandra took advantage of the freedom and pushed him back in mock disdain. "What have you been doing all morning? Dancing with the cattle?"

Scott pulled himself up, pretending insult. "A little sweat and dirt never hurt anyone, but I'll go wash up to make you happy." He gave her a wink, and managed a quick peck to her neck before standing back and offering his elbow to escort her inside. "Anything to make you happy, my love." She gladly accepted - at a distance - and they stepped inside.

"What did you have to bribe Johnny with to get him to go into town in the surrey?" she asked with a knowing smile. "Will you be doing his ranch chores for a week?"

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and released her arm. "Actually, it was his idea," he said brightly. "I suspect Teresa's birthday next month may have something to do with it. He went in town the other day and came back completely baffled. Your opinion is desired, I'm guessing." His voice receded as he bound up the stairs to clean up.

"Shopping with Johnny Lancer? This should be interesting!"

Alexandra was ready to go in a few minutes, and pretended annoyance at having to wait. Her husband formally escorted her to the buggy and helped her up. Scott boarded and clucked at the horse, throwing his wife a loving grin, Alexandra snuggled close as soon as the buggy crossed under the now familiar arch that meant home.

The drive to the site would take the better half of an hour, and she planned on taking full advantage of the short time together. Her bouts of morning sickness had finally abated and she was starting to enjoy the feeling of new life growing inside of her. Scott was just as thrilled, and they spent their time talking about the future - their future.

The road to the site curved off the main road to the ranch about a quarter mile from the Lancer arch. In the past month or so, the turnoff had been etched deeper by frequent travel. What used to be a rarely used path was now quite visible due to the deliveries of construction material. Just a little way from the main road Alexandra noticed another grassy, overgrown wagon path that disappeared up a small valley.

"Where does that go?" she asked curiously. "You have never showed me that area."

"That's the trail to South Point. There's a nice view of the south pastures from there." He glanced at his wife with a sparkle in his eye. "In fact, since we've been working on our house, Johnny mentioned that he'd like to build on that site when the time came. He's never said anything like that before."

"Like what?" she asked, curious. Alexandra knew the brothers were close; she, herself, adored her brother-in-law, but knew that there was a lot about him he kept purposely close to vest. "Settling down?"

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"Exactly. I love my brother dearly, but he's got a bad habit of thinking he's not worth anyone's permanent attention."

"He acts so confident," she said, "but I think I know what you mean. He's really quite sensitive, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. When it comes to trust, he's come a long way. You've only known him a short while; three years ago when we first met, it was like pulling teeth to get any personal information from him. And then, you couldn't be sure if what he told you was true or not. He was - and still is - very good about showing you what he wants you to see and rarely anything more. Madrid is still there, but the Lancer part of him is who he is now."

Alexandra thought about that for a few minutes, fascinated by the conundrum that was Johnny Madrid Lancer. She'd only heard her husband's accounts of the Madrid part, and was happy not to have seen it herself, but the knowledge that it was there under the handsome young man's skin was intriguing. "Some young lady is going to be very lucky to have him," she said thoughtfully.

"He's been smitten before; they always left him for some reason or another, which didn't help his feelings of self-worth any. Once he believes he's worthy, there's going to be a line of willing candidates as far as the eye can see," Scott laughed.

"Like at the dance last week? Where did he take off to, anyway? One minute he was there, and the next he was - gone! And all those girls asking about him; I felt so silly saying I didn't know where he went!"

"That was the famous Johnny disappearing act," Scott said with a knowing air. "I told you we had to take turns keeping an eye on him. That's one of those chores you inherited when you married into the family."

They laughed together and she looked up to see the skeleton of their home rising from the horizon. Some of the workers could be seen moving around the frame like ants. When they were closer, the easily recognizable form of Johnny rounded the back of the site and waited, thumbs hitched on his ever present gun belt. The smell of a campfire touched their noses, and the workers began to drift out of sight to their noon meal.

"It's about time, I'm starvin'!" Johnny's greeting was punctuated by a teasing grin.

"Well, we'd best get eating then, shouldn't we?" Alexandra accepted Johnny's help from the buggy while Scott secured the horse.

"We can't have you wasting away to nothing in, oh, twenty minutes, now can we?" Scott jibed. "I swear, brother, I don't know where you put it all."

"Muscle, Boston, it's all muscle." Johnny took the basket and lifted the cloth to peek underneath. Alexandra swatted his hand playfully.

"Oh, so that's what you have between your ears," Scott commented instantly. "I was wondering what was in there."

"Very funny, now can we eat, please? I'll need all my energy to keep on my feet in town."

"Oh, you poor thing," Alexandra said, playing along. "Come on then." She took the dark haired brother's elbow and directed him to her and Scott's favorite picnic place. Johnny threw Scott a wide smile over his shoulder as they turned to go.

Scott shook his head at his brother's audacity but couldn't suppress his grin as he fell in behind the pair.

After lunch, the three of them quickly toured the site before loading the buggy. Scott pulled Alexandra in tight and kissed her tenderly.

"Uh, Scott, you're gonna disturb the men," Johnny teased.

Finishing the drawn out affection, the older Lancer stepped back and helped his wife into the buggy as he spoke. "Being the boss has it privileges, and kissing my wife whenever and wherever I want is one of them."

Johnny brightened. "Really? Well, since I'm one of the bosses, too, does that mean . . ."

"No!" Alexandra and Scott chorused together instantly.

Scott shook a finger at his grinning brother. "And I've told her to make sure you don't spend all your money on candy, young man."

Johnny picked up the reins and snorted. "Well, see if I share with you now. Come on, sis, let's go paint the town." He slapped the reins on the horse's rump and they moved off. Alexandra blew her husband a kiss as they disappeared down the road.

The happy woman settled down in her part of the seat and sighed.

"What?" Johnny said, giving her a glance. "You look too happy to be sighin' like that."

"I am happy. I hope you're this happy someday, Johnny."

He laughed shortly. "Me too. Gonna be a spell, though."

"Why? There are a lot of girls in town that are quite ready." She looked at him with a glow of mischief in her eyes. "You know, the ones that go to the dances. Oh, wait . . ." She put her hand on her lips as if she was thinking, then said in a teasing tone, "You were there last week, weren't you? Someone that looked like you rode with us to the dance, but then he disappeared!"

Johnny chuckled good-naturedly and then deftly changed the subject. "What I meant was that Scott's keepin' us pretty busy on the house. Gotta get ya in before the worst of winter, you know. That's the plan."

Alexandra let the subject change stand, and took Johnny's elbow with her hand. "Yes, that would be nice, and I can't wait. Scott told me about a site over there," she pointed off the road. "South Point, I think he called it. Can you take me there? I'd love to see it."

Johnny sat up straighter and his expression brightened. "Sure, we got time," he said. "It is a nice spot." He scanned the road ahead, looking for the faint indication of

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the turnoff in the dry, golden grass. Once in the narrow valley, the overgrown road to the South Point overlook was rutted from recent summer rains, rough but passable. He reined in the buggy just below the rim so they could walk to the top and see the valley slowly open below them. It was a trip Johnny had made often in the past three years, and he had a vision of what his home would look like when the time came.

Johnny wrapped the reins once around the buggy frame and hopped down.

"Oh, Johnny, this is just as beautiful as our spot. We're all so close, yet have our privacy. I can't even hear the hammering. It's wonderful!" As her brother-in-law reached to help her down, a motion at the rise caught her eye and she looked up.

Johnny saw her glance and heard the hoof beats at the same time. He released her, leaving her to stand in the buggy, and turned around. The fact that four riders topped the rise as he finished his turn didn't surprise him as much as who they were. Unconsciously, Johnny squared his feet and wiped any emotion from his face.

"Well, lookie who we found!" the lead rider said with a laugh that set Johnny's teeth on edge. The scruffy young man reined to a stop about twenty feet from Johnny and the buggy. The other three riders fanned out on either side.

"Hey, you know him, Taylor?" The boy on the end to Johnny's right nodded his head in Johnny's direction.

"Ain't you boys heard 'o Johnny Madrid?"

The other three stared at Johnny, astonished. Two were nervous, and Johnny recognized the third as the familiar cocky type of youth that always caused him trouble; the scar on his cheek was another indication. The youth's next comment confirmed his assessment.

"I've always wanted to face Johnny Madrid," he stated as intensely as he could. In Johnny's eyes, the boy just fell into ranks with the other over-confident, and now dead, challengers he'd met along the way of his life.

"You don't say," said Johnny flatly. He slowly moved to the rear of the buggy to get Alexandra out of the line of fire and flipped the safety loop from his gun.

"Whoa, there Johnny, that's not why we're here." Taylor laughed holding up his hands in mock surrender. He didn't look nervous but the pair at his side did.

"You're not callin' me out?" Johnny asked Taylor directly, his eyes slanted suspiciously.

"No, I'm not callin' ya out. We were up here for other reasons, but now that we've found ya, what are you up to?"

Johnny didn't change his deceptively relaxed pose. "Up to? What business is that of yours?"

"Now, Johnny, don't get so defensive." Taylor's voice was light, but there was something in his eyes that made the warning bells in Johnny's head ring crazily.

"Haven't seen ya down south for a while. We were just up here lookin' for some . . . work. Now, I know what you get paid for jobs, so maybe there's somethin' for us,

too." He sat slumped in his saddle but Johnny knew from experience there was more to this drifter than met the casual eye.

Alexandra's voice was very soft. "You know these men, Johnny?"

Johnny's eyes never left the men. "From a long time ago, yes."

Taylor raised his eyebrows and put a hand behind his ear. "What? Didn't hear ya."

"What do you want, Taylor?" Johnny drawled lazily, shifting his feet. To look at him, one would think he was relaxed and chatting with old friends, but Johnny's stance ensured a clean shot to each of the four if necessary.

"Well, we were up here lookin' for a cash source of our own, which we found just down this here hill." He tipped his head back the way they came.

Johnny's mind worked the route they must have taken from town. "Cattle rustlin'?" he said, figuring they'd come directly through the south quarter where Lancer cattle were currently grazing.

"Aw, a place this size won't miss a few head. It'll give us enough of a stake until we find the next job. Or we could throw in with y'all."

"I don't think so." The tone in Johnny's voice made the nervous pair glance at each other, and the cocky one on the opposite end laugh shortly. Johnny casually walked further behind the buggy, putting him closer to the nervous pair of riders.

Taylor only smiled the smile of a snake. "What did you say, Madrid?"

"I said, I don't think so. This is my land. I want you to get off of it. Now."

Then Taylor grunted and sat up straight, his hand moving slowly back to his own gun. "Is that how to treat an old friend, Johnny? Your land? Really? Well, then, that's lucky for me! It'll be like payback then, won't it?" The man's face suddenly went serious. "Remember when you put your gun against my side in Nogales? I lost a lot of money on that job."

"It's the nature of the business. Now get off my land."

Taylor laughed shortly, and it gave Johnny a chill. There was no mirth in the sound. Johnny had also noticed how the cocky youth on Taylor's left had settled his eyes on Alexandra; there was a hungry look fanning itself into a fire that Johnny did not like. In spite of Johnny's steely glare, the youth leaned over and said something lowly to Taylor.

Taylor's eyes flicked to the woman, then back to Johnny, a smug grin pulling on his mouth just before he spoke. His voice was low and threatening. "And I think we deserve some interest on that lost money, don't ya think?" His eyes sparked malevolently and Johnny's hopes for a peaceful settlement died.

The hungry-eyed youth was the first to pull leather; Johnny shot him off his horse and he was dead before he hit the ground. Taylor's horse spun in fright and the other two tangled together doing the same. Two more shots were fired from the melee and Johnny responded, sending one of the nervous pair to the ground with a bullet through his heart while the other retreated over the ridge.

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Johnny heard the squeak of the buggy and saw it move in his peripheral vision. A spared glance told him that Alexandra had gone for the reins and was trying to pull up the slack. When he refocused on the danger, Taylor had his horse under control and his gun leveled at Johnny. Johnny dove to one side; their shots were simultaneous and the world flashed into a calliope of stars.



It was quiet when he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Taylor lying face down in the dirt, but the sight swam and was peppered with shadowy spots. Johnny groaned at the pain in his head and rolled to his back before he realized he was on the ground himself.

What happened?

He touched the source of his pain - a slimy spot near his eye. It took a moment for his eyes to focus enough on his fingers to recognize blood. Then the events sprang back into his mind.

"Alexandra!" he yelled, ignoring the blast of pain it caused. He rolled to his hands and knees then struggled to his feet. His whirling vision and the slope of the hill dropped him to his hands and knees once more, but he again struggled to his feet and frantically looked around.

The buggy was upside down, the shafts shattered and one of the wheels a splintered wreck. Another wheel, broken and hanging loose, tipped lazily with a light puff of wind, the protesting squeak it uttered sounding too loud in the pressing quiet. Johnny had no idea how long he'd been out; the scene of destruction jerked him into awareness.

"No!" he cried, stumbling to the wreck. The horse was nowhere to be seen, more than likely heading for the Lancer barn. Johnny slipped on the uneven ground near the buggy and crawled the rest of the way to its side. He looked under it but didn't see anything. "Alexandra!" he yelled, fireworks going off in his head for the effort.

Pushing the pain aside he used the buggy's frame to get to his feet and keep them, leaning heavily on it as he made his way to the other side. She wasn't around the ruins. Sick with worry, he raised his pounding head and forced himself to focus. Slowly, he scanned the area.

His heart leaped to his throat when he saw the still form thrown clear of the wreck. Stumbling frantically, he made it to her side. She was lying mostly on her back, her hips twisted to one side and one arm thrown across her chest. Alexandra's face was ghostly white, her eyes shut. A trickle of blood ran from her temple. Kneeling, Johnny gently laid his palm against her cheek and felt warmth.

"Alexandra!" he called, the unfamiliar feelings of panic and despair rising in his chest. His fingers felt at her throat, but he couldn't stop the trembling of his hand long

enough to discern a pulse. The unbidden image of his mother came to his mind and he couldn't shake it. Along with the vision came the same feelings of a helpless, scared ten-year-old, and Johnny's vision swam with tears. "No!" he said hoarsely, working his way to her head until he was kneeling next to her. Gently, he placed her head on his knees. He carefully held her head between his hands and rocked back and forth.

"No, no, no. . ." he pleaded mournfully.

CHAPTER THREE

When the horse galloped under the Lancer arch, motions were already underway to find the errant buggy. Jelly had seen the horse as it topped the rise with long reins flying and torn harness flapping. When one ranch hand caught the frightened animal, three more - Cipriano at the lead - raced out to find Scott.

Jelly quickly hitched the wagon as Teresa threw medical supplies and blankets in the back. Murdoch saddled his horse and barked orders. "Ortiz! Come with me! I'll need you to ride for the doctor if need be. Walt! Help Teresa heat some water."

"But Murdoch," she protested, already half in the wagon. "I want to go!"

"I know, honey, but it's better if you stay here and prepare the place. What if it's a false alarm? We can still say we were visiting the building site. Having you along would be hard to explain. Besides, someone needs to be here to hold the fort. If we don't need the water for wounds, we'll use it for baths." He smiled, but uncertainty still hovered in his eyes.

Grudgingly, she agreed. If the horse had simply run off, she'd feel pretty silly if a parade of people came to find her. "All right," she said with a pout. "If it is a false alarm, someone's going to get an earful from me."

"Fair enough. See you soon, darling." Murdoch mounted and caught up with the wagon.



Scott was explaining a diagram and discussing the plans with one of the builders when Cipriano arrived at the site. The Segundo had seen Scott's lean form from a distance, and was surprised. He must not know anything about the horse, the Mexican realized. He also realized that Alexandra was not at his side and the buggy was not in sight. What happened? He slowed the group and approached at a more reasonable pace, considering his options on what to say.

The horses were blowing from the run when the three of them reined to a stop at the newly framed front door. Scott, a big smile on his face, stepped through the opening when he heard them. "Hey, Cip, what brings you . . ." he stopped cold when

he saw their confused faces, and his smile disappeared. "What? What is it?" he asked, his senses suddenly alert.

"Senor Scott, where's the buggy?" Cipriano tried to keep his voice light, but his eyes must have given him away.

"Johnny took Alexandra into town." His heart began to thump more strongly. "Why? What's the matter?"

"The horse, senor. It came home without them."

Scott instantly ran for the closest horse. "They may have gone by South Point first. Let's go." The bay leapt off immediately, feeling Scott's urgency.

Jelly's wagon was in view on the well-traveled road by the time Scott and the others came to the turnoff for South Point. Scott waved at them then started up the overgrown, curving path. Fresh buggy tracks were visible in the light dust on the road and Scott's apprehension mounted.

When they cleared the final curve to the point, the sight of the wrecked buggy took his breath away. Scott galloped towards it, spotting the kneeling figure of his brother a moment later. "Alexandra!" he yelled, pulling the horse up with a violent yank when he saw the flare of her dress against the grass. He jumped off before the horse was fully stopped and ran to his brother's side. "Oh, no!" he cried, his voice cracking.

Scott fell to his knees at her side, intent on her face. "Alex, honey, it's me!" He felt her cheek, and ran his hands down to her shoulders. "Alexandra!"

Johnny's rocking motion slowed. "She needs a doctor, Scott, we need to get her back to the ranch." His voice was raspy with despair and slightly slurred.

"What happened?" Scott demanded, checking for a pulse.

"The horses spooked at the guns," Johnny started to explain, wincing painfully.

"Guns?" Scott's head jerked up. He stared at his brother for a fleeting moment as his brain worked furiously. Johnny and guns. Then he scanned the horizon and saw three bodies near the crest of the ridge. Gunfight. "She was shot!?"

"No! Scott, no she wasn't!" Johnny went on to explain, obviously disoriented, but his brother heard none of it.

My wife was in the middle of a gunfight! was all Scott heard in his head. Anger and sorrow rose like bile in his throat and his vision narrowed down to a small point centered on Alexandra's face. Johnny's voice was merely background noise as he fought to keep his head.

Rumbling and low voices marked the arrival of Jelly and the wagon. Scott felt the presence of another across from him and glanced up to see Murdoch, but with his tumultuous thoughts he found he couldn't speak.

"Let's get her in the wagon." Murdoch's normally gruff voice was soft. "Scott? Let's get her home."

Scott realized that Johnny had moved alongside him to help with the move. The touch of his brother's arm triggered a flood of emotion and Scott recoiled at the power

of it. He latched on to the only coherent reasoning he could see at that second - the knowledge that Johnny's past had caused this. Scott snapped.

"Get away from her, just get away!" Anguished, Scott twisted aside and shoved his brother so hard that Johnny went sprawling. "This is your fault!"

"Scott, this isn't helping!" Murdoch barked. The other hands gathered to lift the injured woman.

Scott lurched to his feet and turned on Johnny, shaking an accusing finger at him. "Stay away from her, you understand? You've done enough!"

Johnny lay stunned, staring open mouthed at his brother. His vision still swam and the pain was fierce, but he managed to get to his feet. "Scott," he started, taking a wobbly step in his brother's direction, "you don't understand . . ."

When Johnny got close enough, Scott pushed him down again and then clenched his fists at his sides. "I said stay away! I mean it, Johnny!" He took a step closer to his downed brother with one arm cocked to strike him down again, but Cipriano and Murdoch were at his side in an instant, holding him back. The older Lancer brother, however, would not be calmed. He tried to shake them loose.

"Scott!" Murdoch barked. "This isn't helping! Get in the wagon with Alexandra! She needs you!"

Finally breaking off his murderous glare at Johnny, Scott brushed off the two men and stormed to the wagon. By the time he was settled by her head, his stiff frame had softened and he began to whisper to his wife and gently stroke her cheek.

With a sympathetic backward glance at Johnny from the wagon seat, Jelly snapped the reins and the wagon moved off.

"I sent Ortiz to get the doctor," Murdoch said quietly to Cipriano. "Get on back to the ranch and help get Alexandra into the house then come back and take these bodies to Val in town. We'll be along." The big man indicated Johnny with a tilt of his head. Cipriano nodded and motioned for the rest of the men to leave.

Johnny had begun to rise and Murdoch reached out to help him. Johnny slapped the helping hand aside. "Leave me be," he growled, stumbling for a moment to catch his balance.

"You're hurt," Murdoch said in a calm voice that belied the desire to demand answers. "Let me look." He reached out again, and his arm was pushed off again as if his son could read the real thoughts on his mind.

"I'm fine!" Johnny stood with his head bowed, one hand pressed against a bloody wound in his hair. He edged sideways to keep his balance. "I'm fine." His voice had dropped to a near whisper as he stared at the ground, dazed.

Johnny looked lost, and it wasn't a look that suited him. With this stance, Murdoch was thrown off guard and realized his own questions would have to wait. He swallowed hard, and forced himself to speak low and evenly. "Johnny, we need to get you home."

Murdoch kept his hands at his side, waiting patiently for his son's anger to ebb. After a few long seconds, he was shocked to see the sideways list in Johnny's stance was getting worse. He could also see the vacant, blank stare of the normally dancing blue eyes. He was the picture of complete devastation.

"Johnny," he said softly, reaching out for the young man's shoulders. This time Johnny didn't push him away, and instinctively, the sympathetic father pulled his son into a hug, surprised and grateful that it was allowed. Johnny's body seemed to melt in his arms.

Murdoch took advantage of the lull in his son's anger and quickly examined him. He uncovered a serious gouge along the side of Johnny's head. Immediately concerned, and now given something to focus on, Johnny's father insisted on dressing it with a piece torn from his shirt before departing South Point. Johnny sat quiet and listless, his eyes glassy and unfocused, as he was treated. Murdoch finally realized that Johnny was showing signs of shock.

Murdoch managed to get his strangely malleable son onto Scott's horse and then mounted his own sorrel. He kept the pace slow, alarmed at the way his son swayed in the saddle. Johnny didn't utter a sound all the way but stared fixedly at his mount's black crest. Neither did he acknowledge the hands that passed them on their way back to retrieve the rustlers' bodies.

A line of clouds rolling in made the dark descend early. Murdoch relaxed a bit when he saw the white Lancer arch, but still had to control his anxiety and his desire to charge ahead and see what was going on. As they crossed under the landmark the younger Lancer finally showed signs of animation by gripping the reins more tightly and finally raising his head to look at the house.

Nearly every window brightly glowed with lamp light against the falling darkness. Doc Jenkins' buggy was near the barn, his horse stabled. As they got closer, Murdoch noticed his son growing tense and his focus of anxiety shifted to the normally irrepressible son. Johnny was so rigid by the time they pulled up to the house hitching post Murdoch wasn't sure his son could move at all.

Although he felt pressured to get in the house, Murdoch moved slowly and kept a sharp eye on his son. Johnny showed no sign of moving, his eyes fixed on Scott's bedroom window. Murdoch reached his side and put a hand on either side of Johnny's leg. He tilted his face up and momentarily studied his son. "Johnny," he finally said softly, "let's go inside."

Eyes still locked on the window, Johnny whispered in a shaky voice, "It's a wake."

Murdoch's blood ran cold, and he fought the urge to pull his son from the saddle and into the warmth of the house. Instead, he kept his tone level. "We don't know that, son. Come on, get down."

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When Johnny turned and faced his father, Murdoch felt a surge of fear that made his heart race. He'd never seen that look on his son's face before, and it was frightening - deeply frightening.

Johnny's eyes were wide and haunted, his pupils huge and crowding the blue into a barely visible ring. His skin was waxy pale, the makeshift bandage dark against his skin. He stared at Murdoch without seeing him, his knuckles white from gripping the reins. There was a slight tremor in his hand. Johnny sat like that for many long seconds, then every ounce of life seemed to drain from him and he slowly crumpled into Murdoch's strong arms, his expressive eyes rolled back in his head.

The patriarch gathered up his son, his own soul aching, and made his way to the large front doors. He managed to get the door unlatched, and bumped it open with his shoulder. On his way to the stairs, he passed the great room entry. The occupants, Teresa, Jelly and the priest that had married Scott and Alexandra, were already on their feet at the sound of the massive front door opening.

Teresa gasped and ran to her brother-by-heart. "Johnny!" She just had time to touch his cheek as Murdoch swept by.

"Let's get him to his room," Murdoch said lowly. "Bring up some hot water and bandages, Teresa. Father, can you help her?"

The priest nodded and followed the girl.

"I knew the durn boy was hurt bad," Jelly sputtered, falling in behind the pair and stabilizing the larger man from behind. "This is a black day for Lancer, Murdoch, a black day, I say. I feel it in my bones."

Murdoch gave Scott and Alexandra's closed door a quick glance as he maneuvered Johnny into his room and onto his bed. Answers; the eldest Lancer needed answers to feel even slightly in control of this situation, and the only two that could give them were unable to do so. His thoughts turned to his daughter-in-law. As Murdoch removed his son's boots, he quietly asked, "How is she, Jelly?"

Jelly Hoskins wrung his hands and slowly shook his head as he worked on loosening Johnny's shirt. "Looks bad, boss. Scott insisted on helping Doc and Teresa's been scared to death. Doc 'n Scott've been in there for a while. Teresa said she only saw a scratch on Alexandra's temple, but she didn't move or make any kinda noise on the ride home. It's bad, Murdoch, I just know it."

"I wonder if Val will know those men," Murdoch said quietly. The two of them spoke about the sheriff as they worked to settle Johnny.

"He weren't in town. Doc said he was called to Spanish Wells to testify. Ortiz sent him a telegram."

Teresa hustled in as Jelly and Murdoch finished tucking in the injured Lancer. "Father Ben is in with Alexandra," Teresa said as she entered. She seemed relieved to have something to do, and began cleaning the deep gash with slightly trembling hands. "Murdoch, I can see bone. A lot of it. This is really deep." Teresa bit her lip as she worked. "Sam needs to look at this. He's going to need stitches at least." Her eyes

were wide with worry when she finally looked up at her guardian. “He hasn’t moved at all and I haven’t been that gentle.” Tears pooled in her eyes, threatening to overflow as she set her jaw to keep that from happening. “Is it true what Scott said to him, Murdoch? He told Johnny it was his fault?”

Suddenly feeling old and weary, Murdoch nodded mutely. Scott’s attack had been brutal, and based on hot emotion. After a moment, he said, “We don’t know what happened yet, Teresa. Johnny hasn’t said a word about it.” He hugged her and stroked her hair. “You and Jelly sit with him. I’m going to speak with Sam, all right?”

Teresa sniffed and wiped her eyes. Jelly pulled up a chair for her as he settled on the foot of the bed. With a final glance at his unconscious son, Murdoch left the room.



Murdoch knocked softly before opening the door and leaning in. The bed was bathed in lamplight and the figure of Alexandra, lying in the bed with her hair loose across the pillow, was breathtaking. She looked like a fine porcelain doll with a peaceful expression and closed eyes. The apples of her cheeks had a rose blush that accented the fine bone structure of her face, and her lashes, relaxed, dark crescents, fanned across the delicate skin under her eyes.

Scott sat on the far side, one hand holding hers and the other stroking the fine, wavy hairs from her pale forehead. His eyes, framed red from tears, were wide and dark with worry and locked on her face, searching for any sign of awareness. Father Ben sat off to one side, head bowed in prayer.

A movement from Sam Jenkins caught Murdoch’s attention as he stood next to him. The senior Lancer glanced over and noticed a stack of bloody sheets on the floor next to the doctor; he’d just added another to the pile.

“I need someone to remove these,” Sam said quietly, referring to the pile. His hand was under the sheet placing something near the woman’s stomach. Satisfied with the maneuver, Dr. Jenkins gathered the bloody cloths and nodded toward the door. Murdoch followed.

“Sam?” Murdoch asked as the doctor gave him the bloody linens.

“She’s lost the baby. That’s all I know for sure right now Murdoch.” He waited for his friend to collect himself then caught his attention. “I think she’s bleeding internally, both in her abdomen and up here.” Sam tapped his skull. “She’s lost too much blood to operate. She’s too weak. Her heart won’t settle down and her pulse is racy. It doesn’t look good, Murdoch.”

The patriarch nodded grimly, memories of Catherine flooding his mind. It took him a moment to catch his breath. “J . . . Johnny needs stitches, I think. He’s in his room when you have a moment.”

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“There’s not much I can do here right now. Scott?” There was no indication from the lean, worried young man that he’d heard. “I’ll be right back.”

They slipped into the hall and down to Johnny’s room.

“I think he’s coming around,” Teresa said jumping to her feet.

Jelly pulled off the temporary bandage to allow Sam to give Johnny a cursory inspection. The doctor sent Teresa to get his bag. Johnny’s head was rolling back and forth on the pillow as his mind began to engage again. Sam sat on the edge of the bed and held the young man’s head still to get a closer look and check his eyes. When Teresa returned with the bag, he pulled out his suture needle. “Boil this, please. And get those linens to Maria.”

Murdoch looked at the pile in his arms, surprised they were there. Teresa took them without comment and hustled from the room.

Johnny awoke with a start and sat up suddenly. What little color was in his face drained instantly, and he pressed his hand against his stomach.

Murdoch realized what was happening and grabbed the washbasin, getting it to Johnny’s lap just as he began to vomit. When he was finally finished he shakily pushed the bowl aside and Jelly took it from the room. Johnny groaned and leaned forward with his face in his hands, bracing his elbows against his bent knees.

“You have a concussion, young man, and a nasty one at that. You’re lucky your skull isn’t fractured. I need to stitch your head.” Sam dabbed at the oozing wound.

Murdoch circled around to the other side of the bed and sat, putting his arm around Johnny’s shoulders. “Johnny?” he said quietly, close to his son’s ear. “Did you hear Sam?”

For the tense seconds that followed, the worried father didn’t know which was worse – Johnny’s silence, or his increasingly ragged breathing. Murdoch’s anxiety raised a notch when his silent son began to rock; all the signs indicated an inevitable explosion.

Sam and Murdoch exchanged alarmed glances. “John?” Sam said lowly, putting his hand firmly on Johnny’s upper back. “You need to calm down.” The response was instant and explosive.

“Go away!” Johnny snapped, swinging his arms and forcing them both back. He threw off the sheet and shimmied to his feet, clad only in his favorite black pants adorned down the sides with silver. Murdoch moved around to his side, but Johnny backed toward the wall, breathing raggedly. The head wound began to bleed profusely again. Blood ran down the side of his face, trailing down his bare shoulders and chest. “Just leave me alone, will you?” he shouted. Murdoch tried to approach and Johnny took a swing at him, but the older man easily dodged it.

The wall stopped Johnny’s retreat. His head dropped, allowing blood to drip to the floor, and he panted heavily a few times before his breathing hitched and he began to tremble. He sank to his knees, face in hands, and the two men cautiously came to

his side. Weakly, he pushed them away, so Sam and Murdoch squatted down as close as they dared.

“John, I need to stitch you up.” Sam’s voice was calm and matter of fact as if the whole incident hadn’t happened and it was quite natural to be on the floor. The door opened and Teresa entered with a little gasp, Jelly right behind.

“Don’t look at me,” Johnny snarled. “Leave! Go away!”

Murdoch nodded at the two, indicating they should leave. Teresa handed over the needle, her eyes shiny. Jelly took her shoulders and led her out. Sam prepared the needle, and Johnny turned his sorrowful eyes on Murdoch. “You too,” he growled, his eyes flooded to near overflowing. “Go.”

“Johnny, I . . .”

“GET OUT!”

“It’s all right, Murdoch, I got him. You gonna let me do this, John?” Sam asked directly and none too gently.

Johnny nodded and dropped his chin again, his breathing shaky. “Just go, Murdoch. Please.” His voice was a raspy whisper.

Murdoch Lancer set his jaw and nodded, backing to the door. As he opened it to leave, he heard Sam speaking quietly to his son, preparing to close the wound. Johnny began to softly cry. Murdoch quietly stepped out and shut the door.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Alexandra Helena Salvadore Lancer was only with us a short while," Father Ben intoned in a voice as flat as the sky. "But it was long enough for us to know she was loved as much as she loved back. We will miss her here on Earth and are comforted in knowing we will see her again in heaven. May God rest her soul."

The overcast morning would burn off as the sun traveled to its apex. Unusual for the season, the gunmetal mantle of the sky was an appropriate backdrop to the event.

Alexandra had died three days before, shortly after Dr. Sam Jenkins' final stitch closed the wound on Johnny's scalp. The doctor only wished he could mend the Lancer hearts as easily.

Standing next to Teresa with his head bowed, the physician's thoughts drifted back over the past seventy-two hours.

Johnny had drifted in and out of consciousness that night and the doctor wasn't fully convinced it was entirely from the head wound. The depth of sorrow he'd seen while administering treatment still tore at his heart; the younger brother seemed to know Alexandra was not going to make it. After the stitches, Johnny had refused any comfort and stayed on the floor for the night.

Alexandra's life left her while her beloved husband sat at her side and Sam's fingers held her wrist. All the doctor had to say was, "I'm sorry." Scott's posture hadn't changed but his eyes lost all life in that instant. The older brother was instantly veiled in an invincible cloak of stone. He'd politely thanked the doctor and the priest, and then summarily excused them from the room and closed the sturdy door.

In the great room, Teresa had turned to her guardian and wept for the loss of her sister. Murdoch had simply held tight and let her cry, unable to offer verbal condolences beyond a ragged clearing of his throat. Sam was sure the patriarch couldn't have moved at that moment, either.

Maria had left the hacienda with a stifled sob, escorted home by Father Ben on his way back to the church. Maria had returned just before dawn and quietly began preparations that were necessary to keep the house going and to get ready for the

upcoming services. The small Mexican woman was the one to move the family out of its stupor; Teresa was first.

When the sun showed itself over the hills that morning, Teresa finally began to pitch in by simply following Maria's example. The young girl moved mechanically but her motions cascaded down the family. Murdoch unrooted from his den, and Jelly finally came out of the sanctity of his room.

The brothers, however, stayed in their rooms, one drifting between levels of awareness and the other between stages of grief.

Sam had stayed, resting, until late afternoon when Scott's door finally creaked open. The young man had aged years in a handful of hours and moved as if in a fog. Still, he'd recalled his Boston manners and thanked Sam again. Sam had tried to check Johnny once more before departing, but the boy wouldn't let him step in the room. The doctor left as father and elder son wearily discussed the next steps at the kitchen table. It was a conversation heavy in direction and lax in emotion. The physician had wondered when the breakdown would come for both of them.

Today - nearly three days later - the doctor found himself standing with the Lancers on his right -Teresa, then Murdoch, Scott and Jelly - and the Salvadores on his left - Eduardo, Alicia and son Thomas.

Behind them townsfolk and friends huddled as a substantial crowd, a testimony to the popularity of the family. Scanning the group, Sam finally spotted Johnny just before the graveside service began, standing alone and barely within hearing distance. The white bandage that swathed his wound was stark against the black of his hair and the ash colored sky.

Murdoch had already spoken about his concerns for his younger son when Sam had first arrived for the service. "He's barricaded himself in that room," Murdoch revealed in disgust. "And Scott doesn't seem to care."

"Scott's had a lot on his mind," Sam offered.

"I know that, Sam, but he's seen us trying to reason with Johnny through that damn door and hasn't said a thing."

"Johnny knows about the service?"

"Yes." Murdoch had the grace to look sheepish. "I finally yelled at him and demanded he open the door and come with us. He told me to go away. At least we know he's awake."

When the lone figure of the younger Lancer son had finally appeared at the service, Sam saw a look of relief cross the face of each family member as they noticed him. Except for Scott; he kept his eyes fixed forward, still deep within himself.

Sam realized the service was concluded when the crowd behind him began to move. Scott turned, and with Father Ben beside him, began thanking anyone that approached with condolences. The doctor watched Murdoch escort the Salvadores to a waiting carriage to drive them back to the hacienda. Alexandra's family had arrived

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late the night before and at least Murdoch had the presence of mind to realize they must be very tired both mentally and physically.

The doctor watched as Jelly broke from the crowd and made his way to the solitary figure by the lone oak. As the crowd cleared, a silent drama played out as the old man obviously tried to plead his case to have Johnny return with them. The white wrapped head simply kept bowed and slowly shook in a negative response. Jelly's body language showed agitation and the raised tone of his voice could be discerned, but nothing swayed the young man. Finally, the old ranch hand made his way back to his waiting horse and he left with a disgusted snort.

By the time the doctor mounted the step to his buggy, the only ones left at the site were Scott and Teresa. She stood next to her adopted sibling with her hand tucked in his elbow. The pair made a sorrowful picture with the gray sky behind them. The dark rectangle of freshly turned earth at their feet, strewn with cut flowers, was in stark contrast against gold summer grass weakly waving in the slight breeze. Even the green of the lone oak that topped the gentle slope seemed veiled in gray. In the tree's shadow, the dark figure of Johnny standing alone completed the mournful theme.

With a sad sigh, the doctor looked to the road to town and flicked the reins. He'd done all he could for the Lancer family at this point. He hoped with all his heart that they would be able to find their way back to being a family again.



"Are you ready, Scott?" Teresa's voice was compassionately tender. She studied his gaunt cheeks and shadowed eyes, and prayed that someday soon the brother-by-heart she knew would show himself again.

Several long seconds passed before his head finally fell wearily forward. "Yes," he said huskily with a glance at the sole buggy parked near the road.

"I'll get Johnny," she began, releasing his elbow as she turned to the single oak tree.

"No." Scott's voice was sharp.

Teresa stopped, her eyes wide in surprise. "We can't just leave him!"

"Then go get him. I'll walk back." He turned, and began to walk away.

"What?" Stunned, the young girl felt herself begin to unravel. While Scott slowly walked away from her, all the emotion she had managed to work around for the past days came to a head and she started to tremble. Teresa opened her mouth to speak, to lash out like Scott had done to Johnny, but the only thing that came out was a choked sob. She pressed her hand tightly against her mouth in an effort to get the numb focus back in the forefront that had allowed her to function since Alexandra was brought home.

The noise caused Scott to pause. Through her tear-blurred eyes, Teresa watched him turn, expecting to see anger in his eyes at the mention of Johnny. Instead, she saw the deep and familiar sorrow that had dwelled there for days.

The lean Lancer, whose frame in the past few days seemed slumped in defeat, studied her for a second with his gray-blue eyes. The wan smile he gave her did nothing to warm his gaze. When he spoke, she barely heard his fragile voice over the rustling grass and her pounding heart.

“I just can’t see him right now, honey. I just can’t.” There was a slight tremble to his hand as he took a step back and took Teresa’s hand in his. “I may be able to later, but I just can’t think about it now. I have too much to think about right now.” He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before releasing it, but was unable to hold the fragile smile. When he walked away the second time, Teresa felt her world shift inexorably into a place where there was no footing, no base. Looking for something to hold on to, she turned to the only other person here that had been an anchor in her life.

Johnny had moved down the slope and was now standing next to the flower-strewn grave, his head bowed in reverence. He didn’t acknowledge her arrival nor did she comment on his presence; she was still trying to keep from falling apart along with her world.

Teresa simply moved to his side and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. She could feel the heat of his body through the shirt he wore and automatically reached up with her other hand to feel his cheek. Rough stubble scratched the back of her fingers as she appraised him with a long look. The scrutiny allowed the young woman to focus on something other than her own sorrow.

Dark, dried blood spotted the wrapping around his head; it should have been changed long ago. She dropped her hand from his face to hold his elbow.

“Johnny, you have a fever,” she stated quietly, not daring to push.

“I figgered as much,” he mumbled.

“You need to eat.”

His chuckle was short and dry, his eyes still on Alexandra’s resting place. “I need a lot of things,” he replied hoarsely.

Teresa frowned. “Like what?”

He inclined his head in her direction and she caught an unusual brightness in his eye. “I’ve got some supplies with me. I’ll be at the building site. I figger it’s the one place Scott won’t be goin’ near for a while. Will you tell Murdoch for me?”

“What?” she blurted in anger. “You can’t go anywhere, Johnny Lancer! You’re sick! The stitches must be infected and Sam has to look at them!” She tightened her grip on his elbow and gave it a good shake in desperation. “You need to be with family!”

Johnny ducked his head again. His voice had a weary tone when he again spoke. “I know, *querida*, but I can’t change the circumstances.” He patted her hand, and then squeezed it comfortingly, just as his brother had done minutes before. “I’m

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not leavin'. I've been thinkin', and I can't leave. The site is closer than any of the line shacks if anyone wants to talk to me."

He turned his head to face uphill and whistled. Barranca trotted into view from where he had been ground tied, his golden head cocked aside to avoid the dragging reins. Johnny turned back to Teresa. "Go get the buggy and pick up Scott before he gets blisters." He disentangled his elbow from her hands as she began to protest again, but he finally quieted her with a kiss on the forehead.

The brief footing she found with her brother-by-heart crumbled beneath her. "You can't just go, Johnny," she pleaded one last time as he held her back at arm's length.

"I have to. See ya later; you know where I'll be."

Johnny wobbled obviously on his feet as he gathered Barranca's reins and mounted up. Once in the saddle, he quickly got the woozy sway under control and gave Teresa a crooked smile. With a cluck and a nudge, the palomino spun on his hindquarters and jogged back over the hill. She watched him until he disappeared, then turned to face the road where she could see Scott's tiny form in the distance.

She shook her head with an exasperated growl as the tears she'd tried to control ran warmly down her face. Teresa stomped her foot and angrily brushed the tears aside. After a moment, she sighed in resignation, and with that came a new determination to do something, anything, to bring her family together again. She lifted the hem of her skirt and began her trek to the waiting buggy, swearing to make the effort to fix this since no one else was making the effort.

Teresa knew she'd be working through grief and sorrow on all fronts, but the way she saw it, they all would heal faster with each other to lean on in the process.



When the Lancer ward pulled up next to the lean blond, he entered the buggy without a word and took the reins from Teresa without asking. She willingly gave them up. While he sat there driving the buggy with a disconnected air, she fought with her emotions. Scott was too deep into himself and his grief to engage in any conversation, so all she did was sit close, taking a bit of comfort in his presence.

Pulling up in front of the hacienda put an end to one of the more uncomfortable rides the young girl had ever experienced. Her new found determination to bring the only family she knew together brought forth a confounding mix of emotions that were impossible to put in any sort of order. She knew everyone was grieving, including herself, and she also knew that there was anger trying to come out as blame in both Murdoch and Scott. They hadn't said that, exactly, but where Johnny was concerned, it wasn't unexpected. Murdoch's angry edge was one clue. That's the reason Johnny's locked himself away, she thought. He's blaming himself, too.

Stopped in front of the hacienda, Scott climbed down and automatically turned to help Teresa from the buggy. Then he silently turned and wandered into the house, moving like an old man. She watched him, unable to make herself go into the house and see him in so much misery, afraid she would not be able to ever escape it. Instead, she led the horse and buggy to the barn.

Flying straw and angry grumbling greeted her when she reached the barn door. The hunched form of Jelly wielding a pitchfork in one of the stalls proved to be the source of the atmosphere. Teresa paused, wondering if she should disturb the tirade. When she turned to glance back at the house and weigh her options, the motion was noticed.

"Oh! Teresa, I didn't hear ya pull up." Clearly embarrassed, the old man put the pointy implement aside and vainly tried to brush the straw from his clothes as he approached her to take the horse. "Here. I'll do that. I gotta keep busy or I'll go plumb loco. Didja talk any sense into Johnny? Did he come home?"

"No," Teresa said softly. "He wouldn't listen." She went over the conversation with Johnny in her head and frowned. "He said he couldn't change the circumstances. Does that mean he's going to stay away until something changes? What has to change, Jelly? Do you know?"

The frustrated man spoke as he unhitched the horse from the buggy. "I don't have no idea what runnin' through that boy's noggin. The only circumstance I find in that house that needs changin' is Scott's sadness, and that's gonna be around awhile. Johnny prob'ly blames hisself for it. Boy's shoulders aren't broad enough to take all he puts on 'em."

Suddenly, something didn't match in the girl's mind between Johnny's attitude and Jelly's statement. Johnny seemed too calm, and she was sure it wasn't from his injury. "Jelly, do you know what, exactly, happened when . . . at South Point?"

"Nope. The boy's mouth's been shut tighter 'n widow Kelly's purse strings."

She shook her head of the horrible scenario her mind had made up this past week, the same scenario that had robbed her of sleep and made her stomach queasy. Not really sure she wanted to know what really happened, she wondered if it could be as bad as she imagined. Maybe that was the place to start her family healing - they all needed to know what happened and not guess anymore.

Someone needed to get the facts from Johnny to start this process, and her guardian would be her first choice at the moment. When she turned to go, Jelly spoke.

"I'm goin' out to the building site tomorrow an' takin the boy supplies. I did get him to say he needed 'em. Let Murdoch know if you see him and he cares."

"He cares, Jelly."

Jelly snorted again. "Funny way a showin' it by yellin' at him through the door then ignorin' him at the service."

She had to admit, the old man did have a point, but she knew Murdoch cared. And she was going to make sure he made it clear to his younger son. Johnny needed

to be home; was she the only one who realized they needed each other to get through this?



When Scott wandered into the hacienda he found his father staring into the dead embers of the massive fireplace, an empty crystal glass still in his hand. In an automatic motion, the younger Lancer made his way to the sofa and dropped onto it without comment. He, too, found his eyes drawn to the blackened remains, accepting the inanimate darkness as a reflection of how he felt. It was strangely comforting.

"I'll take the Salvadores to town tomorrow morning," Murdoch said quietly. "Unless you . . ."

"No," Scott replied quickly. "No, it's all right. You do it." He felt numb. The idea of having to do anything was beyond him; it was all he could do to make his feet take him from one place to another. A repeating loop of questions on how this all could have been avoided ran through his mind, coupled with the wondering of how he was going to go on.

Time ticked by in heavy silence. Murdoch eventually put the glass on the mantle and sat next to his son on the sofa.

"Son, you have to keep thinking you'll get through this." The big man's hand was surprisingly light on Scott's shoulder. He gave the younger man a reassuring squeeze. "It will get better."

"How?" Scott whispered, his voice growing stronger as he spoke. "How can it get better? Alexandra's gone and never coming back and everything here reminds me of that." He got his feet and began to pace, running his hand through his hair as he spoke. "She's still part of me and I can't accept she's gone. Part of me wants to place blame. Most of all, I feel empty. Just empty and dead." His voice shook with the final admittance. He stopped by the hearth and sagged against his elbows on the mantle.

Murdoch bowed his head, focusing on his hands in his lap. He knew exactly how his son felt, but it wouldn't help him one iota. Scott had to work through this on his own. Sadly, no one else could do it for him. "I know there's nothing anyone can do to make you feel better, son. All I can tell you is that you won't forget; you'll never forget. You'll just learn to live with it."

Scott's laugh was short and bitter. "How can I live with it when it's my fault?"

The senior Lancer looked up at that statement. "What?"

The younger man turned his hollow, hurting eyes to his father's and held them. "She - they - were my responsibility, so it's my fault. Don't you see that?" There was a charged pause. "It makes me wonder if I should have ever come out West."

Speechless at that jump of logic, Murdoch could only stare back. Scott straightened with a shaky breath, excused himself before his barely viable connections with composure fell apart, and fled to the sanctity of his room.

Shaken, the patriarch of Lancer moved to pour himself another drink. He mentally backtracked the conversation he just had to see how his distraught son had come to that particular conclusion of blame and what events that it could possibly foretell. His gut instinct was telling him that he might lose his son along with a daughter-in-law and grandchild, and the idea scared him.

His reverie was broken by the sound of someone entering the house. Swishing skirts and a delicate sigh told him it was Teresa, but he didn't have the energy to go and meet her. Murdoch looked up when she came immediately into the great room and found him. He managed a weak grin that faded quickly and then dropped his head to sip his scotch. Teresa had stopped in front of the desk where he sat. He could feel her eyes on him.

"Murdoch, we have to talk. About Johnny."

He looked up, surprised. Scott had been the focus up to this point. "Johnny?"

"Yes. Johnny. Are you angry with him?"

"Angry?" He tiredly wiped his face with his big hand and leaned back in his leather chair. It wasn't an easy feat to switch mental tracks right now.

"Well, you've been yelling at him all week, so I thought you were angry."

"I was yelling at him because he wouldn't open the door. I was . . . concerned, and yes, I'll admit, probably a little angry." He glanced up to see her cock an eyebrow at him. "All right, I was probably a lot angry. Scott's having a rough time - we all are - and he locked himself away."

"Do you blame him for what happened to Alexandra?"

He let out an explosive breath. "I don't know what happened to her! That's just it!" Realizing he was shouting, Murdoch took a moment to collect himself. Teresa hadn't budged. "You know how trouble finds him. I assume that's what happened this time!"

"We've all assumed a lot, Murdoch," Teresa said quietly. "But only one of us knows what really happened. Johnny told me he's staying at the building site because he can't change the circumstances here."

That got Murdoch's attention. "He's what?" The big man pushed himself to his feet. "He can't stay out there! He needs to be here! What 'circumstances' is he talking about?"

Teresa shrugged. "I was hoping you knew. And since you don't, shouldn't you go find out what he means?"

"I'm not going anywhere tonight. We've just buried Scott's wife and her family is here. We need to be together right now."

"I know. That's why Johnny should be here, too."

The young woman in front of him spoke in an even tone, poised in both speech and posture. Murdoch realized with her presence and calm attitude, he felt himself growing calm. "I . . . I guess you're right."

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

"Then you need to talk to him. Tomorrow, after the Salvadores are gone. The only way we can help Scott - all of us - is to get over the anger and concentrate on healing." Her poise finally showed a fine crack as her eyes began to shine with threatening tears and her fingers began to toy with a pleat in her skirt. "I won't let this family come apart at the seams, Murdoch. It's all the family I have."

Murdoch Lancer's heart could not take anymore. Moving swiftly for his size, he stepped around the desk and gathered the girl in his arms where she softly cried.



"Next stop, Salt Lake City, Utah!"

The conductor's announcement jerked the dozing man into awareness. Quickly, he adjusted his coat and smoothed his hair. The money for the first class accommodations was well spent; he had been quite comfortable so far. With each trip west he learned a bit more, making the trip less painful each time. He hoped that someday he wouldn't have to make any more trips to the despised state of California.

It had been four days since he'd received the wire about Alexandra's death. He remembered smiling when he'd read the missive, his instincts stirring awake. When he sent an answering wire with his expected condolences, he'd sent out two more: One of sympathy to the Salvadores and a second to the San Francisco Pinkerton office. If his instincts were right, Harlan Garrett smelled an opportunity. He was on the first available train west that very night.

When he reached Chicago, a wire was waiting for him. Details were beginning to emerge. The fateful buggy accident had taken place during some sort of gun battle, and – not surprisingly – the half-breed Madrid had been right in the middle of it. Garrett requested a detective sniff around Morro Coyo for more details, but advised avoiding the sheriff as he was a friend of the Lancers. He'd advised the agency to follow the gossip.

"Mr. Garrett?" The smartly dressed conductor stood at attention next to the old man.

"Yes?"

"Telegram, sir." An envelope was offered, and Garrett took it with a nod and a tip.

He opened the envelope. Sipping his wine as he read the note, Garrett smiled in satisfaction. This is getting better and better, he thought as he mulled over the words. It seemed that there was a hint of Lancer family turmoil brewing – details to follow. He couldn't help but feel confident that a fortuitous opportunity would open for him when he met the Pinks in San Francisco. And, to date, seized opportunities are what had gotten him everything he ever wanted.

This time, he hoped his fortune would be no different.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The grizzled old man pulled back on the reins and brought the sturdy wagon to a rough stop. There was no sign of movement around the building site but he could smell the remains of a fire.

“Johnny?” Jelly hollered. There was no response, and he snorted with a half grin as he mumbled to himself, “Whall, if’n there ain’t no one here, there ain’t no one to flap their jaws ‘bout me movin’ in.” He secured the horse and grabbed the logical first thing to unload – the coffee pot and coffee makings.

As he swaggered to the site and through the framed doorway, Jelly searched the area with his eyes. The rock fireplace was one of the first things built, designed to stand in the center of a large living area. The chimney stood fast against a sky turning blue with the dawn. The wooden framing, like human ribs surrounding it, already made the stone structure the heart of the future home. Jelly saw the charred remains of a small fire within the firebox at the same time he saw a lump of blankets on the floor, snuggled up to the hearth. A swatch of dark hair and a glimpse of dirty white bandages could be seen protruding from one end of the blankets.

Jelly frowned. “Johnny?” He approached slowly to avoid startling the normally volatile young man, but his heart began to pound a little harder the closer he got. The younger Lancer son would never allow anyone to sneak up on him. “Johnny,” he said a little louder, setting the coffee items on the raised hearth with a clang. The form in the blankets jerked with the sharp noise but still didn’t answer.

Carefully, the older man knelt by Johnny’s side. “Johnny!” He reached out and shook the bulge he assumed would be a shoulder and was rewarded with a groan. “Hey, boy, wake up, will ya? You’re a beginnin’ to worry me.” Jelly pulled the blanket away from Johnny’s face and automatically reached to feel an unshaven, hollow cheek. “I knew it! You’ve gone an’ made yourself worse off. It’s a good thing I came out here.”

Johnny weakly rolled onto his back, his right hand automatically groping at his side as his lids twitched. Snatches of blue flashed as Johnny fought to keep his eyes open. “Jelly?” he croaked.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

“Yeah, it’s me, you fool. Stay here while I git some cool water. Yer burnin’ up.”

“Go ‘way. I wanna sleep.” Johnny’s hand still searched for his weapon in an uncontrolled manner. It was so far from his usual grace and coordination that Jelly’s concern raised several notches at once.

“Then do that while I git things together.” Johnny’s friend hustled to retrieve water and the medical supplies, and then he started a fire and put on a pot of water. “Well, there must be ice freezin’ somewheres below, ‘cause for once you’re stayin’ put instead of runnin’ off.” Jelly’s chatter showed his nervous concern as he prepared to check the young man’s wound. “You’re stuck with me for a bit, Johnny, so you may as well git used to it.”

By the time he’d arranged the things he needed by the prone man’s head, Johnny had grown still again. Jelly pulled the blanket down to Johnny’s waist and gently patted a rough cheek. “Johnny, you with me?” A soft groan was followed by a weak hand trying to push him away. “I’m unwrapping your head. This here bandage ain’t fit to rub down a pig.”

Johnny’s lids fluttered again, and dull, blue eyes searched for the source of the nuisance. “Go ‘way.”

Jelly ignored him and began removing the bandage. It had become loose, and should have been easy to remove except that a nasty discharge from the center of the long wound had adhered the wrappings to his head. Jelly clucked in dismay. “I knew it. Infected. I think ol’ Dewdrop’s got more brains ‘n you, boy. Good thing I mixed up what I need for a poultice. Just gotta add water.”

“Jelly, leave me alone, will ya? That hurts.” Johnny began to wiggle in an effort to sit up, but was unsuccessful until his friend helped him. Soon, he was leaning back against the raised hearth with an extra blanket tucked behind him to soften the stones against his spine. He swayed as he sat. “Ooo, I don’t feel so good,” he admitted weakly.

The old man snorted disgustedly as he started to clean the crusty wound. “Well, I ain’t surprised. You eat last night? Or yesterday?”

Unable to decide if he should rub his rolling stomach or throbbing head, Johnny’s wandering hand was slapped down by Jelly, making the decision for him. He crossed his arms across his abdomen. The glazed blue eyes blinked, and then he frowned. “What?” he asked, obviously dazed.

“Good thing I came out here. Squirrels could outfox you right now, you know that?”

Johnny looked more confused. “Squirrels?”

“Johnny Lancer, you got a fever hottern’ that fire and you look like a scarecrow. Now hold still, will ya?”

The admonishment either did the trick, or Johnny simply wasn’t aware enough to fight anymore. He sat still and let his eyes close. His chin dropped to his chest.

After being so belligerent for the past few days, the stillness was unnerving, but Jelly took advantage of the situation. He managed to apply a poultice secured with a clean, temporary bandage. As it did its work, he started coffee and managed to shave off four days' worth of growth from Johnny's cheeks. The result made the young man's face look paler and even more gaunt than before.

"I should make ya drink some o' that willow bark tea for the fever, but consider it a reward for bein' so cooperative that you're gettin' coffee." Jelly made sure Johnny's eyes were open before he pressed a warm cup of the brew in his friend's hands. A little life sparked in the indigo eyes. Shakily, Johnny raised the cup to his lips. "I'll start some real food now, then we'll wrap ya up again."

Before the cool of the dawn gave way to the heat of the day, Johnny was fed, re-bandaged, and moved to a shady part of the site on the back side of the fireplace. His protests were summarily ignored as he seemed to be hovering in a fever induced woozy world that made him fairly easy to handle. As long as his gun was near, he was satisfied to keep still.

A little before noon, Murdoch arrived on his sturdy horse, looking tired. Jelly motioned for him to keep quiet and whispered that his son was asleep. The eldest Lancer stiffly dismounted, the effects of the past days wearing heavily on his frame. Jelly stood between him and the site, arms crossed over his chest. Murdoch leaned against his horse for a moment to loosen his legs as he eyed the protective stance of the old man. "What do you think I'm going to do? Physically knock some sense into him?"

"I wouldn't put it past ya, seein' how everyone has been the last coupla days," Jelly snapped. Then his voice softened substantially. "The Salvadores get on the train all right?"

"Yes. I took them to the coach station myself this morning. Scott wasn't . . ." he hesitated, unable to continue.

"I know what ya mean, Murdoch. Scott's been in a bad way."

All Murdoch could do was nod. "I was going to have Teresa keep an eye on him but I guess he took off just before I did to ride the fence line. That's what he told Cipriano, anyway."

Jelly's weathered brow furrowed. "It's like they've switched places, Scott takin' off and Johnny sittin' fast."

Murdoch arched his eyebrows and nodded. "You're right. It's just like that." He paused and stood still, unwilling to force the old ranch hand aside. "Scott worries me, Jelly, but so does Johnny right now." Jelly finally relaxed his stance, relief clear in his eyes, and the Lancer boss tipped his head toward the house. "So, how is he? Has he said anything about what happened?"

Jelly shook his head and fell in beside his employer and friend as Murdoch tied his horse to the back of the wagon. "He's not too good right now, boss. The cut's infected and he's got a fever."

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

They walked through the framed door together. Murdoch's eyes wandered over the naked building as he spoke. "He's probably had a fever for days. He hasn't eaten either, as far as I know."

"He has now. I forced some eggs and ham into him and managed to get water down his throat."

The pair quietly rounded the hearth. Johnny was in the shadow of the chimney, curled up on his left side. His right hand rested on his gun, which was lying on the floor in front of him. Jelly saw Murdoch's jaw tighten at the sight of his younger son, worry sharp in his eyes. They watched the sleeping young man for several long moments.

"I need to know what happened, Jelly," Murdoch finally said softly. "I've placed my anger and blame on Johnny because it's just the easiest thing to do. And he doesn't make it easy not to."

Jelly snorted. "That's for sure."

Murdoch tiredly rubbed his forehead. "Old habits, I guess. But I've learned a thing or two in the past three years about my sons. I think something else is going on here, Jelly, and I aim to find out what it is. Three years ago - hell, even one year ago - Johnny would have run much further away and been a lot angrier. He doesn't just . . . take it like this. Something happened in the time he was locked away in his room. Something's different this time."

Jelly nodded. "I think ya nailed it right on the head, boss. The boy's much too quiet."

They watched the reclined figure for a minute or so then the towering patriarch turned away. "I'll help you unload the wagon. I intend to stay until I find out what happened, both at South Point and in his room."

"Does Teresa know that?"

Murdoch nodded as they began to unload supplies. "Not only does she know it, she's the one that insisted I come out here. Practically threw me out of the house. I tell you, that girl's got the will of her father twice over. Paul would be proud."

Jelly grunted agreement. "That an' sense, too. 'Bout time ya noticed it."

The patriarch had the decency to duck his head and grin crookedly. "I know. It's difficult to accept that she's almost a grown woman."

"Almost?" Jelly laughed. "Boss, you gotta open your eyeballs some more!"



It was on the long side of dusk when Scott returned to the estancia. His hours in the saddle and on the fence line did little to ease his mind, and he welcomed the physical fatigue. Hopefully, his sleep would be dreamless.

Stretching his aching muscles, he had to grin at the abuse. It seemed fitting somehow, a punishment for failing his responsibilities and poor choices. With a quiet word, he led his tired horse to the barn and began rubbing him down.

As he groomed the grateful animal, a glance around the barn showed the weary man a pair of empty stalls. Scott's mind drifted into unwanted territory as memories of his brother flashed into his mind - every one of them showing the darker Lancer with gun in hand. Feeling the anger rise in his veins, Scott ground his teeth together and made himself concentrate on Charlie. Brushing harder, he fought to bring the face of his wife into his inner eye.

It worked for a while, and he managed to get his muscles to relax a bit and finish the job. Finally, he threw down some hay and dumped some oats, and headed to the house.

It was dark when he crossed the yard. Glittering stars shimmered in the black sky, and a new moon hung low in the east. The hacienda was enveloped in shadow, its white walls rising from the void like some sort of guardian of the night.

The only light came from the kitchen, which the tired man only noticed when he pushed the door open. His mind gratefully quiet, Scott allowed his nose to lead the way to the kitchen where he saw that Maria and Teresa were working at the stove, their backs to him.

"Where's Murdoch?" he inquired curiously. His own voice sounded strange to his ears, and apparently it was the same for the women. Both of them jumped at his words.

"Scott!" Teresa yelped, pressing her hand to her heart. "I didn't realize you were there!" She gave him a quick glance and half smile before returning to the stove, her hands busy. "Murdoch went to see Johnny. I don't think he's going to be back tonight."

At the mention of his brother's name, the quiet of Scott's mind was disrupted. In a flash, he saw gunfire and his wife's blood on the sheets of the bed upstairs. He grabbed the back of a tall chair to steady himself and swallowed the bile he felt rising in his throat.

Teresa turned from the stove with a plate full of food. She stopped short at Scott's expression, her face suddenly alarmed. "Are you all right?"

It took several moments for him to rein in the emotions. In the meantime, he released the chair and stiffly stood straight. Through clenched teeth, he responded. "I'm fine. I'll wash up." Before the young girl could inquire further, he turned and withdrew up the stairs.

Scott paused at his room, hand on doorknob, but found he couldn't enter. The near blinding anger and remorse he felt before abated quickly as he stepped away from the door. Turning on his heel, he made his way to his father's room to clean up, completely ignoring Johnny's door.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

After cleaning himself up and finally regaining some composure, Scott made his way down the hall. He needed a clean shirt. The door to his room seemed more massive than he recalled as he reached for the door knob.

The room had been cleaned, but other than that everything was in place. It was what was left of his life, and he couldn't bear to look at it. Scott ducked his head and pulled a shirt from the drawer, quickly changing while studying the floor. Other than a small rug Alexandra had purchased in San Francisco lying by the window, the floor was the only thing that did not show her touch, and he was able to dress without her face crossing his mind.

When he returned to the dining area, Maria had disappeared, and two places were set at the table. Automatically, Scott pulled out Teresa's chair for her and she sat, her face neutral. He moved to his place across from her and settled in. The empty chair to his left seemed larger than the rest.

"Scott."

His head jerked up at the sound of his name. Teresa was watching him. "Yes?" he replied, picking up his knife and fork and turning his attention to his plate.

"Your grandfather comes tomorrow, you know."

The blond head jerked up. "Grandfather?" He managed to collect himself. "Oh. Yes. I'd forgotten about him."

Teresa laughed shortly, but it wasn't with humor. She turned her eyes to her plate and said bitterly, "I wish I could." Instantly, her knife paused in the air over the small steak on her plate. Then, slowly, she lowered the utensils to the table, thick tension between them. She pressed her lips into a line, realizing she'd rudely and insensitively crossed a line. Disappointed in herself, she sighed and raised her head. "I'm sorry, Scott," she said softly. "That was completely uncalled for."

Their eyes met from across the table for a moment then she continued to speak. "I know you're hurting, we all are. It's just that I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Of losing the only family I know. Don't you see that we all need each other to get through this? I don't know what you're thinking, Scott, I can't read your mind. You're so angry."

He slammed his silverware on the table. "Yes, I'm angry! My child was murdered and I've just buried my wife!" Teresa froze, and instantly dropped her eyes to her plate. Scott, realizing how awful he sounded, let out a breath and pulled his hands to his lap where he studied them until he could control himself once again. His voice was even and ragged when he spoke again. "It's my turn to apologize. I'm sorry."

She didn't say anything for several moments. The obviously shaken girl twisted her napkin in her lap nervously, but when she finally spoke again, her voice was strong and level. "May I ask who it is you're mad at?"

"Johnny. Myself. This place." He leaned back in the chair and ran both hands through his hair before dropping them in his lap again. Feeling drained, Scott looked up to see Teresa's brown eyes studying him, puzzled.

"What do you mean, 'this place'?" she asked. "Lancer?"

At that moment, it was clear to him what he meant, and the realization made him pause. Blond eyebrows knitted together as he put the pieces of the emotional puzzle together. "No, the West in general. I'm guilty of making the decision to stay here, which, in turn, brought Alexandra here to her death. This is wild country, Teresa, Murdoch told me that the first day I came here. I guess I'm finally seeing what he meant."

"So you're taking it out on Johnny?"

"Johnny is the embodiment of the West, don't you see? This country made him; they are one in the same. Johnny Madrid is the West."

Teresa sat up straighter. "He's not Madrid anymore, and you know it. You don't even know if Madrid had anything to do with this! Before you go making any judgments, don't you think you'd better get your facts in order? What if you find out that it would have ended up just the same if you were there instead of Johnny? And if that's the case, can you find it in your heart to forgive him? That's what I need to know, Scott, because I know it's the only way we can all heal."

The troubled young man turned that idea over in his mind. Would it make a difference? He doubted it, but now there was a niggling in his mind to find out what really did happen that day. His sister-by-heart was right; he needed the truth that facts would give him. His hand wiped dryly across his face as something else she'd said struck home. "You're right. I need to talk to Johnny. But don't you see that it isn't Johnny I'll have to forgive? It's me. I'll have to forgive myself for making the decision to stay out here, and I'm not sure I can do that."

Alarmed, Teresa's eyes grew big and she leaned forward, her hands flat on the table flanking her plate. In a heartbeat, her expression changed to one of pure determination. "I'm going to tell you the same thing I told your brother. You need to be with your family, and your family is here at Lancer."

Scott said nothing, but he felt his heart soften for the first time in a week.



Sleeping under the stars had a certain appeal, but as Murdoch Lancer shifted once again to get comfortable on the wood floor he wondered when, exactly, he had become soft. I worked long and hard to be able to sleep in a bed every night, he mused grumpily to himself. The sound of Jelly's snoring didn't help him to appreciate the moment, but when he looked over to the unmoving form of his son nearby a feeling of contentment came over him. But if it takes sleeping on a hard, wood floor to help my sons, it's worth the pain.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

He rolled onto his back and turned his eyes skyward in an effort to ignore his aches and pains. Finally, after watching the wide belt of the Milky Way rotate lazily in the sky and listening to the soft night noises surrounding him, the elder Lancer fell into a restful asleep.

Something woke him with a jerk when the sliver of moon was starting its descent into the west. Still on his back, Murdoch lifted his head and turned it toward Johnny. He saw that his son was sitting up, leaning back on one arm. The other hand pressed against his head wound.

“You all right, son?” Murdoch queried softly, trying not to startle him. Johnny’s eyes turned to him, shiny in the darkness.

“Murdoch?”

“Yes, it’s me. How are you?” The big man sat up with a groan, and Johnny chuckled.

“Bettern’ you, I think.” Johnny glanced in the direction of the snoring Jelly. “I guess he’s doin’ all right. How long . . .?” He let the sentence hang as he frowned, trying to remember anything of the past hours.

“I’ve been here since about noon. You’ve . . . this is your second night here. I guess your fever’s broken?” Murdoch scooted over and reached out to feel his son’s cheek. It was prickly with new hair growth and significantly cooler to the touch.

“Guess so, but the headache’s still there.” He glanced at the sky. “It’ll be dawn in a couple of hours.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty close.” Murdoch dragged his blankets over next to his son, and they both sat with their backs to the raised hearth and looked at the stars. After a little while, Johnny broke the silence in a soft voice.

"I can't fix it, Murdoch. There's absolutely nothing I can do. There's no one to hunt down, no one to blame." Murdoch glanced at Johnny’s profile. Weariness hung on the young man's features like a second skin.

“Johnny,” Murdoch said. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Silence dragged out for what seemed like an eternity but the older man patiently kept quiet and waited. Seeming to concentrate on his interlaced fingers, Murdoch figured his son was gathering his thoughts and working to push aside the emotion before he spoke. Then, finally, he told the story. As every action was related the patriarch had to marvel at his son’s eye for detail in an event that must have only lasted a mere few seconds.

Johnny told everything up to seeing the muzzle flash of Taylor’s handgun before he paused, swallowing hard. Then, instead of telling of finding Alexandra, he summed up his thoughts, his voice shaky for the first few words as he fought to suppress the emotion.

“Murdoch, Madrid had nothing to do with it. Things woulda been about the same even if Scott was there. Maybe worse.”

"You acted like a rancher protecting what he loved, Johnny, not a gunfighter," Murdoch agreed. "There is a difference."

After a moment, Johnny rose to his feet and walked the length of the wooden structure. Murdoch rose stiffly and followed him. Johnny walked to the very edge of the porch, which extended out over the downhill slope of the hill on stilt-like columns, giving this side of the house a stunning view of the valley. At this moment the land looked like textured dark velvet, the hint of color suggested by the weak light of the setting moon. The drop to the ground was a good ten feet, and it made the older man nervous the way his son hung his toes over the edge when he finally stopped. Murdoch stopped just short of the edge, stifling the urge to pull Johnny away from the precipice. Instead, he closely watched his son's face.

Johnny wrapped his arms around his chest and dipped his head with a shadowy smile. A short laugh escaped him, but his sorrowful blue eyes held only pain in the darkness. "I did what I had to do. It still doesn't make it better."

"I know. Sometimes that's the way it is. Scott's not exactly blaming you, Johnny, I think he blames himself."

Johnny's head cocked sideways. His eyes were slanted with confusion. "What's he got to blame himself for?" The words were barely out when his mouth clamped shut. Through clenched teeth he said lowly, "Me. He's questioning accepting me. He's realizin' the consequences."

Guiltily, Murdoch knew the same thought had been in his own mind. But, recalling Scott's outburst, another had occurred to him.

"I don't think that's it." Murdoch kept his face neutral as he thought back on the three years they had together. In all that time, there had been one other opinion that was a constant. Scott usually brushed it off – but not any longer. "Johnny, Scott is questioning his decision to stay in the West in general. It has killed his mother, his wife and his child. That's a lot to carry, I know." The timbre of his voice was brittle with the last statement.

Johnny nodded slowly. "So, even if he knew Madrid had nothing to do with it, that it was something that just happened, it may not help. It comes down to livin' with the law of the big dog compared to civilized Boston."

"Perhaps."

The lean ex-gunfighter didn't move for a long time, his arms wrapped around his body in a protective stance with his head bowed forward. His unruly hair flickered in the light wind, caressing the white bandage in a stubborn show of independence from the binding.

"I miss her." Johnny's voice was barely a whisper.

Murdoch felt his heart begin to crumble once again at the thought of his beautiful, engaging daughter-in-law, and at the loss of a grandchild. It took many moments to get enough control to speak. "I do too, son."

They both took time to gather thoughts and composure.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

"This place," Johnny finally started again, unlocking his arms and sweeping them to take in the entirety of the velvet valley below, "this place gets to you. It gets into your blood and under your skin." Johnny swayed slightly, still perched on the edge of the framework as he made the motion. "It's infected me, Murdoch, and I can't beat it. I can't leave." His arms dropped heavily to his side with a resigned sigh. He studied his toes for a moment, still curled over the edge of the wooden foundation, before stepping back.

Inwardly, Murdoch heaved a relieved sigh and relaxed. "Yes," he admitted in a near whisper. "It does that."

In response, Johnny turned to face his father, his eyes shining and his shoulders slumped as if defeated. "Scott has another place to make a life. I don't. But if he goes, I need to know if I'm the reason. I need to look him in the eyes when he makes his decision to stay or go. He's got space now to decide. He needs to find me when he wants to hear what I have to say. Do you understand that?"

Murdoch nodded. "Yes, yes I do. And you did the right thing at South Point, Johnny."

Shadows enveloped the younger Lancer's face as he turned aside and dropped his head. "I know. It's taken me days to realize that. Things are bad now, Murdoch, but it'll be worse if he leaves. We'll all lose"

Lips compressed in a tight line, Murdoch fought his initial words of confidence that Scott would come around. Johnny was right, he realized. Even in light of Johnny doing the right thing, they could all still lose. It was entirely up to Scott. Could he live with the consequences of his original decision to stay here? "Maybe he won't go, Johnny. Scott's resiliency is only second to his determination. And then there's Teresa."

Johnny glanced up at his father, clearly turning the last comment over in his mind.

Murdoch grinned at his son's expression, and he gently placed a hand on his shoulder, giving it a little shake. "Who do you think told me what to do when I came out here? And what to say? And got me out of the house faster than I thought possible? She's at the house with Scott now. He doesn't have a chance." His eyes sparkled with humor.

Johnny's dark blues flashed with life for the first time in days, clearly visible even in the darkness. His smile was small but engaged all his features. "I think I know what ya mean. My little sister can be a force to reckon with."

The hint of day was just edging the eastern mountains in gold. Tiredly rubbing his cheeks with his hands, Murdoch winced at a particularly loud guttural snort that came from the direction of Jelly's bedroll. "Speaking of forces, we better roll him over before he topples the chimney. And you need more rest, son."

Johnny chuckled and turned back to the hearth, his weak legs not allowing him to walk a straight line. Murdoch automatically placed his large hand on his son's

broad back for support and guidance in a smooth movement that had finally become natural with the passing years.

CHAPTER SIX

Dawn had long burned itself out by the time the Lancers rose, managing to get a few hours of sleep. Jelly muttered and clanked pans as he organized breakfast for father and son. Johnny managed to eat enough to keep the handyman from fussing and Murdoch was taking a few extra minutes to savor the concoction labeled coffee.

After the meal, Johnny admitted – with Jelly’s insistent nagging – to still be dealing with headache and fever and wandered into the brush to relieve himself. Murdoch, meanwhile, gathered his things and prepared to return to the ranch.

After answering the call of nature, the sick man checked on his palomino. Johnny cursed his wobbly legs one more time as he grabbed Barranca’s mane to steady himself. He glanced up to see if he’d been noticed and came face to face with the towering form of his father. Murdoch stood a short distance away with his hands on his hips and a look of disapproval on his face.

“I’m not too crazy about the idea of leaving you out here, you know,” he said in a very fatherly tone.

“I won’t be alone. I got Jelly here.”

Murdoch’s amused snort stopped the sentence. “You and I both know you’ll do what you want, even with Jelly around. You have to promise me, Johnny, that you’ll take a day to gather your strength. The fever’s not completely gone, but I think the poultice will take care of that if you’ll only stay still.”

“Yeah, I know, I know.” He released the silver mane and stood squarely on his feet, but decided not to take a chance on moving while under Murdoch’s glare. Johnny’s head still felt like it was tilting a bit to one side.

“I’d rather you came home with me, but I understand your decision. When Scott’s ready, he’ll come. I’m sure of it.” Murdoch walked to his son’s side and put his hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Meanwhile, I want you to promise to take care of yourself. Promise?”

Johnny sighed. “Yeah, I promise.” He glanced up at Murdoch’s skeptical eyes. “Really! I mean it, Murdoch! What else do I have to do out here?”

“Oh, let’s see, ride Barranca, check the north pasture, finish the house . . .” Murdoch showed signs of going on and on as he ticked the chores off one by one with his fingers.

Johnny grinned and playfully punched his father’s shoulder. “Okay, you’ve made your point. I’ll try to contain myself. I swear.”

Murdoch took his son’s elbow and led him back to the framed entrance, where he released him and took the reins of his mount from Jelly. “I believe you. This time. Jelly,” he turned to the old man, who had joined Murdoch. “Keep an eye on him.”

“And when have I not?” the weathered hand replied with a snort. Johnny rolled his eyes, and swayed as a result. Jelly grabbed his elbow. “Johnny, I swear, you’re harder to keep still than a spooked cat. Now come on, you need another poultice on that noggin.”

Murdoch smiled as Johnny was propelled, complaining, into the framed house. Stiffly, the elder Lancer mounted his horse and nudged him toward the estancia. Overall, he was optimistic; his sons cared too much for each other to let things stand the way they were at the moment. Now that he was sure Johnny wasn't going to leave, he felt that things would be square between them soon. It was just a matter of time.

Time. The big man frowned and pulled out his pocket watch. Harlan Garrett was due on the noon stage, just a few hours from now. With a sigh of resignation, he mounted his horse and pointed the gelding back toward the ranch, hoping to see how Scott was doing before they left for town.

It was late in the morning when Murdoch jogged up to the Lancer barn. As he pulled up, he saw his older son hitching up the buggy. Stiffness from the previous night had settled into his back, and the big man grunted slightly as he dismounted and his feet hit the ground. A young hand appeared at his side and he gratefully handed over the reins. “Gracias,” he said while he stretched a moment.

Glad to see his son moving with a more relaxed posture, the elder Lancer walked over and began helping.

“I’ve almost got it, sir,” Scott said in what sounded like an almost normal tone.

“If you say so,” Murdoch replied, taking a step back and rubbing his back.

“How are you doing this morning, son? Get any sleep?”

Scott glanced over to his father and gave him a quick appraisal. “By the way you look I think I got more than you.”

Murdoch felt a grin pull on a corner of his mouth. “You may be right.” His son seemed more connected at this moment, but the mantle of grief was still heavy in the boy’s eyes. Recalling his past dealings of losing a loved one, Murdoch was all too familiar with the tactic of using physical labor to put off emotion. He also knew that it couldn’t be put off forever.

Scott finished with the horse and buggy and stood near his father, brushing off the dust. There was an uncomfortable silence while Murdoch mentally debated how to bring up the subject of going to see Johnny.

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Feeling his own unease, Scott finally broke the impasse. "Guess I'll get cleaned up a bit before going to get Grandfather." He turned to the house.

"Scott," Murdoch started. His boy stopped and turned back, smoky blue eyes edged with fatigue meeting his own. "Scott, you need to speak to Johnny. I think it will help."

The older son stiffened at the sound of his brother's name, but the expected outburst of rejection didn't come. Instead, he nodded and dropped his head as he hitched his hands on his hips. "I know," he admitted quietly. "Teresa convinced me of that. I'm just not sure I trust myself . . ."

The implication was heavy.

For such a large hand, Murdoch's touch was surprisingly light when he placed it on his grieving son's shoulder. "You'll see that Johnny did the right thing. Don't underestimate the connection between you two," he said gently. "Trust it."

The blond head tilted sideways to regard his father. Anger, doubt and above all the ever present grief swirled in his mind as he took in the words. "I'll promise to try," he said, wondering if he could honor his promise.

"That's all I can ask." Murdoch patted his son's shoulder and they both walked to the house.



The coach rolled into Morro Coyo that afternoon in a veil of dust and rattled to a stop in front of the coach office three hours late. Dusk was falling fast. Harlan Garret brushed off the sleeves of his coat as the ladies disembarked. He followed them out, ahead of the younger men, wondering again why anyone would choose to live in a place like this.

"Grandfather!"

The familiar voice caused him to look up, and he was pleased to find his beloved Scotty reaching to help him step down. He gladly accepted the arm.

"Scotty, my boy! I wasn't expecting you to meet me, but I'm happy to see you." The older man offered his hand and the younger one shook it politely. Garrett held his hand after the shake and met his grandson's eyes. "I am truly sorry about your loss."

Scott's throat tightened. He nodded shortly and swallowed hard to loosen it enough to breathe. Dropping the hand shake, he said huskily, "I'll get your bags."

As Scott pulled his Grandfather's bags aside, Harlan critically looked him over. "You're too thin, Scotty. Aren't they feeding you?"

The lanky blond chortled dryly. "I've been well taken care of. Just not much of an appetite of late. No need to worry about me."

"I can't help but worry about you." The distinguished man stepped back abruptly to allow a Mexican couple to pass by on the boardwalk. As his eyes trailed

after the pair, he worked to keep the disgust from his eyes. "You know how dangerous this territory is."

Scott chose to ignore his grandfather's statement and uncomfortable posture. Instead, he carried a set of bags to a waiting buggy. "Is this all?"

"Yes, yes, that's all. I won't be staying long. I don't want to intrude on a difficult situation." The old Bostonian moved stiffly to his grandson and laid his hand gently on Scott's forearm. "I am truly sorry for your loss, Scotty, and that's why I came. I don't want to be any trouble or bother. I just want to show you how much I care." Sure his voice and motions carried the right amount of sympathy; Garrett tried to read the blue eyes regarding him. Sadly, he saw a hint of skepticism there and carefully chose his next words. "I know I've made a mess of past visits. Bringing Julie and meeting those boys was a mistake, and I apologize. I also know I could have been much more accepting of your wife. I just want you to know that I love you, and that you are welcome back in Boston anytime, grandson. Maybe some time away from here would help you recover . . ."

"I'm fine," Scott snapped, breaking eye contact to load the bags. Although that very thought had been tickling his mind, the actual decision to leave was much harder to make. If he did go, he wondered if he'd ever have the strength to come back and merely compound one bad decision made three years ago. He rested his hands on the bags for a moment, his head ducked. Then, with a resigned sigh, he turned back to the man that had raised him. "Look, Grandfather, I really do appreciate the gesture. It's a long trip."

"I just want what's best for you, my boy. A break in Boston may do you good." He reached up and patted a pale cheek. "Some Maine lobster or crab cakes would do you wonders!"

Scott cracked a weak smile at the statement and fleetingly wondered if Alexandra had ever had crab cakes. He felt his face harden as he tried to think of other things.

A crestfallen expression crossed the old man's face, and Scott realized his thoughts had reflected in his expression. He took a moment to soften his attitude before he spoke again. "Tell you what; I'll think about it. I admit, it's been a rough week," his voice wavered for a second, but he continued in a strong voice, "Would you like something to wash the dust down before we go?"

Perplexed by his grandson's behavior, Garrett allowed himself to be led to the local dining house. Where was the anger and bitterness he'd expected to see? Before leaving San Francisco, he'd made a point to visit the Salvadores. The picture they had painted of the Lancer clan was much different than he was seeing here. Murdoch was supposed to be angry, and the brothers at odds with each other. What had happened between then and now? All he could see here was sadness and grief and none of the anger he'd hoped for.

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Garrett eyed his grandson closely. There was a slight tremor in his hands, and he was painfully thin and pale. The wily old man decided that his proper heir was actually walking a fine line of self-control; there may still be a chance to turn him East. He hoped his contact had found that last straw that would change his heir's mind forever.

“Scotty, my boy, it’s late and I am very tired. Recalling how the stages ran out here, I made a reservation to stay in town tonight. We could go to the ranch in the morning.” The lemonade glass was finally empty, as Garrett took his time to empty it while he thought about his options. He put on a weary face and quickly spoke again as his grandson opened his mouth to reply. “You can send a rider to say you’re staying in town. Is a little time with me so awful?” He smiled kindly. “I do have a wire to send in the morning, anyway. Business. It’s just simpler to stay here tonight. You could use the time away.”

The blond young man grinned weakly, then nodded. He had to admit that the idea of returning to the room he and his wife shared wasn't appealing at this moment. “Sure.” He pushed the chair back and stood. “I’ll take you and your bags to the hotel, then stable the horse. Are you ready, sir?”

The grey head bobbed. “Yes, yes. Let’s go.”

Scott helped him into the buggy and they drove the short way to the only hotel in the small town. Garrett accepted his help from the buggy and moved stiffly into the simple lobby. Scott followed with the bags, and the elder man rang the service bell. A perky youth appeared.

“Davy, I believe my grandfather has a reservation. Harlan Garrett,” Scott informed the clerk.

“Yessir, Mr. Lancer,” Davy replied, flipping open the register.

“I have this, Scotty, my boy. You go stable the horse and I’ll meet you in the room.” Scott nodded and stepped out. Garrett turned back to Davy and asked in a low voice. “Any messages for me, boy?”

Davy checked the cubbies and pulled out a folded note. “Yes, sir. Here you go.”

“Thank you. Take my bags up, then.” The boy nodded and grabbed the keys to Room 2D. Taking Garrett’s two bags, he started up the stairs as the Bostonian finished signing the register and fell in behind.

Davy opened the room door and dropped the bags inside. He held the door open for his guest, who tipped him generously. Davy slipped away with a quick ‘Thank you.’

Garrett waited a few seconds before reading the note. “2B,” he said out loud. He stuffed the paper in his pocket, and slipped into the hall. This time, he wasn't making the mistake of anyone in this town knowing who he spoke with.

Garrett tapped on the door to 2B. The door cracked open and the Bostonian found himself on the receiving end of piercing eyes embedded in a grim face. “Mr. Simms?”

With a quick nod, the solid balding man allowed the older man inside.

“I don’t have much time,” Garrett said without preamble. “You received my wire? You located the man in question?”

“Yes, he’s here. I left him in the saloon drinking away some of that cash you wired.”

Garrett had his last straw. “I’d hoped I wouldn’t need to see him, but I think it’s time. Arrange for him to meet me here.” Garrett pointed at the floor, indicating Simm’s room. “Tomorrow morning at 8:00. It’s worth an additional \$50 to him. It’s worth \$50 extra for you if he’s not hung over.”

Simms nodded shortly, his grim expression never changing. “8:00, my room,” he repeated shortly.

Garrett smiled. “At least the Pinkertons here are as efficient as the Boston office. It’s the only thing in this God forsaken desert remotely professional.” He moved to the door, which Simms opened for him.

When he stepped into the hall, Garrett paused and pursed his lips in thought. He was sure he held a strong hand in this game, and it was a game Harlan Garrett did not intend to lose.



The dawn had reached Morro Coyo hours before, Scott realized when he finally jerked awake. He blinked in confusion and bolted upright, taking several moments to recall where he was. The sounds of the street below brought him into foggy focus.

“Good morning, Scotty! I daresay you don’t sleep in like this at your ranch, do you?” The older man was fixing his tie in front of a mirror over the dresser.

Scott rubbed his eyes. “Good morning, Grandfather. You’re right; the opportunity doesn’t come up much at Lancer.” He was awake enough to see the flash of disapproval cross Garrett’s reflection at the name of the ranch. Harlan Garrett’s opinion about this place will never change, he thought. I guess I’m beginning to see why. “What time is it?”

“You must have needed the rest. It’s almost 8:00.” Garrett put the final touches on his tie and reached for his coat, looking out the window as he pulled it on. “I need to send that wire. You get cleaned up and dressed, my boy, and I’ll meet you at that . . . quaint-looking . . . diner across the street.”

Scott swung his legs over the edge of the bed and glanced amusingly at his grandfather’s wording. “Del Rio’s. I could use some coffee.”

Garrett reached over and patted his grandson’s shoulder, his eyes full of concern. “And a good breakfast. You are too thin, my boy.”

Scott waved him off. “Yes, yes. I am hungry.” He rose, clad only in his underwear, and stretched, enjoying the pull of his sore muscles across his flat stomach

and firm shoulders. “The wire office is two doors down at the mercantile,” he said as he yawned.

“I will find it.” After a disapproving frown at the blatant naked display in front of him, Garrett had forced his mouth into something resembling a smile by the time he reached the door. “I will see you in a few minutes.” He slipped out and quietly closed the door.

A shadow of a smile softened Scott’s mouth at the quick departure. He knew it was only a matter of time before Harlan put on the pressure to return to Boston for a visit. If his Grandfather had gotten here a mere two days earlier, he might have caved in to the urge to get away and accepted the suggestion.

But the conversation he and Teresa had held the two nights ago, as well as his short talk with Murdoch yesterday, gave him pause. Could he rectify a decision made three years ago? Would anything Johnny had to say make a difference? Could any of this despair he felt be alleviated? He had to know. And the only one who possibly held sway to these questions was waiting for him at Lancer.



Garrett quickly moved down the hall and tapped on 2B. As soon as the latch unlocked, he pushed his way in and closed the door. His eyes scanned the room and settled on a stubborn looking young man with his jaw set in defiance. He didn’t look a day over twenty.

“Is that him?” Garrett asked, speaking to Simms but keeping his eyes on the cowboy.

Simms locked the door. “Josh Stedman, yes.”

Garrett pulled his money clip from his pocket. He peeled off a small bill and handed it to Simms. “Go get some coffee.” Simms left instantly.

“Your fifty dollars’ worth of time is about up. What ya want, old man?” Stedman growled, pushing himself to his feet.

The elder Bostonian was not cowed by the boy’s insolence. He hooked his fingers in his vest pockets and glared at the young hooligan. “It’s not what I want, it’s what you want.”

The cowboy frowned. “I don’t like playin’ games, mister.” His hand trailed down and rested on the butt of his gun.

“I know who killed your brother.”

The boy snorted. “So do I. So?”

Garrett raised an eyebrow. “Do you want some justice?”

His question was answered with a short laugh. “I ain’t stupid enough to go up against Johnny Madrid. If that’s what ya called me up here for, forgit it.” Stedman started to move to the door, but Garrett blocked his way. Stedman stopped. This close,

the older man could see the insecurity in the boy's eyes. The tough attitude was a front, and the wily businessman knew he could wrap this boy around his finger.

"No, I have something different in mind, Mr. Stedman. Take Madrid's brother away. Destroy his life, and at the same time get enough money to take you where you want to go. Interested?"

Greed flickered across the youngster's hazel eyes, and he backed off a step. "Go on."

"There's a girl that means a lot to that half-breed killer and his . . ." Garrett cleared his throat, finding it difficult to refer to Madrid and his grandson in the same sentence this way. ". . . brother. Take the girl away, make it look like Madrid's fault, and it will split them and destroy them all."

"I ain't killin' no girl!" Stedman protested.

"No, no, that's not what I mean. Just take her away for a while. Ask for money to return her. Tell them it's because Madrid killed your brother and you deserve it. They will gladly pay to get the girl back and realize how dangerous it is to be around someone like Madrid. Then they'll disown him."

The young cowboy looked thoughtful. "That's all I'd have to do? Stash the girl somewhere and collect the money?"

"That's all."

"But she'll see my face."

"Young man, you should be able to get enough money to get far, far away from here in a very short time, and I would advise you to do just that." Garrett could see the boy was hooked. Now it was time to close the deal. "I'll even give you enough money to take care of her while she's in your care." He pulled out his money clip again and peeled off several bills. "This should do it. I've also drawn a sketch of the ranch layout. The girl - Teresa O'Brien - goes for a ride almost daily, if I remember correctly. She should be easy to find; she's the only white woman there."

Stedman studied the map for a moment. "What makes you so sure I'll do this?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm not. I am merely suggesting it. I think you're smart enough to see easy money and man enough to pull it off. How many chances are you going to have to get rich and get some justice for the death of your brother at the same time? But you have to strike when the iron's hot, boy. That's how men get rich - they seize opportunity. Nerves are tight and emotions are raw right now. If you wait, the opportunity will pass you by."

The boy grinned slightly, looked at the cash and the map, and then tucked them in his pocket. As he did so, he asked, "What's in this for you, old man?"

"Plenty, but it's none of your concern. Your payoff is immediate. My payoff comes with the fallout. Now stay here until you see me go into the establishment across the street. Then you can leave." Garrett paused at the door. "And I suggest you don't hurt the girl. I know it's your plan and you call the shots, Mr. Stedman, but I

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guarantee that if she gets hurt, your money probably won't get you far enough away. Ever. Goodbye." He slipped out and down the hall to wait for Scott outside.

Garrett smugly patted himself on the back for the way he played young Stedman. The businessman didn't really care what happened to Stedman, or Teresa, for that matter. She was a young woman living with three men, for God's sake! What kind of reputation must she have? Maybe it would be a blessing if something happened to her; it didn't really matter either way. All that mattered was to drive the wedge deeper between Scott and those Lancers and make the rift unbridgeable. With nothing left out here, Scotty would have to return to Boston where his Grandfather would be sympathetic, but welcome him back with open arms.

All he had to do was wait and pick up the pieces.



Young Stedman leaned against the window frame and watched the old man walk across the street with a tall blond cowboy. As soon as they stepped on the boardwalk, Simms exited Del Rio's and walked to the hotel without acknowledging his employer. Stedman grinned, and twisted his fingers in the lacy curtain.

"If the old coot thinks he's the one runnin' my life, he's got another thing comin'. He ain't the only one with plans," he mumbled to himself. With a stronger voice, he spoke to the ceiling, "Hear me big brother? Dawson's here and we'll take care of business for ya."

With a flip of his wrist, the gauzy lace fluttered aside and the young cowboy pushed off to the door. Sure, the old guy's idea was a good one, but Stedman needed a little more satisfaction. The boy grinned as he left the room. Don't know who ya were, mister, and I don't really care. Just as long as Madrid knows who I am, and I aim to help him find out. My face is gonna be the last one he sees.

The old man's heels had barely cleared the diner doorway when the angry youth was on his way to meet his silent partner.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Teresa moved through the hacienda with a mental checklist, knowing full well she was avoiding Scott's room. She paused at the door, wishing Maria was here for support like she had been when the room was cleaned days before. With Harlan arriving later this morning, the room would be needed.

A soft sigh accompanied the opening of the door. Taking in the gloomy darkness, the young girl was slightly taken aback that she could still feel her sister-in-law's essence in the air. Her heart quickened. Before she could make herself take a step into the room, she heard heavy footfalls behind her. The slightly uneven gait told her who it was before the steps fell silent behind her.

There was a slight pause before she felt the big hand of her father figure on her shoulder. "The room need some light, don't you think?" Murdoch asked quietly. "Let me."

Grateful for the company, Teresa stepped in and aside, allowing her guardian to pass. She made it to the dresser when a rustle of material allowed the morning light to flood the room. It helped, and she was able to turn her attention to what needed to be done.

Murdoch threw open the window, and a waft of early morning summer air, heavy with the perfume of roses and jasmine, rolled in on a light breeze. Teresa couldn't help but smile at him.

"That's much better. It's what this room needed," she said, beginning to check for dust.

At the sound of her voice, the big man turned his attention from the window to his ward and watched her swipe the furniture with a small rag. She seemed much older than her nineteen years, and he wondered if it was fair that she had so much responsibility on her small shoulders. "Teresa," he started. "Why don't you take a break today? You and Maria have done so much this week. When was the last time you took a ride?"

"I've only done what's been needed, Murdoch," the young woman replied. Her exam of the furniture had brought her beside him by the window. She glanced outside,

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and a tiny smile graced her face when she felt the breeze. “I couldn’t just sit. That meant I had to think . . .”

Looking down from his substantial height, he felt nothing but pride at what a remarkable woman this girl was becoming; or according to Jelly, had become. She and Alexandra had quickly created a bond that he knew she must have craved; one with a woman worthy of emulating. He slipped his arm around her shoulders. “We all need time, Teresa. I’m sorry you already know that.” The reference to her father made her duck her head, but she bravely raised it again to take in the neat room. “Take some time. Get out for a while.”

Gratefully, she looked up to him and nodded. “All right,” she said. “After Scott and Harlan arrive and we’ve all had lunch, I’ll go. I’ll take something to Johnny.”

Murdoch chuckled and gave her a quick hug. “I know he’d appreciate it. He’s had only Jelly’s cooking for days.”

Teresa smiled back and felt the sorrow and grief fall away a little, allowing her to see the homey room that surrounded them in a brighter light.



Scott and Harlan arrived at Lancer a little before noon. Teresa and Maria kept busy right up until their arrival. When the dust swirl and squeaking rig pulled up and stopped by the front door, Maria gave the girl a sour look.

“Go hide in the kitchen,” Teresa offered with a knowing smile. “I’ll handle lunch.”

Maria nodded. “Gracias,” she said. “I’ll return to clean up when *la vieja cabra* is upstairs.”

Teresa’s jaw dropped and her eyes grew wide. “Maria!” she scolded none too convincingly as she giggled, placing her delicate hand over her mouth in an effort to stop.

The older woman’s eyes glittered for just a moment then she lovingly patted the girl’s cheek. “*Eso suena agradable*,” she said with a gentle smile. “Your laugh has been gone too long.”

Maria disappeared to the kitchen and Teresa felt better able to face the disagreeable old man. She went to the front door and stepped outside, joining Murdoch on the front porch. She noticed that a touch of sun to Scott’s face had chased away some of the dark hollows, but the aura of sorrow still clung to his frame as he moved about. Taking Murdoch’s elbow helped her affirm her feelings that soon everything would be all right. It had to be.



Settling Harlan in the guest room and preparing lunch kept the young girl busy, but she was able to hear most of the condolences and platitudes that the elder Bostonian uttered. She marveled at how perfect the words were, but wondered at the sincerity.

The men collected in the great room before the meal and the banter became light, focusing on local politics. Teresa thought Garrett was fighting to look interested, and his real attention was on his fair-haired grandson who sat with a dejected air, spinning his lemonade glass between his hands.

Conversation paused, the silence heavy. Teresa cleared her throat. "Mr. Garrett, I'm going on a ride after lunch. Is there anything you need before I go?" Scott's head turned up at the revelation.

"No, no, my dear, I'll be fine."

Scott's gaze caught her eye. "Are you going to the house?" he asked in a shaky voice.

Teresa shifted. "Yes, I am." Hope sparked in her heart.

"Would you mind if I joined you later? I'd like to show Grandfather around a little first."

She managed to contain the urge to leap up and hug him, and instead, smiled and rose to her feet, her heart fluttering with joy. "I think that would be wonderful, Scott." Teresa knew that if she didn't excuse herself now, the happy tears she felt building would make everyone uncomfortable. "Lunch will be ready in a minute. Excuse me, please," and she swept from the room with a lighter step.



Scott counted five requests for him to return to Boston in the hours after lunch with his Grandfather. They were cleverly worded and woven expertly into the conversation at the time, and Scott found himself trying to outwit the older man by bringing up subjects that were far away from that line of thinking. The fifth request had been included in an exchange about taking Lancer bulls to auction in Stockton, and Scott threw in a mental towel. Trying to outwit his Grandfather was something he wasn't quite up to, he decided. He imagined himself telling Johnny how 'ol Harlan' managed these feats of invitation and managed a weak smile at the response he knew he'd get. Now that he'd committed himself to seeing his brother, he felt a little better.

"Something humorous, Scotty?" They were walking back to the estancia after the promised tour, and Harlan still didn't seem at all impressed. He hid it well, but Scott could see easily through the false interest.

"No, no, I was just thinking about Johnny. I really need to go speak with him, Grandfather. I should be back in time for dinner. Will you excuse me?"

"Certainly, my boy. I think I'll retire to my room for a bit. Be careful, won't you?"

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Scott left his Grandfather at the French doors to the great room. "I will. See you in a little while." He broke away, feeling strangely freed of a burden he didn't know he carried. The idea of riding to the construction site chilled him, but he knew it had to be done. He had to talk to his brother. Scott felt unexplainably driven in this duty and knew he had to overcome the sentiment of the location to see Johnny face to face.

Murdoch met him in the barn but didn't say much. Just his father's presence was all the young man needed to gather strength, and Scott appreciated it. Quickly saddling Charlemagne, he mounted and loped under the familiar arch before his nerve fled.



Scott pulled up at the turnoff to South Point, surprised at what he saw. Teresa's horse was tied to a tree, resting quietly with a hind leg cocked, ears calmly pricked in his direction. Many things raced through his mind in that moment as he paused, but he honestly didn't think anything was seriously amiss. After a few moments of consideration, he nearly rode on to meet his brother, but found himself reining toward the relaxed gray in an automatic response.

As Charlemagne got closer, Scott felt his hand tighten on the reins; something wasn't right. Only when he was close enough to see the piece of paper secured to the saddle horn did his heart begin to beat faster. The feeling that something was very wrong set his senses on alert. When he was close enough, he snatched up the folded missive and looked around.

Seeing no one, he finally looked at the paper. The outside was blank, so he unfolded it and read the short message. What he read made his stomach clench in cold fear and the emotions of the past week washed over him like a wave. He felt sick. Crumpling the note in his fist, he wheeled Charlemagne in the direction of his last happy memory with Alexandra and spurred him onward.

Scott's arrival at the site was far from subtle. Hauling the powerful bay to a rough sliding stop next to the Lancer wagon, he yelled for his brother before his feet hit the ground. Boiling emotions drove him through the framed door about the same time Jelly appeared at a run from the depths of the building.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" the old man sputtered at the sight of the normally level headed Scott wild-eyed and enraged. Jelly was pushed aside without a second thought as Scott stormed toward the heart of the framework.

Johnny was mostly on his feet, crouched, with his Colt firmly in his grip and pointed directly at the source of the disturbance. Scott stopped abruptly, shaking in rage. Calmly, but with the burning coolness of Madrid eyes, Johnny slipped his weapon back home.

"Care to fill me in, brother?" he said in his gunfighter flat tone, his hand unusually heavy on the butt of the gun as he stood and leaned against the framework.

“Now what, Johnny?” Scott yelled, thrusting the note towards Johnny’s face. “Who’s mad at you now? Who did this?” Not waiting for his wary brother to reach for the note, Scott threw it at him.

With cat-like reactions, Johnny snatched the note from the air, his eyes still locked on the tall blond. After a second, he stood up straight, dropped his eyes and began to unfold the message.

“Scott, what’s goin’ on?” Jelly maneuvered to Johnny’s side, glancing nervously between the two of them.

“Someone has Teresa,” Scott said sharply, still glaring at his brother. The words were barely out of his mouth before Johnny was on the move.

“What? Who?” Jelly blubbered.

“That’s what I would like to know!” Scott said icily as Johnny brushed past him. He grabbed Johnny’s elbow in a vise grip, causing the ex-gunfighter to stop and partially turn back to him.

“Let go,” Johnny growled lowly, his right hand falling back to the Colt.

“I will when you tell me what’s going on,” Scott said in the same tone. “Or would you rather shoot me instead?”

Time stood still for several heartbeats as brothers locked eyes and wills. Jelly stood in a ready stance to one side, holding his breath at the standoff. Finally, the younger sibling let his right hand drop. Scott loosened his grip and Johnny pulled his arm free. Jelly exhaled in relief.

“We don’t have time for this, Scott,” Johnny said evenly as he turned to go.

“Then tell me while we ride.” The lanky blond fell in behind.

“Ride?” Jelly yelped. “He can’t ride! He kin barely stand without fallin’ over!” Trailing the pair, he followed them out to where Johnny gathered his palomino.

Without a word between them, Scott grabbed Johnny’s saddle and they worked together to ready Barranca. As Johnny put the final pull on the cinch, Scott retrieved Charlemagne and mounted up. Jelly made his doubts known as they worked.

“This is crazy! Scott, he can’t do anything! Look at him!” Jelly waved his arms at the dark-haired brother who was just jamming his foot in the stirrup to mount.

Scott didn’t reply, but he did take a moment to really look at his brother; he hadn’t seen him for a week, and what he saw at that moment shocked him. Do I look that bad? he thought. Then Jelly’s words struck home. Johnny, comfortably mounted, reined Barranca toward him. “Can you do this?” Scott asked sharply, his emotions still raw.

“I have to,” Johnny snapped in return as he urged his mount onward. Scott spun Charlie around and they rode out side by side.

“Where are ya goin’?” Jelly yelled angrily at the receding backs. “Will ya at least tell me that so’s I can pick up the pieces?” When he didn’t get a reply, he hurriedly began hitching up the wagon. “Murdoch’s goin’ to be furious, an’ I ain’t got nothin’ to tell him. Dang boys got no sense a tall!”

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Gagged and tied, Teresa fumed first at herself for being so stupid and then at her captors for doing this to her. She had an idea of where she was, even though they had blindfolded her as soon as they'd grabbed her at the South Point turnoff.

The younger one had waved her off the road saying his horse had thrown him. She had stopped, but was smart enough not to get too close or dismount. The kid wasn't much older than she was and had limped convincingly enough, so she told him that she would send one of the hands to help him intending to send Jelly his way. When the second, older man emerged from the scant stand of trees, she knew she was in trouble. He had a rifle pointed at her and she had no choice but to dismount when told. They immediately trussed her up like a roasting turkey and she was forced to ride double with one of them.

By their voices, she was riding with the younger one. He sat behind her with his arms wrapped around her waist and his dusty, sour smell made her stomach roll. Teresa thought they were still on Lancer land when the horses finally stopped and the other man spoke.

"I need proof."

"Proof?" The younger man sounded confused at the statement.

Teresa heard the faint swish of a knife being pulled from a sheath and suddenly a strong hand grabbed a fist full of her hair. "Hold still!" the older man barked, and then she felt a tug and the crackling noise of a large lock of hair being cut. Once free, she pulled away, but then felt a hand on her waist. She began to struggle. "I said hold still! Hold her still!" A hand on her throat convinced her. She felt her blouse being tugged from her riding pants, then a ripping noise. "There. Tied together they can't deny we have her. I'll leave this for Madrid and wait. You take her to our hide out."

"But the note said for him to meet us tomorrow," the younger man said, puzzled.

"I know Madrid, boy. He's not waitin'."

"What if he does wait? You gonna be out here all night?"

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

“I won’t be out here all night. Madrid will show today and he’s gonna be on edge when he sees that I know how he thinks. It’s part of the game, kid.”

“Game?” The kid’s voice was almost squeaky. “I’m serious about killin’ him, Dawson!”

The man’s voice was steely sharp when he responded and Teresa felt the boy tense at the tone. “You wanted a pro, Josh, and you got one. I’m only puttin’ up with your whinin’ because your brother was a friend. Don’t question my way of workin’, you understand?”

There was a heavy moment of silence before she felt the kid nod, and then say questioningly, “So it’s like poker?”

Dawson chortled, “You’re trainable after all, boy! Now get goin’.”

Their horse turned, and Teresa was alone with the kid for a very long time. Her captor never said anything, and she couldn’t speak, so she spent a lot of time wondering what this was all about. Fear kept raising his ugly head in her mind, and as time passed, she found it more difficult to keep it at bay. Finally, the horse was steered along a more winding trail and his hoof prints sounded on harder ground.

Teresa began to wonder where she was. An odd mix of fear and anger had made her emotions rockier by the minute, but she realized that she had to keep control if she was to gather any information she could use to escape. She forced herself to settle down and listen carefully. She needed a plan, and first on the list was to find out where she was, second, why she was here and third, to get untied.

With her mind engaged, she found it easier to stay in focus.

The horse was finally stopped, and she was dragged off and slung over the kid’s shoulder like a sack of potatoes. In a few moments, it was much cooler and smelled musty. When she was dumped to the cool, dirt floor she confirmed she was underground. But was it a cave or a mine?

“Don’t be movin’, girl. I’m just outside.” Teresa concentrated on the way the kid’s voice echoed, and determined it must be a mine. All the caves she knew around here were much more cramped. A mine, then. First thing on the list answered. She knew it was a small victory, but the good thing was that the mines around here were usually near roads, and all roads around here lead to Lancer.

She heard the kid return and drop some items on the floor. “I don’t mean for ya to get hurt, but it don’t mean I won’t hurt ya. Once Madrid delivers the money, you’ll get turned loose. Madrid’s gotta die, though.”

Item two answered.

Kill Johnny? Her heart leaped in fear. She knew he would give his life if it meant her freedom, and she couldn’t live with that. Teresa began to squirm, and when the kid grabbed her shoulder to keep her sitting, she kicked at his legs.

“Hey! That hurts, girl!”

In an instant, she was shoved to the ground, face down, with a knee in her back. Trying to breathe through her nose to dispel the white flashes in her eyes from lack of

oxygen, the frightened girl stopped fighting. Panic threatened to swell out of control, and her world narrowed to the carefully controlled intakes of air. Teresa O'Brien swore to herself that she wouldn't pass out.

Another item to add to her list.



"So what does it mean?" Scott asked shortly, riding abreast to his grim brother. "The note says to wait at Taylor's stake. What's it mean?"

"The note said for me to wait at Taylor's stake," Johnny replied quietly, his hat pulled low over his eyes to accommodate the white bandage around his head. "You shouldn't even be here."

"Quit playing games, Johnny!" Scott snapped. "The note also says not to be there until noon tomorrow. That's where we're going now, isn't it? What does it mean, 'Taylor's stake'?" He knew how he sounded but couldn't make himself stop. The feelings that had crashed over him when he first found the note were still whirling through his mind as an uncontrolled vortex.

He saw the sideways look his brother gave him; he also noticed the way Johnny sat Barranca. Usually, the horse and the man looked like one. Right now, Johnny looked like he was using extra energy to stay upright. He also looked tense, and that niggled something within Scott.

"I know this has something to do with . . . that day." He grabbed Barranca's rein, and pulled both horses to a stop. "Tell me what happened, Johnny," Scott demanded, burning anger threatening to fan into a flame. "I have to know!"

"Why?" Johnny demanded, jerking his reins from Scott's hand. "Why do you have to know? So I have to see it all again? So I have to prove myself to you? What do you want from me, Scott?" Barranca nervously danced in place, reacting to the wave of anger emanating from his unsteady rider.

If the older Lancer had not been looking right at his brother's eyes at that moment, he would have missed the rare, unguarded echo of sorrow that resounded in Johnny's fever bright eyes. The shock of seeing it dampened the flame that had started to consume him, and Scott found himself both speechless and surprisingly empty.

Johnny's jaw was locked tight, the muscles in his jaw standing out as undulating ridges as he ground his teeth. "I don't have time for this," the ex-gunslinger growled, gaining control of his fever loosened emotions. He sharply spurred the palomino, and Barranca leaped forward.

Scott fell in behind feeling like he was galloping right into a nightmare on a runaway horse.

They had reached the spot where Teresa's gray was tied up and the horse watched them curiously. Johnny rode past it to the top of the hill with Scott following.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

As they dropped down the other side of the rise, the gray whinnied plaintively about being left behind.

“Jelly will get her,” Scott said flatly when Johnny glanced back in the lonely horse’s direction.

With a sharp nod, Johnny acknowledged the comment and kept on.

The pair of horses picked their way down the slope that led to the south pasture. They followed the fence line at the bottom westward, the only direction Taylor and his gang could have come. And now, Johnny looked for signs that this was the way Teresa was taken. Scott rode quietly behind his brother, unable to speak just yet. He found the task of looking for signs to be a needed distraction to the tumble of thoughts in his mind.

Unbeknown to the Lancer brothers, their progress was being watched from a nearby ridge. Dawson sat his horse with confidence and grinned crookedly when he saw the motion below him. Upon seeing Madrid, even at this distance, his hand automatically went to his low-slung holster. His thumb tapped the wooden grips of his weapon in a staccato rhythm as he nodded knowingly.

“The game’s afoot, Madrid. And you brought company. Well, I hope you like your next little message.”

Laughing softly to himself, the rider leaned back and pulled a well-worn but exquisitely cared for rifle from the saddle scabbard and dismounted. Dropping the reins to ground tie his horse, he positioned himself behind a tree in the shadows, well aware that a metallic flash could give him away. Dawson lifted the rifle to his shoulder and rested his cheek on the stock with intimate familiarity.

“Should be ridin’ up on it just . . . about . . . now . . .”

As he finished speaking, he had his target in his sights.



“What’s that?” Scott said, pointing to something dark fluttering in the wind from the top of a fence post ahead. Johnny lifted his head from studying the ground.

Scott nudged Charlemagne into a jog and passed Barranca, and then reined in next to a post. He had just plucked the item from the wood when a solid thud - followed instantly by the sound of a gunshot - made Charlie twitch sideways and suddenly bolt.

When the big bay raced past, Barranca sat back and reared against the snug hold on his head. Freeing his gun as he released the palomino, Johnny automatically scanned the ridgeline on the run.

“The ravine!” Johnny yelled, letting Scott keep the lead while he fired off a pair of rounds in the general direction of the ridge. The racing bay veered right toward a dry creek bed with the golden horse close on his heels. Soon they were in a water cut

ravine lined with thick brush, well out of sight. They pulled up, breathing hard. Scott's bay refused to stand still and danced in place, hopping with one hind leg lifted.

"Charlie's hit," Scott snapped after glancing down at the favored leg. "Just below the hip." He jumped off and ran his hand down the left, hind leg. "Leg's all right. You're okay, boy." He stroked the horse's neck and spoke lowly in spite of the raging anger he felt growing once again. The bay responded to the controlled voice and stood quietly, the tender leg cocked to relieve the weight on his hip. Blood trickled in a narrow stream from the small hole in the meaty part of his rump just below the hip bone.

Johnny kept watch, gun ready. "Guess he weren't too keen on me arriving early and with company," he said lowly with no trace of emotion. It was stated like a fact, as if he were talking about the weather. When he turned back to Scott was met with a pair of icy blue eyes glaring at him. Johnny ignored them. "What was on the post?"

Scott pulled the item from under his belt where he'd stuffed it while on the run. He kept his eyes focused on Johnny as he held up the lock of hair neatly tied with a strip of very familiar pale yellow material. Well aware of the adrenalin-laced emotions he felt burning through his veins Scott barely kept any comments from erupting from his mouth as he watched Johnny's reaction.

There was none. None visible, anyway, and that further fueled the raging anger barely controlled inside. All Johnny did was stare at the hair for a moment as it danced in the light breeze. Then, without a word, he slipped his gun away and turned Barranca around.

"Where are you going?" Scott growled through tightly clenched jaws.

"It's clear he wants only me, Scott. That shot was a warning," Johnny said over his shoulder as he rode away. "I won't let anyone get hurt because of me. Not again. Stay out of it."

"Stay out of it?" Scott yelled at his brother's back, unable to contain himself anymore. He pulled on Charlie's reins and the horse limped behind him as Scott attempted to follow his brother. "I can't stay out of it! I'm right in the middle of it, Johnny!"

Johnny didn't look back as he loped in the direction of the shooter's ridge. Scott cursed a blue streak, causing Charlemagne to back away and roll his eyes in fear. The angry young man realized what he was doing and forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand. A thought crossed his mind that he almost preferred the numbness of the past few days to these wildly undulating emotions. He also admitted to himself that being out of control was not going to help Teresa.

And this time, he intended to be there and make a difference.

"Come on, let's get you home," he finally said in a civil tone after calming the horse. With his head dropped low for balance, Charlemagne fell in behind his conflicted owner at an uneven, painful pace.



Johnny followed the fence line to the west for about a mile until he was able to cut around to get to the shooter's position. Whoever it was had used the lay of the land and the fence well; it had given him a clear view of the pair of them but no direct path to his spot. Johnny was sure he was being watched the entire time; the shooter had plenty of time to reposition. He also knew that if his nemesis wanted him dead, he would have been so long before now. The shot at Charlemagne was at least 600 yards in a steady wind; not the score of an amateur, and Johnny felt the bullet had ended up exactly where intended.

He found the shooter's position rather easily as the shell casing had been left behind. It wasn't lying on the ground, but was carefully placed so it was standing upright on a flat rock. Beneath the casing was another folded paper with 'Madrid' written on the outside.

Johnny pocketed the casing and carefully looked around before picking up the paper. It was as quiet as death; even the breeze had ceased. The rustling of the paper seemed unusually loud as he unfolded the missive.

Bring \$5,000.00 to Saddleback Mesa

9 o'clock tomorrow. Come alone or you won't see the girl again.

Saddleback Mesa – Johnny knew the spot. It was just off the most southeastern corner of Lancer land. It was open, easily watched and had dozens of escape routes. It was also far enough from town that it would make getting the money from the bank in the morning impossible. Johnny knew that the instigator here – the lone survivor of the shootout with Taylor at South Point – wanted Johnny to have little time to plan.

He would have to get the cash today, and the bank closed very soon; there was no time to get Murdoch's permission or any backup from the ranch, not that he planned on doing either of those things anyway.

Johnny mounted up and headed to town at a pace almost too brisk for the terrain. He would have to push Barranca hard on the flatlands to make it in time. As he worked his way out of the rolling hills, Johnny recalled the features of the man that escaped that day. He was young, but obviously not without some smarts if he'd planned this.

That rifle shot at Scott's horse was one of an experienced gunman, and that made Johnny pause. He wasn't convinced the shooter and that boy were one and the same. It was possible, he supposed, but something about this planning seemed too sophisticated for the nervous young man he recalled. A new partner, perhaps, now that Johnny had killed the others? Was this revenge or just taking advantage of an opportunity like Taylor would? What would his foe expect, and how could he use that?

With such problems to occupy his mind, he could easily ignore the headache and wooziness from his wound's effects. He could also push aside the obligations he

felt after three years of being a part of family. This wasn't about a rancher protecting what was his anymore.

It was well veiled in demands, but Johnny Lancer knew when Johnny Madrid was being called out.

CHAPTER NINE

Two hours had almost passed before Scott made it to Lancer with his wounded horse. He'd hoped to get Teresa's mare, but Jelly had picked her up before Scott got there. Cipriano spotted the older Lancer son as he topped the horizon visible from the ranch, and rode out to meet him. The senior hand took Charlemagne and gave Scott his horse to ride to the hacienda.

The walk had done little to settle Scott's mind and he felt his blood beginning to boil again. When Murdoch burst from the barn, it was clear that he was in the midst of organizing a search party. An explosion was inevitable from the older man's expression.

"Where's Teresa?" Murdoch roared. "Where's Johnny?"

"I don't know!" Scott bellowed right back. "Someone has her and Johnny won't talk!" He waved an arm behind, indicating where he'd come from. "She's out there, somewhere, and Johnny went off, as usual, to take care of it!"

A motion in the doorway of the hacienda made Scott look up. Harlan Garrett paused in the doorway with a surprised look on his face. Scott threw the horse's reins to an approaching hand and stormed up to his grandfather. "Do you know anything about this?" he hotly demanded. The connection between his grandfather and ranch trouble was the first thing that entered his mind when he saw the older man.

Harlan's eyes squinted and he pulled himself up to his full height, still falling short of his grandson but appearing uncowed. "You will not speak to me in that tone, Scotty. I have no idea what is going on! Miss O'Brien is missing, I understand? It sounds to me like that gunfighter's the cause of all this, not me!"

Scott managed to pull himself together somewhat, but his hands were still clenched in fists of rage. His gaze did not waver. "His name is Johnny," he barked, defending his missing sibling. "And I apologize for my tone, but if I find out you had anything to do with this, grandfather . . ."

Harlan's features softened a little. "Apology accepted. And I tell you, I have no idea what is happening. Do they want money?"

That made Scott pause and turn back to Murdoch. "I have no idea what they want except for Johnny, and only Johnny, to meet them. They shot my horse to make that point clear," he said bitterly.

Murdoch signaled for his horse. "I'm going to talk to the Sheriff. Scott, take the hands I've called in to search the area where you last saw Johnny," he said gruffly, his own anger reined in for the moment. Recalling Johnny's physical shape when he last saw him, he added, "Take Jelly with you."

Father and son turned and strode into the barn, their tempers cooled but their blood still hot. "Teresa can't be far," Murdoch noted. "It wasn't that long after she left here that you found her horse. What did the note say?"

"All it said was 'Madrid: Tomorrow, noon, Taylor's stake, alone'," Scott said grimly. "I guess Johnny knows what it means."

They stopped just inside the barn and the eldest Lancer threw a glance at the lean blond. He knew the meaning of the name Taylor; obviously, Scott did not. "Taylor was at South Point that day," he said quietly. "Besides Johnny, there was one other survivor. The sheriff may know who that boy was. It's a start." Murdoch motioned to have two horses brought out. "Johnny can't handle a gunfight right now. We have to find him, or we're going to lose both of them."

Scott felt his mouth tighten into a line. The sound of his brother's name made his emotions fly all over the place, and he desperately tried to get them under control. Some feelings were still just too raw to acknowledge, and pushing them aside was most difficult. Suddenly, the idea of being here without his brother and sister-by-heart seemed impossible; it was already almost that way without Alexandra. For the first time in a week a calmness settled on the new widower's mind. At least he could try to do something about it this time.

The hand brought up the horses. Murdoch took his sorrel, and Scott took the reins of a strong buckskin that Johnny had been working. They lead the animals outside.

Murdoch spoke lowly as they tightened the cinches. "This family will not be destroyed like this, Scott."

The deep, unspoken feelings they shared at that moment was the base Scott needed to ground his emotions, and instantly he found the control and sense of purpose he'd been missing. "Not if we can help it, sir," he replied in a strong, even tone.



"I tell you, Johnny, you really have to try Gaye's Steakhouse when you get to Stockton. Best meal in town. It's down next to the . . ."

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

"I'll find it, thanks." Johnny's outer cool belied the urgency he felt inside. He smiled politely at the bank clerk, when in reality he wanted to tell him to hurry up and shut up. He was finding it more difficult than usual to center himself and concentrate.

"Gee, Mr. Lancer usually uses bank drafts for this kind of purchase. You feel safe carrying this kind of cash all the way to Stockton?" The clerk's hands paused, and he glanced up at the dark haired Lancer and smiled. "Though I guess of all of you Lancers you're the best qualified to protect yourself, huh?"

It was difficult, but Johnny managed to maintain the smile even though his head was pounding. "Guess so. You about done?"

"Five thousand. There you go. Do you want a bank bag?"

Johnny's insides were telling him to run, but outside he nodded calmly. "Sure, good idea, Neville."

Neville reached under the counter and began stuffing the bills inside. "You going to the dance next week? I mean, if you're up to it? You still look a little. . ." Neville froze when he saw Johnny's smile disappear. "I'm sorry. Are you all right, Johnny?"

Johnny slowly reached for the bag and forced the smile back on his face. "Yeah. Headache, that's all. Thanks, Neville. Thanks Mr. Barnes!" Johnny waved at the older man standing near the safe.

"Always a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Lancer. Tell your father and brother hello."

"Will do. 'Bye." Bag in hand, Johnny walked from the bank making a concerted effort to walk with his back straight and showing no sign of pain.

Stepping from the bank into the late afternoon of Green River, Johnny's mind was whirling with plans and discarding them one after another. Before setting out, he knew he needed some provisions so he bought some jerky and licorice at Baldormoro's as well as extra oats at the feed store. Barranca still looked weary from the rushed journey to town and Johnny felt bad pushing him again, but he also knew that it was imperative for him to get back to the mesa tonight - the kid wouldn't be expecting that.

"Hey Johnny!"

Johnny's head snapped up at the greeting, sending a sharp pain shooting across his temple. He clamped his teeth together and forced a small smile. "Hey, Val," he answered lowly. Carefully, he seated his hat firmly on his head to cover the bandage as much as he could.

The sheriff put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "I'm surprised to see you in town. How are you?"

"Fine, fine," Johnny nodded. "Well, I could be better, actually. I think I'll head on home."

"I was gonna offer ya a beer, but you look like you need to hit the sack for a while."

"Yeah, mebbe so." Johnny gathered up Barranca's reins from the hitching post.

Val turned serious. "I still need to talk to you, Johnny. I got an idea what went on, but I still need your statement. Those two men that came in to the undertaker with Taylor? One was wanted for a shootin' in Colorado. Killed a rancher."

Johnny looked up. "The one with the scar?" He touched his cheek to indicate the area on the cocky kid.

"That's the one. Derek Coleman. The other one was from Los Angeles. Robbed a bank and fled the area with his little brother."

"What was his name?" Johnny asked casually, trying not to grimace from his growing headache.

"The brothers were Josh and Terry Stedman. Josh's the one that got away."

So the kid had a name now. Johnny touched his tender temple with a fingertip and casually asked, "He been in town?"

"Don't know, but I've been gone a day."

Johnny moved to Barranca's side. "Well, I'd like to talk with ya, Val, but I really should be getting' back."

Val slapped Johnny's shoulder again. "Think you're right. Get some more rest, will ya?"

"Sure, sure. Bye now, Val."

"See ya later, Johnny. We'll talk when you're feelin' better."

Johnny mounted, and then with a nod to his friend, reined the palomino out of town at a walk. Once they were clear, he pushed the tired horse into a slow lope and turned him east. It would be several hours to the mesa, and the sun would be set before he got there. The game horse was going to be pushed to the limit.



Murdoch rode into town hot and immediately found Val at his desk as he was going through wanted posters. The eldest Lancer spoke without preamble as soon as he closed the door behind him.

"Val, someone's kidnapped Teresa."

"What?" Val barked, jumping to his feet. "When?"

"About three hours ago. Scott's out with my men looking for a trail. We're pretty sure she was taken at South Point." The big man turned to lead the way out.

Val scowled. "That place is cursed." He grabbed his hat and a rifle. "Did you tell Johnny?"

Murdoch stopped with his hand on the door knob, and slowly turned back to Val. "Johnny?"

"Yeah. He left just about an hour ago. Didn't you see him on the road from the ranch? He was going home."

"He was here in town?"

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

Val paused, and nodded. "Yeah. I spoke to him just outside the bank."

Murdoch looked out the window and saw Melvin Barnes locking the doors to the bank. Immediately, he yanked open the sheriff's door and strode across the street, hailing the banker.

"Murdoch! Good to see you again. I hope you're here to accompany your son." The older man's voice dropped for his and Murdoch's ears only. "I know he's good with a gun and all, but I'd still be nervous having my son riding around with that kind of cash."

The Lancer patriarch bit back his surprise as he came to an abrupt stop. "Yes," he said evenly, mind whirling.

"I was rather surprised. You usually use bank drafts. I hope this doesn't become a habit. \$5,000 is a lot of cash to be riding all the way to Stockton with. Far be it for me to tell you your business, though." Barnes smiled.

"No, you're right," Murdoch replied, stymied, but going along with the information. "It's a one-time thing."

"That's good to know. Well, I'll see you later, Murdoch. Watch out for your boy. He didn't look too well. Good evening."

"Good evening, Melvin." Murdoch watched the banker walk away, alarm rising in his heart. Val stood in the doorway of his office, rifle in hand and a puzzled look on his face as Murdoch slowly returned. "Did you see which way Johnny went?"

"Sure. That way. Toward home." Val pointed north. "What's going on, Murdoch?"

Murdoch Lancer wondered that very same thing. After a moment's thought, he met Val's eyes. "We have about an hour of daylight. Can you track Johnny?"

"Sure," Val replied, heading to the livery. "But he's got an hour's head start. You don't know where he's goin'?"

"That's what we need to find out. I'll get my horse and fill you in on the way."



Saddleback Mesa fell short of the rolling hills that surrounded it, and had a table-like flat top devoid of any growth taller than the mesquite bushes that dotted the surface. Sun dried golden grass and wild oats filled most of the open space, struggling to survive in the hard-packed soil. The gold ocean rustled softly in the occasional dry breeze coming through the twin peaks known as Saddleback Ridge to the northeast. The mesa was just flat enough that one could almost see the entire area from any one point.

Josh Stedman could be holding Teresa in any one of the surrounding hills and could approach the mesa from any direction. Tiredly, Johnny surveyed the mesa from the western most view point as Barranca breathed heavily with his nose hanging low.

Night had fallen quietly as he pushed his horse to this point, and right now the only thing that made the mesa visible was the pale, dried grass; it reflected the very meager moonlight more efficiently than the surrounding dark green mesquite and manzanita choked hills. He could see the ink black outline of the hills against a star-dazzled sky and wondered briefly how his adopted sister was faring. She was tough, he knew, but everyone had their limit and he hoped she hadn't found hers yet.

Johnny shoved the unpleasant thoughts lurking in the corners of his mind aside and made himself focus on the lay of the land. His head throbbed constantly, but at least the sharp pains that stabbed his temples earlier had receded a little since sunset.

Putting together what he knew so far, Johnny figured that the kid would come from the north; it was closest to South Point. Teresa must be somewhere between South Point and the mesa. He also knew that traveling with a horseless hostage would slow them down. But if he had a partner and another horse or two – Johnny blew out an exasperated breath. His intuition was usually good, but a few more facts sure wouldn't hurt at this point.

He tilted his head and surveyed the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight so far, which was good, but the moon was barely quarter full and didn't offer much light hanging at the hilltops like it was. Instinct told him that his opponent would expect to see him arrive from the west, which was the direction of town. If he rode in from the north instead, he might catch the kidnapper earlier than expected – perhaps even come in behind him.

Johnny reached down and patted Barranca's crusty neck. "*Lo siento, amigo,*" he said quietly. "I know you're tired. We'll take a break an' let the moon get a bit higher. I'm gonna need your eyes to find the trail down from here and every bit of light'll help." He dismounted and loosened the cinch, feeling the heat of exertion radiating from the golden coat. "I'll feed ya when you cool a bit." The horse seemed to understand and cocked a rear leg to relax.

Johnny squatted and thoughtfully chewed on some jerky. He memorized what he could of the night-shrouded terrain surrounding the mesa and tried to ignore the feeling of loneliness he felt creeping into his soul.



Under the same moon, Scott paced near a dying fire. They had managed to push on for a while after sunset, but Cipriano insisted they stop before the darkness caused them to disturb any of the faint marks he'd managed to find on the hard ground.

The shooter's spot and Barranca's prints were quickly found. The imprints didn't follow the same path for long, and when Cipriano realized that Johnny was heading for town, Scott refocused their attentions to the other path. They had been steadily heading south and east.

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As Jelly repacked the ominous assortment of medical supplies he had hastily shoved into his too fat saddlebags, Cipriano and some of the other hands familiar with the area discussed mines and caves and any abandoned buildings or line shacks trying to discern where Teresa would most likely be held. The list was dishearteningly long. By the time night fell, the familiar double peak of Saddleback Ridge could be seen far to the southeast as spilled ink against scattered diamonds.

Somewhere out there, Teresa was living a nightmare. Scott tried to at least rest a little, knowing it would be impossible to sleep. He could hear the half-dozen hands around him, also not sleeping, and decided to try and plan their next move without knowing where they were going or who they were dealing with. All he could do was pray they would get there in time, and that vexed him to no end.

After an hour of restlessness, Scott got to his feet. The lookout nodded in his direction once, and returned his gaze to the darkness. He turned his back on the sentinel and found his feet walking in the direction of Saddleback Ridge, his eyes cast to the ground in front of him hoping to find a clue.

The slice of moon was high in the sky and the brightest it was ever going to get. Scott patiently walked in a sweeping pattern, back and forth. He didn't know what he was looking for and was surprised when he found it.

He'd wandered over a half-mile when he saw it. If the moon had been at a lower angle, or the night overcast, he probably wouldn't have seen it because of the shadows thrown by the shrubs. Stopping, Scott stared at the play of light and could see parallel lines on the ground. The lines weren't in the dirt, but instead, were lines of dry, golden grass unbroken by the heavier, thicker brush that surrounded them.

Old wagon wheel ruts, overgrown with the years. Scott's heart jumped. The grassy lines were headed directly toward the low mountains between where he stood and Saddleback Ridge.

Without a second thought, Scott turned on his heel and returned to the horses. As he saddled up, the sentinel approached and asked what he was doing.

"I'll be back in a little while. I just want to check something out. I don't want to risk damaging the signs Cip's following, so I'll go alone." He swung up and pointed the buckskin's nose in the desired direction. "I'll be back in a little while."

Scott set the horse into a fast walk and set out into the night.



Teresa tried to wiggle into a position that would help relieve the pins and needles shooting into her limbs, but wasn't very successful. She hadn't been able to feel her hands for a while now, and wondered what they looked like. Again, she tested the bonds tying her wrists to her beltline. They held fast. Instead, she concentrated on working the blindfold up just enough to see. Breathing raggedly around the gag, she settled to the dirt floor once again until her breathing leveled out.

The young woman heard the murmur of the two men, but no specific words. She smelled a fire, and saw a flickering orange glow in the slice of outside world she had under the bottom edge of the blindfold. Teresa tried to figure out how that information could help her, and the only thing that came to mind was that they wouldn't light a fire deep inside a tunnel. That must mean they may be near an exit. Teresa then concentrated on what she could feel, and got a small thrill of victory when she felt the hint of a cool breeze brush her cheek. Then the sound of footsteps made her freeze.

"Time for some water, my dear." She recognized the voice of the older man and the power of his grip as he pulled her to a sitting position by her bicep. A squeak of pain escaped her throat and stalled at the gag, resulting in a gasping sound. Teresa sat still as she felt hands loosen the knot at the nape of her neck.

When the gag was pulled free, she took a deep breath. Before she could exhale, a canteen was shoved to her lips and tepid water poured into her mouth. Teresa gagged, choked and shook her head; water coursed down her chin. The man laughed and grabbed a handful of her hair.

"Hold still, girl, you're wastin' water." He jerked her hair back, raising her chin, and poured more water into her mouth. She choked shortly, but managed a pair of wild gulps. The man released her hair. "That's enough for now," he chuckled. Teresa felt him grab the gag hanging around her neck.

Before the only opportunity left her was taken away, Teresa screamed as loud as she could. She felt the hand on the gag jerk in surprise.

"Holy Moses!" the man yelped in surprise.

Teresa's scream continued until her lungs were drained, and she immediately started again, taking full advantage of her only, desperate opportunity and ignoring the sound of scrambling feet. Then something struck her cheek, and she hit the ground hard. She took a sobbing breath, readying another scream, but was brutally stopped by hands on her face.

Mercifully, the second slap knocked her into darkness.

## CHAPTER TEN

Before the end of the first scream's echo, Barranca's attention was full in the direction of the heart-wrenching sound. It was very faint, but Johnny knew what it was immediately; Madrid had heard more screaming than he cared to remember. His fist squeezed the reins tighter in response.

Carefully, and with barely contained control, the professional gunfighter emerged as each piece that was Lancer was isolated and locked away – the pain, the emotion, the connections, the desire for family. Without it all, he could do what needed to be done with total focus.

The second scream lined up his direction of travel a bit more accurately.

The night had seemed long so far, and the position of the moon told Johnny it was just barely half over. The palomino kept on, nose to a barely visible deer trail, an occasional stumble telling of his weariness. When they crested a hill that was strangely barren on its peak, Johnny finally got his first glimpse of his quarry. In the ebony hills surrounding the Mesa he saw the tiny golden flicker of a campfire; the kid finally made a mistake.

Johnny pulled the tired horse to a stop, sharply aware of the sticky stiffness of dried sweat on the golden neck. Urgency told him to push on but common sense made him realize the folly of forcing Barranca to his limit right now. Thoughts of what Teresa could be going through threatened to overwhelm him entirely, refusing to be locked away with the other thoughts of family. The palomino seemed to feel the conflict and took a tentative step, willing to push on. Johnny considered it as he gauged the darkness.

He squinted at the waxing quarter moon slightly west of its apex and figured he'd seen all the light it was going to offer tonight. It was time for a rest. Stiffly, he slipped from the horse, his knees wobbling alarmingly, as a lance of pain jarred his temple. His stomach began to rise in protest, but Johnny clenched his jaws and willed it into submission. The fever was easier to ignore than the symptoms of the concussion.

Focus. He had to focus. The mechanical motions of caring for his horse helped. The measure of grain was not only welcome, but necessary if he was to continue to push the horse.

As Barranca consumed his confection, Johnny chewed on jerky and studied the golden flicker of fire, trying to calculate the distance. With that in mind, the gunfighter began to absorb his surroundings in more detail. A light strip in the darkness indicated a dry creek bed at the bottom of this rise. Johnny noted that it ran in the general direction of the fire. He nodded in satisfaction, his path for the night chosen.

When Barranca finished his treat, Johnny tightened the cinch. The tired horse gave a sigh, and Johnny was hit with a pang of guilt. He rubbed the gold face. "Just a little further, amigo, then we'll stop for a while longer. Promise."

Johnny climbed as gracefully as he could into the saddle and found his stirrup. His head swam. "Come on," he said softly with a subtle nudge of his knees. Barranca dropped his nose along the requested trail and began to pick his way down the slope to the sandy path below.

Barranca's hooves made a shussing noise as he moved in the dry sand. Johnny pointed the horse in the right direction and the pair followed the curves and bends at a steady pace. When the scent of smoke hit the gunfighter's nose, he knew he was as close. Estimation put him to be very nearly below the campfire, and much closer than Johnny had dared hope to get.

By the position of the moon, Johnny estimated dawn to be only a handful of hours off. All he had to do was set up and wait until morning and he could stop this before it went any further. Sliding from the saddle, he hit the sandy earth with watery knees. He took a moment to gather strength and focus. Finally feeling somewhat sturdy and able to ignore his pounding head, Johnny looked around.

Finding a suitable spot in the sandy creek bed, he ground tied Barranca and began to dig in the sand. Soon he was rewarded with damp sand, and eventually a trickle of muddy water. His mount's nose interfered with his deepening of the hole, but the horse was eventually rewarded with a shallow pool of muddy water. Barranca drank thirstily. When the palomino was done, Johnny pushed his canteen in the hole and managed to fill it. He drank some, wiped his hot face down, and hung the vessel on the saddle along with his hat.

Resting his hand on the saddlebag fat with cash, Johnny considered for a moment simply following orders and showing up on the Mesa like he'd intended when he got the cash from the bank. Was he risking Teresa's life with his plan to push? Was it possible she would simply be let go? At that moment, Alexandra's face came to mind, and, coupled with the memory of the earlier scream, his heart skipped. He couldn't hope for a good outcome following their rules.

This kid wasn't going to catch him flatfooted again. Something told the ex-gunfighter that if the kid walked away with the cash, it wouldn't be over. Johnny

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wanted to be sure that this was going to end here, today. With that in mind, he considered the cash an ace up his sleeve to be used if necessary. Johnny gave the horse a reassuring pat on the rump. Again, he had to bring the gunfighter attitude to bear, trying not to acknowledge the slipping ability to keep the mask in place.

“I’ll be back. Get some rest, compadre.” Gold ears flicked in his direction as he spoke, and he left his friend after an affectionate and welcome rub at the base of the horse’s ear.

With the cinch slightly loosened Johnny felt the horse was as comfortable as he could make him, and tied him to a sturdy manzanita. Anxious to get a bead on his quarry, Johnny took a deep breath and began to climb upward into the shadows of the night.

By dawn, he planned on having the kidnapper in the sights of his Colt.



The girl’s screams had unnerved Dawson. The kid, too, seemed to be unable to settle down and that set the older man’s teeth on edge. His rifle had been at his side ever since, and the gunman found himself prowling around outside the mouth of the mine in a larger and larger perimeter as the fire slowly died.

There was no way anyone could know where they were, but Travis Dawson knew better than to underestimate Johnny Madrid. He’d seen and heard of the pistolero conquering the worst situations by being totally unexpected as well as impressively fast. He also recalled the few hard earned lessons early in his own career where he’d underestimated his opponent but had managed to survive. Never again.

The kid had shown a level head to call in an expert after his first meeting with the Pinkerton agent; Josh Stedman would never survive a meeting with Madrid. Dawson’s casual friendship with the brothers was about to pay off and he could put enough space between himself and Los Angeles to feel comfortable.

Madrid was the only thing in his way at the moment.

Dawson absently caressed the rifle as he squinted into the dark. The kid finally fell asleep around midnight, but the older man’s senses were on full alert. Keeping the horses within his sight, he’d noticed the animals’ interest in one particular direction for the past hour. He could easily dismiss their attention to the proximity of coyotes, owls or some other night creature, but Dawson wasn’t about to take anything for granted, especially with five thousand dollars at stake.

Dawson was realistic enough to know anything was possible. The narrow path they’d taken to get to this mine wasn’t the only way out - he’d made sure of that. The kid would be following a deer trail he’d scouted to the Mesa where the exchange would take place. After making sure he was alone, Dawson would take out Madrid from another angle and they would be free and clear.

The kid hadn't asked about the girl and assumed she would be released. Dawson had other ideas.

The rifleman made his way back down the trail naturally keeping to the shadows. The path here was carved in stone hard clay, the parallel wagon wheel marks from years past still visible. Earlier, Dawson had nearly turned an ankle in one of the tracks, and now was careful to stay between them.

At one point the trail skirted around a large boulder and curved very near an edge that sloped away to the valley below. Dawson considered the boulder a prime object to hide behind for an ambush, so he took the turn wide to go around it. As he did so, he glanced down into the valley beside him.

The moon's light barely illuminated a light patch below and Dawson paused, remembering the dry creek bed below. Mentally, he traced its path in relation to the neighboring hills and realized it curved around in the same direction that caught the horses' interest a little earlier.

He wondered, mentally calculated, and a spark of possibility came to him. Rooted to the path, he quickly estimated the probability of Madrid getting this far; his answer pushed him into motion. Still keeping to the shadows, Dawson slinked back to camp, his eyes in constant motion. He put his hand over the kid's mouth and shook him sharply.

Leaning close to Stedman's ear, Dawson whispered firmly as the boy's eyes flew open. "Quiet! I think he's here. You need to keep watch and saddle the horses. Now that the fire's dead and the moon's about set he can't do anything until dawn. I'm setting up now and will keep an eye on you and the site. Understand?"

Josh nodded, and once released from Dawson's grip, clambered to his feet and checked his gun. His eyes were huge in the dark. "Madrid? Here?" he choked.

"I'm not takin' any chances. Keep your eyes open. If he shows himself, I'll be coverin' him. Go on with the exchange. I'll be watching. I won't do anything until the money is secure." Josh nodded quickly and moved to saddle the horses as the rifleman melted into the night.

It was a dangerous game of cat and mouse. Dawson was sure he had the upper hand, and by noon tomorrow, planned on being \$5,000.00 richer with no witnesses.



When the moon finally dipped below the hills, Scott knew that dawn would be showing itself very soon. Still not sleepy, he pulled up the buckskin and decided to wait out the darkness until the trail was visible again. Sometime, he wasn't exactly sure when, Scott had made the decision to follow this meager trail to its end. It may have had something to do with the noise he'd heard earlier; it wasn't so much that he was unable to identify it, but the fact that it seemed to come from the other end of the

parallel tracks he followed. If there was one thing Scott Lancer had learned about this land, it was that coincidence wasn't usually found in nature.

Allowing his mind to wander, the young widower found his thoughts inexorably settling on Alexandra. For the first time since her death, he finally felt the trace of a smile on his face as he recalled her laughing face and parts of the many conversations they had had. It was comforting for a little while until he began to recall how she and Teresa had become so close. Suddenly, he felt a cold stone in his stomach, and he pulled his thoughts back into the present.

Scott jerked back into awareness and was surprised to see the barely perceivable lightening of the sky that indicated the start of dawn. He quickly glanced around, a bit surprised at being so engrossed in thought and memory that time had passed unnoticed. Clearing his throat nervously, he nudged his horse onward. The parallel trail of golden grass was becoming easier to see with the hint of light.

Eventually, the overgrown ruts wound and climbed. Then the flat openness disappeared along with the grass and the hard packed trail began to wind around one hill, a narrow path along the edge of a valley. Once he pulled abreast of a particularly large boulder that he jogged around, Scott saw the openness of Saddleback Mesa open before him in the flat light of pre-dawn.

He stopped, suddenly aware that the buckskin's attitude had changed, and Scott was instantly on edge - something around the bend had the animal's attention. Scott slipped from the saddle intending to peek around the boulder, but a soft whickering from the other side stopped him cold. He slipped his hand over the buckskin's nostrils so the horse was unable to respond to the unseen horse.

Someone was on the other end of this trail.

Carefully, Scott led his horse back the way they came and looked for a tall stand of brush to conceal and secure his mount. Tingling with anticipation, he pulled his rifle from the saddle scabbard. Deeply engrained military training took over as the ex-officer scanned the area for his best position. He chose to go up and over.



The sky was as bright as it would be before the sun would actually appear. Johnny was satisfied that when the sun crested the eastern hills, it would be nearly in line with the mine opening behind the dead campfire – a small advantage, but one advantage nonetheless. The horses that he'd heard rustling during the dark hours became visible with the pre-dawn light, and he'd studied them closely. Two horses, fully saddled. Shortly after, he saw the kid and felt a race of rage spike his blood.

The kid still had the nervous edge Johnny remembered, and that's when instinct kicked in; Josh Stedman wasn't working alone. There was nothing blatantly glaring about the kid or the campsite that told him this, but he'd learned to trust his instincts a

very long time ago. As it got lighter, the one thing he did notice was that there was an empty rifle sheath on one of the saddles with no rifle in sight.

It could be in the mine, where he had no doubt Teresa was at the moment, but Johnny couldn't convince himself of that. His inner voice was telling him that the rifle and its owner were out there, doing just what he was doing right now. Johnny's actions had been second guessed all along, and he was sure that it was happening again. This had all the earmarks of an ambush.

Although part of him wanted to storm the mine and get Teresa, the other part knew that they would be picked off like sitting ducks. Johnny knew he had to locate the rifleman before making any moves and his only choice was to wait. If he couldn't pinpoint the gunman by 9:00, he'd have to go in for the scheduled exchange and take it from there.

Johnny settled in, working to push aside the vision of Teresa in the cave and the pain of his pounding head. One of the horses at the site nickered softly, and the kid moved in to quiet the animal. Johnny saw that Josh looked around nervously. After quieting the horse, he moved to the relative cover of the mine opening.

Many quiet minutes passed. Johnny scanned the hills constantly, searching for any sign of the second man. Then, just as the sun broke over the hills, something caught the interest of the two horses at the mine, and their ears snapped forward. Their gaze was in the direction of Saddleback Mesa.

Johnny followed their stares and saw figures moving in the distance – two people on horseback. They were too far away to identify them, but after a few moments of study, Johnny could see that they were following his own trail and just beginning the descent into the dry riverbed.

Whoever it was left Johnny no choice. He had to push the schedule and face the kid now. If the two riders were backup for the kid, he needed to get Teresa now. If the unknown riders were from Lancer, they were unknowingly riding into an ambush.

Johnny took a few seconds more to study the distant forms again. His decision was made as soon as he recognized the stocky profile of his father's sorrel as they turned downhill.

Without a second thought, Johnny descended down to Barranca, tightened the cinch, and mounted up. Directing the palomino up the rim of the wash, the pair of them came out on the Mesa as close to the mine as they could be. He pulled the horse to a stop, and, with the rising sun backing him up, waited to be noticed.



Dawson was surprised to see Madrid seemingly pop up out of nowhere and completely expose himself on the Mesa, but wasn't going to let this chance pass him by. He repositioned himself slightly, having to step more into the open than he

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desired, but still feeling confident. Now all he had to do was wait until the kid had the cash in hand.



Josh Stedman's heart about leaped from his throat when he saw the single rider seemingly appear from nowhere and face him from the Mesa. Stumbling back into the mine, he unceremoniously hauled his captive to her feet. Teresa gasped and tried to break free, but she was no match for the agitated young man as he dragged her from the mine and into the open. He held her in front of him like a shield, his handgun pressed into the soft part under her jaw until she cringed.

The young man squinted into the sun, unable to discern any details of the rider. His gut told him who it was.

"You're early, Madrid!" the boy shouted, his voice sounding a bit higher than he'd hoped. "I'll shoot!"

The rider didn't move. Instead a low, even voice, void of any emotion, sounded back. "Let's get this done, Stedman."

The use of his name frazzled the kid some more, but he held his ground. "Drop your gun and we'll come down!"

After a moment, the form did as he was told. Keeping his hostage between him and the dark form, the kid moved to the horses, glad that Dawson had told him to saddle them earlier. He shoved the girl up into the saddle of the closest one and then managed to mount up behind her. The kid wrapped one arm around her waist and grabbed the reins, and held the gun to her side with the other. Carefully, he guided the horse down Dawson's previously laid out path.

Josh knew Dawson was out there somewhere and it gave him the courage to approach the shadowy form. As soon as the cash was in his hands, Madrid would be dead. Closer now, he could make out the golden coat of the horse and the frightening, hooded eyes of Madrid. The gunfighter sat in a relaxed slump, motionless, both hands resting on the saddle horn.

"Where's the money?" Josh snapped, stopping his horse about twenty feet from the palomino.

"Saddlebag," Johnny drawled without moving. His relaxed posture made the boy tense a little more, and Teresa groaned as the gun pressed deeper. Johnny's eyes flicked to the girl's face for a moment, and then settled back on the boy. "Want me to show you?"

"No," Josh snapped. "Get down. Keep your hands where I can see them." Johnny slid from Barranca's back and stood, eyes still locked on the kid. "Drop the reins and back up." Again, Johnny followed the orders. As he backed up, the kid slid off his horse dragging Teresa to the ground with him. Still using her as a shield, the

pair moved forward until they were next to the palomino. They stopped beside the fat saddlebag.

Not taking his eyes from Madrid and keeping the gun pressed firmly against Teresa's body, Josh checked the saddlebag, unbuckling it and the inner bank bag without looking. Feeling the cash, the kid finally smiled. He'd won. "Good thing you believed me, Madrid, or the girl would be dead right now." He backed up enough to get Barranca's reins and positioned the horse between them and the infamous gunfighter.

"Trade's done. Give me the girl." Madrid's voice gave the kid chills and he felt his heart race again.

"The trade's done when I say!" Josh's voice didn't sound as strong as he'd hoped, and he wondered what was taking Dawson so long to shoot. Maybe I'm in the way. Sure would be nice to know where he is.

Figuring Madrid would be dead as soon as he mounted the palomino, the kid stuck his foot in the stirrup, and, still pressing his gun against the girl, swung his leg over.

That's when all hell broke loose.



Scott made it to his vantage point just as the sun topped the far ridge and saw a drama playing out below. The kid, with Teresa in his grip, was checking Barranca's saddlebag. Scott brought his rifle to bear. Just as he got a bead on the kid and his trigger finger began to squeeze, he saw a motion to the north in the periphery of his vision. Instinctively, he swung his rifle to it and saw the head and shoulders of a man lining up a rifle on his brother.

Scott coolly squeezed the trigger at his new target and yelled at Johnny to run.

It took a moment for Scott to realize the other shooter had fired almost at the same time. He jacked another round into the rifle, but when he looked for his target, it was gone. Scott turned the gun to the Mesa, where he saw Johnny pushing himself to his hands and knees. The kid was trying to get Barranca to move, but the frightened horse was fighting him. Teresa was on the ground next to the prancing hooves, struggling to sit up.

Scott scanned the brush looking for the shooter. Not seeing him, he started down to get the single horse tied below him before the shooter made another move. It was a steep grade, and the desperate blond found himself scrambling for control and balance as he descended at an ever increasing speed. Near the bottom of his slide, he saw the shooter break from the brush on the edge of the Mesa, rifle still in hand, and run right up to the recalcitrant palomino. The figure pulled the kid off in one mighty yank and quickly took his place on the dancing horse. The kid jumped up and the gunman shot him point blank with the rifle.

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Scott felt sick.

Johnny was on his feet and stumbled toward Teresa. The gunman got Barranca turned using brute force. As Scott's feet hit level ground, his rifle was instantly on his shoulder and he got a quick shot off as the other gunman was bringing his rifle to bear on Johnny. Barranca reared and bolted when Scott's shot hit by his feet. The gunman shifted his rifle, and changed his plans, pulling the palomino's head aside and smacking him hard across the flank with the flat stock of the rifle. Barranca leaped forward and dropped out of sight into the dry wash below.

Scott jumped on the horse near him and lit out for the Mesa, yelling Johnny's name. By the time he forged a path to the Mesa, Johnny had veered away from Teresa and caught the kid's horse.

"Let him go, Johnny!" Scott yelled as he galloped to them, shocked that his brother was ignoring Teresa. All the anger from a week ago surged to the surface again in the apparent disregard of the girl's safety. "Damn it, Teresa needs us!" Instead, Johnny pulled himself into the saddle none too gracefully. Scott roughly pulled his mount to a stop near the girl and jumped off, stumbling a few steps before falling to his knees next to her. Teresa writhed uncontrollably as Scott loosened the gag and blindfold, and she sobbed in great gulps of air.

"My gun!" Johnny yelled in a hoarse voice. "Toss me my gun!"

Scott's hands continued to work Teresa's bindings. He glared at his brother with icy eyes. "Let him go, Johnny! He doesn't matter!"

"He's heading right at Murdoch, Scott!" Johnny's tone was a terrifying mix of anguish and desperation. When Scott's head jerked up at that news, he saw that his little brother's eyes were wide with fevered fear. "I've got to stop him! My gun! There!"

It took a second for the words to sink in. Scott dropped his eyes over Teresa's shaking shoulders and saw the Colt on the ground. He held her off a moment and grabbed it. Johnny rode right up on them and snatched the gun from his brother's hand as he galloped by.

That's when Scott noticed the blood. The gunman hadn't missed after all.

"Johnny, wait!" Scott called, now frantically trying to release the girl from her bonds.

"Stop him!" Teresa begged between her tears. "Scott, we have to go after him! One of them is hired gun. Johnny's sick. . ."

"He's more than sick," Scott grunted, finally freeing her hands. "He's shot, too." He stood and hauled her to her feet, then firmly held her shoulders. He could feel her violent quivering. "Teresa, honey, are you all right? Can you ride?"

"They didn't really hurt me," she said weakly, her tingling hand automatically feeling the cheek that Dawson had slapped. "I was just so scared." Her eyes trailed past her brother to the body on the ground, and she let out a little groan. "Scott, the hired gun's still alive."

“I know. Can you ride?” She nodded shortly, and they both got on the remaining horse. “My horse is right around the hill,” he said, kicking the jittery animal into a lope back to the mine. In no time, following the dried wheel tracks, they collected Scott’s buckskin. He glanced back in the direction of Lancer and on the distant horizon he saw the shimmering shadow of a moving mass. “It’s Cipriano! Teresa, ride to them and tell them what happened. I’m going after Johnny.”

Scott glanced up and saw that Teresa’s eyes were wide and heavy with tears. She was obviously more than terrified, but she bit her lip and nodded. He smiled encouragingly at her, and then reached out to gently grasp her trembling hand. “You’re quite a girl, you know that? Now go get my backup for me.”

That was enough to get a spark in her eyes and a determined set to her mouth. Teresa nodded, and then kicked the horse into a run and headed toward the ranch hands while Scott turned the buckskin to help his brother and father.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Johnny pushed his horse up the wash and was finally rewarded with a glimpse of silver tail. Without slowing, Johnny pursed his lips and whistled.

When they rounded the curve of the wash, it was obvious Barranca's gait had broken - the distance between them had narrowed. Johnny whistled again, and the horse slowed even more. The gunman spurred the palomino's sides and cracked the golden flank with the ends of the reins; Barranca, becoming agitated, bucked as he was forced forward. When Johnny whistled a third time, the horse tossed his head, fighting the bit, and dug in with all four feet. Leather slapped hide in sharp retorts.

Finally, Barranca reared. The kidnapper jerked the reins sideways and they both toppled over.

Johnny saw his chance and drove his horse hard, hoping to get within Colt range before his foe gained his feet.

At a full gallop in deep sand, Johnny's horse seemed to be moving in slow motion. Johnny raised his Colt and began to aim but Barranca was struggling to place his feet and blocking the shot. Dawson's rifle, which had been lying across his lap in the saddle, was now firmly in his grip as he kicked free of the stirrups.

The maneuver seemed impossible, but Dawson managed to roll to his stomach, pull the rifle to him and aim from the chest. For anyone else, the shot would have been wild.

Johnny's horse went down in a spray of sand with a guttural squeal, burying Johnny with its body. A blinding flash was followed by the dull thrum of pain as his head struck the riverbed. It stunned him for several moments. He felt the animal twitch momentarily after coming to a rest, but there was no follow-up motion or effort to rise. Johnny tried to roll, confused as to why he couldn't move his leg.

Barranca, shaken, backed away from the scene and Dawson divided his attention between getting the palomino and his cash or making sure the chase was over.

Slowly, it came to Johnny that he was trapped under the dead horse. It took several fleeting seconds for him to realize his gun was gone. He glanced groggily

around while trying to free his leg and arm from under the dead weight, and a stab of pain in his thigh sharpened his senses. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw the gunman finally snatch Barranca's reins and turn toward them, his rifle at his side like an extension of his arm. Johnny turned to face him, keeping his Madrid mask firmly in place even though his head pounded and his vision blurred. Neck muscles shrieked at the effort it took to keep his head lifted from the earth.

The predator's eyes brightened.

"Name's Dawson," the gunman said with triumph in his voice as he measured up his rival with his eyes. "And I get to be the one who finally puts Madrid in the ground." Barranca danced at the end of the reins. "All I really wanted was the money, but I won't turn my back on the added bonus."

Johnny felt his searching fingers bump the Colt under the dead horse's thick crest. "Kinda low class, shootin' a man when he's down," Johnny drawled as his fingers wrapped around the pistol butt tangled in the mass of mane. Dawson opened his mouth to reply, but Johnny was finally able to pull his gun free in a disjointed motion, distracting Dawson, whose rifle barrel came up in an instinctual response for a shot from the hip.

Dawson managed to get off a shot that solidly hit near the dead horse's withers and ricocheted off the pommel of Johnny's saddle. Johnny's shot was better, and winged the gunman. Dawson stumbled backward, the rifle falling from its useless grip. Cursing, Dawson caught his balance as he grabbed his right arm, and moved behind Barranca. Johnny knew he had just shattered his opponent's elbow and hoped that gave him a precious few seconds to get his wits about him. His vision swam; focus pulsing in time with his throbbing head. The burn of a new injury in his thigh made itself known with blinding clarity.

Johnny fought to keep his thoughts in order and keep track of Dawson. He held his Colt aloft, but it wavered like a sapling in the wind. Dawson finally managed to climb on Barranca, but he listed to one side. Dizzy and with fading vision, Johnny tried to whistle again, but his mouth was too dry and his lips didn't seem to want to obey him. He tried to shout, but he didn't seem to have any energy left. His arm dropped, the gun suddenly too heavy to hold aloft.

His head sank back into the sand, his fuzzy thoughts heavy on Murdoch. As a surge from somewhere inside helped Johnny to raise his pistol at the blurry pair. "*Lo siento, amigo*," he muttered softly to the spirited palomino. Johnny knew his aim wasn't too accurate at this point and that he would probably hit his four footed friend, but Murdoch was just ahead and riding right into danger. It was a sacrifice he had to make.

Johnny forced the drooping gun up again and took shaky aim, but the sharp gunshot from another direction made him jerk with surprise. Dawson flew from the saddle and landed in the wash with a dry thump. Warily, Johnny let his arm drop into

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the sand, consciousness fleeing at an alarming rate. Pain enveloped him, but he had to smile when he felt the warm breath from Barranca's soft muzzle on his cheek.

That's when Johnny's world went dark and he was almost grateful for it.



Scott thundered back past the mine and onto the Mesa, his mind racing. A mental clock ticking in his head told him he was too far behind his brother and he quickly assessed alternatives. The dry wash was too winding and sandy to catch up, but he could cut across the Mesa and come in from above; he just hoped the pair hadn't left the wash already.

He leaned low and the buckskin responded, hooves pounding on the hard ground. Although the horse was already weary from being ridden all night, it answered the request to open up without question.

The horse's ears were pinned back with effort, the tawny neck foaming with sweat. The sound of gunfire at first seemed to echo from everywhere, but when Scott put the horse near the edge of the Mesa and slowed a bit, he was able to pinpoint the location. Finally, a golden flash caught his attention. Scott backed from the edge to keep from being spotted and reined in, pulling his rifle before vaulting to the ground.

Prone on his belly, Scott pulled himself to the edge and looked over. Below was the heart stopping sight of a dead horse and a trapped rider – Johnny, whose gun hand was obviously failing him. Even though his heart was pounding Scott carefully placed the rifle and sought his target. The shifting palomino made it difficult, but not impossible, to get a fix on Teresa's tormentor.

The injured gunman sat the golden horse crookedly, his bloody right arm pressed against his stomach, and Scott could see the feral smile on the man's face as he made a quick wrap of the reins around the saddle horn with his left hand.

Johnny's shaky gun tracked the movement, but sagged alarmingly.

The mounted killer looked down at Scott's injured brother with that deadly grin as he drew his handgun awkwardly with his left hand. He swung it toward his target.

Scott fired and at that second, for the first time in a week, he found he didn't feel completely helpless.



Murdoch and Val followed the sound of gunfire having no idea what to expect. When they rounded the final curve, Barranca spooked and threw his head, but didn't go far from the body on the ground at his feet.

"Johnny!" Murdoch pushed forward and Val was about to do the same when a still form off to the side caught his eye. Instead, the Sheriff dismounted to check the other body.

Murdoch stiffly dismounted next to his son and placed his shaking fingers on Johnny's neck. Faint and racing, but the pulse was there against the boy's hot skin. The gash from a week ago was split even wider open, caked with sand and dirt, and oozed pitifully. Johnny's head lolled side to side with the motions of the big man's hands as Murdoch checked the boy for injuries.

"MURDOCH!" The senior Lancer's head jerked up at the distant call, and he saw a lanky form waving at him from the edge of the Mesa. "I'M COMING DOWN!"

Murdoch gave Scott an acknowledging wave. "Val!" he called after turning his attention back to Johnny. His normally strong voice was shaky. "Help me dig him out. I can't tell if he's hurt anywhere else. I don't understand where Teresa is!"

The sheriff dropped next to the older man and began to dig from one side of Johnny as Murdoch dug from the other. They were still unable to extricate the unconscious man.

"We're gonna need help," Val panted. "Maybe pull the horse off? We need to keep looking for Teresa, too, Murdoch."

"Let's see what Scott knows," Murdoch said faintly, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. Breathing heavily from their effort, both men tried to think of other options as they struggled to keep their worry about both the boy and Teresa in control.

Muted voices caught their attention and they turned in time to see Scott, followed by Cipriano and Teresa. Scott dropped from the buckskin and sprinted past his father to kneel by his brother's side. He gently held the limp head in his hands. The other men swarmed around the trapped son, throwing out ideas on what to do.

Something broke inside the big Scot when he watched the girl slip from her horse amongst all the frenzy, and he found himself pulling the trembling girl into his arms without even knowing how he got to her side.

Teresa finally broke down when she felt the strong arms of her father figure envelop her, the feeling of being safe allowing the release of her tears. Murdoch rested his cheek against the top of her head as she sobbed, and he calmed her with a low, reassuring voice.

His eyes, however, were on Johnny and he couldn't help but wonder if, after all this, his family would stay intact.



While they discussed how to best extricate Johnny, Cipriano escorted a reluctant Teresa home. She tried to convince her guardian that she was fine, but Murdoch would not be swayed. Teresa was going home. Finally, she gave in, taking comfort in knowing that she would have the house ready to receive Johnny. She and the Segundo were to direct a wagon back to meet up with the rescue party, and make sure that any other needed supplies were on board.

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Another hand was sent to alert the doctor while a pair of men began to rig a travois to get Johnny out of the wash and meet the wagon on the trail. Scott directed all the action from his brother's side, refusing to leave.

Once Teresa was out of sight, Murdoch was able to settle across from his older son. Scott had positioned Johnny's head on his thigh so the injured man's spine was level. Someone handed the eldest Lancer a canteen and he began to wipe down his younger son's face.

"He's hot," Murdoch said.

"I know," Scott replied quietly. "His fever's not that high, though. I don't know why he's not waking up. I know he's shot somewhere near his hip; that must be it."

They finally got Johnny free by both digging and dragging the dead body of the horse off of him. It took the better part of an hour since the young man never stirred and the group could not tell if they were injuring him more or not. Jelly managed to clean and wrap the head wound while in the middle of the busy workers. The travois was assembled and hooked up to the most willing horse, but before transferring him, Scott, Murdoch and an ever-clucking Jelly gave Johnny a thorough check.

"Here," Scott said, pointing to the thigh that had been trapped under the horse. "Here's the bullet wound." When they rolled him onto his back, the large blood stain in the sand was impossible to miss. "Looks like the dead weight of the horse stemmed the flow a little." He used a knife to cut around the bloody hole in the pants and uncovered an ugly wound covered with dirty sand.

Murdoch rinsed the area with water, and it began to bleed again. A pair of kerchiefs tied together worked as a bandage. It soon blossomed red. Jelly grabbed more bandages from his quickly deflating saddlebags and swore softly when he dropped next to Johnny's leg. As he added more pressure to the bandage, Jelly began to mutter to himself.

Scott had been sitting quietly, wiping down his brother's face and trying to clean the head wound with a kerchief and water. Something in Jelly's tone caught the fraught young man's ear, and he jerked his head up. "You think he broke his leg?"

"I'm not sure," Jelly answered immediately. "I think his thigh bone is broke, maybe his hip, too. Cain't tell - it's a funny shape near his hip. An' he's done opened his head again; probly why he's out cold. Well, that 'n the fever 'n the fall . . . the boy's a mess."

Scott's thoughts turned inward when he saw the look of naked fear briefly exposed in his father's face. Murdoch Lancer wasn't one to wear his feelings on his sleeve and the fear was quickly pulled under control, but the effect on the elder son had already been passed on.

Val returned to the group after checking the dead man's body. "His name's Travis Dawson. He's a hired gun." The sheriff adjusted his gun belt unconsciously.

At the mention of the dead man's name, Scott turned his eyes to Val. "There's another one up on the Mesa, at the north end. He was so young and Dawson shot him. He's dead."

Val nodded and mounted up, a long look lingering on his injured friend. "Sounds like Josh Stedman. Must have met Dawson in Los Angeles. Stedman wasn't more 'n a kid. A stupid kid." He picked up his reins, knowing Johnny couldn't be in better hands. "I'll take care of 'em, Murdoch." He left them to check the Mesa.

The travois was waiting, and it was time to move the injured man. Jelly wisely bound Johnny's legs together so that the uninjured leg could act as a splint. Johnny was stripped of his shirt so it could be soaked in water and draped over him to keep him cool. The young Lancer never moved a muscle or batted an eye during the preparations.

"I bet he didn't sleep all week 'ceptin' when he was at the building site. An' that was more like bein' unconscious. He's exhausted." Jelly insisted on walking with the travois and keeping the shirt wet. "An' so are you, Scott. You ride, I'll walk."

Scott nodded, feeling a little like he was in a dream. He took charge of the travois horse with no argument and spoke quietly to his father. "Jelly and I can take turns walking and riding."

Murdoch nodded. "We need to get out of this wash and onto the main road to meet the ranch wagon. You men," he spoke to the rest of the group "Go ahead and follow the trail. It's sandy, but still pretty clear. Move any obstacles out of the way for the travois. Stop and wait where the trail goes up and out of the wash. We'll need everybody to get Johnny to the top."

The men nodded and mounted, then began to move off. One of the hands managed to catch the skittish palomino and hand him off to Murdoch to pony out. The horse settled down immediately, and like his owner, seemed to surrender to his weariness. Murdoch followed the travois on his horse, watching Jelly's ministrations and feeling a little more confident about the outcome.

Scott was glad to have some quiet and space. He let the horse follow the trail, making sure they avoided the larger rocks. His mind was a whirlwind of emotions and thoughts; thoughts of the East, the West and the definition of family. The scenes of the past hours played over and over in his mind. He suddenly realized sympathy for his brother if this was how his mind had been working for the past week.

The one point of view that always rose to the top was that of his spunky sister-by-heart. With her in mind as he thought back, Scott began to see the error in his thinking this past week. Teresa also represented the West; and then it hit him that Alexandra – being born and bred in San Francisco – was also part of this land, and he loved them both.

Scott hung his head in shame. Anger and sorrow had made him misjudge everything and everyone terribly. Scott had been so angry at himself for allowing the

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West to influence him that he'd failed to see the part of the land that he'd embraced without question.

Suddenly, his heart felt a little lighter. His eyes misted when he reminded himself that his beloved Alexandra and their unborn child were not here physically, but accepted the fact that they, in essence, were always with him. His wife would be happy knowing he had his family to lean on. Scott could now feel that in his newly softened heart.

He glanced back at his too-still brother and knew that he would be all right. Scott didn't have to know what happened at South Mesa anymore, or how Dawson and Stedman fit in. It didn't matter because he trusted Johnny more than anyone else, and knew that he'd done the best he could at the time, if not more than his best, to protect Alexandra. Murdoch was right; he simply had to trust the bond he had with his brother.

The schism of his heart began to mend.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Harlan Garrett was sitting in Teresa's rose garden with a glass of lemonade, enjoying the peace and quiet. Waiting in the house had become uncomfortable with that Maria woman cleaning all around him. He shook his head at the latitudes given to the hired help here. It was appalling.

Garrett was not good at waiting, and that's exactly what he was forced to do before he could see if his opportunity had panned out. Truly, his grandson wouldn't let the horrid roughness of this land absorb him. Scotty had to see that he was better than this, and only in for more hard times if he stayed. Surely, he'd had enough by now.

A motion in the distant hills caught his eye and he stood to see over the garden wall. Squinting, he could barely make out the forms of two riders coming in fast. He put the glass down and made his way to the front porch where he saw, to his astonishment, the girl Teresa and the Mexican foreman. Had all that careful maneuvering failed again? How could this happen? Quickly, he backtracked in his mind and was sure that there was no way for anyone to know his dealings in all this – unless he came face to face with Josh Stedman. Garrett swallowed hard, and then put on the proper concerned face when the girl and the man rode under the white arch.

Maria hustled from the door and stood next to the Bostonian, nervously wringing her hands. When Teresa became clearly visible, the small Mexican let out a little gasp and began muttering in Spanish. When the pair crossed under the white arch, Garrett took a step to meet them but was taken aback as Maria cut in front of him to greet the girl. The older woman was babbling incoherently as Teresa dismounted directly into her arms.

Teresa wavered a moment and allowed the intimate hug, much to Garrett's chagrin. He forced a polite smile on his face as he approached her, his mind whirling with unspoken questions. He picked the one that seemed to be the most innocuous.

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“I’m so glad to see you, my dear!” he said. “Where’s Scotty? Where’s Murdoch? Do they know you’re all right?”

“Yes, yes, they’re all fine, too. I just left them.” She turned to Maria and spoke rapidly in Spanish. Garrett was irked, but kept the plastered smile on his face. After the small Mexican woman gasped and hurried off, Teresa turned to him. “Johnny’s hurt and I need to set up his room I need to gather some herbs . . .” the young woman’s voice trailed off and she ran a shaky hand through her hair. “I must look a sight,” she murmured, sounding on the edge of exhaustion.

Garrett found himself reaching a hand out and sympathetically patting her shoulder. “You must be tired,” he said. “You should rest.”

She smiled briefly, and then pulled herself together right in front of Garrett’s eyes. The girl’s toughness surprised him. “I’ll sleep later. Right now, a quick wash and a change of clothes is what I need. Maria’s gathering the supplies.” She hurried off to the house, leaving the perplexed older man in her wake. The girl should have been in hysterics; he had an idea of what she must have been through based on the fresh bruise on her face.

Curiosity was making him edgy, but Harlan Garrett could wait. There could still be a return in this for him. All he had to do was wait for all the players to assemble to see if his gamble had worked.



Coordinated teamwork and a heavy dose of determination got the travois-turned-stretcher up and out of the wash. The next decision was to either wait for the wagon or keep moving. Jelly insisted they keep going as long as Johnny was unconscious. So they rigged the travois once again. It would still be hours until anyone would reach them.

“Town would be closer,” Jelly pointed out.

“He needs to be home,” Murdoch quietly insisted, Teresa’s voice ringing in his mind. “This family has been apart for too long.” Then the elder Lancer sent the hands back to the ranch ahead of them.

Scott wearily nodded his head in silent agreement, dismounted, and put himself at his brother’s shoulder. “I’ll stay with him.” Jelly gave him a wry look, but mounted the blowing horse without comment.

After the rest and adjustments, they continued on. The slow parade moved quietly, each lost in their own thoughts. Scott kept his brother’s shirt damp and checked for any signs of life in Johnny’s eyes. The older brother had no idea how long he’d been walking when he finally saw some motion in his little brother’s features.

“Hold up, Jelly, I think he’s coming around.” Scott fell to one knee next to his brother’s head, which was now dazedly rolling back and forth. A groan escaped Johnny’s dry lips. “Come on, Johnny. I know you can hear me.” Scott wet a

handkerchief and wiped down the once lax face. "Open up. Look at me." Scott could see motion behind the closed lids, then Johnny's body twitched.



The darkness had been quiet and soothing. Now all he felt was hot and sore - incredibly sore. The higher he climbed out of the shadows the more pain he felt, but there was an inner drive to keep on climbing despite it. A lightning bolt of pain flared in the blackness and Johnny couldn't help but jerk, and that caused more fireworks of pain. He heard himself groan and he searched with one hand to try and push away a pressure he felt on his face. Then he felt more hands on him.

They were crowding him. He needed space to collect himself. Johnny tried to push up, but the hands he felt against his shoulders wouldn't allow it. The pain flashed again. His eyes snapped open, and the sudden brightness made his head explode. His grimace screwed his eyes closed against the light.

"No, no . . ." he insisted, trying to break free. The more he moved the more pain he felt and the heavier the pressure on his shoulders. Johnny felt trapped which immediately ignited panic from some dark place inside. "Let go of me!" he thought he shouted, escalating his resistance.

"Johnny, stop! Stop fighting!"

The words were finally becoming clear, and the voice hit another place in his whirling, pain-plagued mind. He paused, breathing hard.

"That's it, Johnny, listen to me. You have to stop moving. You'll hurt yourself even more."

Johnny forced his eyes to blink. The brightness hurt his head tremendously, but the fuzzy forms were beginning to coalesce before him. He felt his own hands grasping something solid, and he relaxed the grip a little. In response, the pressure lessened on his shoulders. The pain, however, was relentless and he couldn't quite figure where it was coming from yet. "Scott?" he croaked dryly.

"Here, son, try to get some water down." One of the blurs in front of him grew larger and shaped up to be his father. Johnny felt the hard coolness of a canteen against his lips. He swallowed thirstily, the cold wetness feeling wonderful. "That's good for now, son. You have to stay still for a while."

"Scott?" he whispered again. His hands gripped what he now recognized as forearms. Scott's forearms.

"I'm here, brother." Johnny's eyes centered on the familiar face as it floated into his circle of sight, and the blond head of his brother came into focus. "Just like you to let us do all the work while you lie around."

Johnny couldn't help but smile, but it was taken away by another lightning bolt. "Hurts," he mumbled, shutting his eyes against the light as he tried to shift away from the fire stoking somewhere below his hips. Another agonizing stab was the result, and

he groaned, feeling the panic beginning to rise along with the burning fire. “Oh, God, it hurts!”

“I know, Johnny, I know.” Scott’s hand pressed Johnny’s shoulders again, and this time the injured man didn’t fight. The pain wasn’t coming from the shoulders – even the pain from the light in his eyes seemed trivial. Johnny locked his watering eyes on his brother in a desperate attempt to gain control of it all.

“Ya have to stay still, boy.” Jelly’s voice entered his mind, but he kept his eyes on his brother.

“My leg,” Johnny ground out through tightly clenched teeth. “On fire.” His grip on Scott’s forearms tightened again, and he panted heavily through locked jaws.

“I know, I know, brother, but if you lay still it should help. Come on, Johnny, lie still.”

“Oh, God . . .” Johnny’s wretched eyes squeezed shut as the agony swelled.

Even in exquisite pain, Johnny tried to latch on to his brother’s voice and use it as a focus for control, but it wasn’t working. The lightning in the dark was relentless, and his swimming head made concentration impossible. He gripped Scott’s forearms in panicked desperation, but the pain below his hips grew, licking like a firestorm down his legs and up his back. It took his breath away and he began to fight it again as the fire consumed him.



“Git his mouth open, Murdoch! Scott, don’t let him get up!”

Johnny’s body convulsed and writhed uncontrollably as he fell into the arms of fever and panic, his groans on the edge of screams. Scott continued to speak, inches from his brother’s face, but his voice fell on deaf ears. Murdoch’s strong hands immobilized his son’s head and he used his thumbs to pry Johnny’s lower jaw open enough for Jelly to get the neck of the brown bottle in his flailing son’s mouth. When Jelly poured out a measure of the contents, most if the laudanum ran down Johnny’s jaw line and neck, and even more was sprayed back at them with Johnny’s gasping breath.

One good dose finally made it in, and Murdoch held Johnny’s jaw shut until he swallowed, and even then some of the vile liquid leaked from his nostril. Scott spoke soothingly, keeping Johnny pinned to the travois until he saw the wildness leave his brother’s blinking blue eyes. Tears trailed from the corners of his eyes. Finally, after a long few minutes, his lids sagged and then Scott was able to release his grip. Johnny’s hands fell away from the exhausted blond’s forearms. Murdoch withdrew with a relieved sigh. The three of them stepped back, badly shaken, to catch their breath.

Murdoch trembled as he wiped his forehead. It took a moment for him to speak. “I certainly don’t want to do that again,” he said.

Scott shakily unbuttoned his cuff and rolled one sleeve up to his elbow. The hand-shaped bruise from Johnny's grip was already forming on his lighter skin. "Any longer and he would have broken my arms," Scott noted lowly, gently rubbing the area.

"It's the fever and the concussion. It's makin' him loopy." Jelly had a little difficulty capping the brown bottle because his hands were shaking too much. "An' there must be a broken bone din' something nasty inside. Sure would be nice to get him home before that dose wears off."

"How long . . .?" Scott asked.

"We got a couple of hours, I think," Jelly responded, glancing up the road.

Murdoch moved to his horse and mounted, gathering up Barranca's reins again. "We should be meeting the wagon soon. Let's get moving, then."

No one mentioned the possibility that they had injured Johnny more when they pulled him from under the horse, but the idea played in the backs of their individual minds as they forged onward.

The dose lasted just long enough. Jelly was sure the boy's depleted state contributed, but they were all glad he was still out when they transferred him to the wagon. Scott rode in the back with his brother while Jelly clipped orders and inquiries from the passenger side of the seat. Sam Jenkins was waiting for them when they got to the hacienda and climbed in the back as soon as the wagon stopped.

Murdoch dismounted his horse stiffly and passed on Barranca's and his own mount's reins to the stable hands. Teresa was at his side in an instant with her arm around his waist. They waited patiently, giving each other support. Scott and Sam spoke quietly back and forth with Jelly pitching in while the doctor checked the boy carefully. No one missed the frown on the old physician's face when he examined Johnny's leg.

Finally, the doctor suggested taking Johnny to his room and the waiting hands jumped into action. Scott began giving orders, but Sam put a hand on his elbow and nodded in Murdoch's direction. Jelly took over and the pair of them approached Murdoch and Teresa.

"Well?" Murdoch asked, knowing he wasn't going to like what he would hear.

"The concussion's obviously been a problem, as well as that infection from last week, but those are the least of my worries. He's broken his femur, Murdoch. The big bone in the thigh."

"How can a broken bone be so painful? I've never seen him like that."

Murdoch sounded tired, and he scrubbed his cheek with a big hand.

"Well, the problem is the surrounding muscle. The thigh muscles are the biggest on the body, and the broken bone has shifted and is now causing the muscles to spasm. That, in turn, grinds the broken ends of the bones together. It's a very painful kind of injury. I have to set the bone, and then he has to stay very quiet until

the bone knits enough to keep from shifting. The leg needs to be in traction to stop the spasms, or they could separate the break again.”

“Traction?” Teresa questioned.

“Traction is weight. He has to stay in bed with a weight on the end of his leg to keep the muscles stretched, but it has to pull against something. The patient’s body is usually the counter weight. Johnny will be secured to the bed around the waist so the weight can pull on the leg. It keeps pressure off the break.”

The three Lancer family members looked significantly at each other. They knew what that meant; it was going to be a miserable experience for Johnny, and therefore for the rest of them.

“Johnny was shot,” Scott recalled. “In that leg. Is that what broke it?”

“You also said a horse fell on him,” Sam answered. “Could be the bullet either broke or weakened the bone, and the fall completed the job and separated the bone. I need to open up the thigh to take out the bullet, so I’ll be able to see more then.” His eyes met the young woman’s. “I know you’ve had a bad time of it, Teresa, and you certainly are holding up well, but I want you to get some rest while I do this. Maria can help me.” Before she could protest, the doctor gently laid his fingers on her bruised cheek. “And put a cold compress on that. Rest, young lady. Now.”

Teresa ducked her head. “All right.”

Sam smiled and patted her arm. “You are amazing, young lady. Let’s get going. We’ll do the surgery in Johnny’s bed. Scott, this is what I need. . .” The small group broke up after a few minutes. Dr. Jenkins, Teresa and Murdoch went into the hacienda while Scott turned to the barn.

Garrett watched the entire homecoming from the front porch, taking note of every face, very relieved that Stedman wasn’t with them. Then, he waited for an appropriate moment to join his grandson. From his vantage point he was unable to hear much, but he was patient and moved immediately to his grandson’s side when the lean young man headed to the barn. The older man was a little miffed that his legacy hadn’t greeted him in any way.

“Scotty! I’m so glad you are all right.” Scott didn’t break his stride, but did give his grandfather a glance. “You are all right, aren’t you? What’s the matter?”

Scott paused to open the barn door and looked at his grand relative with an expression of complete disbelief. “What’s the matter? Are you serious?”

The old man frowned. “Don’t you speak to me in that tone. Really, your manners . . .”

“You’re worried about manners?” Scott managed to control his voice, stood for a moment with his mouth open, ready to explain what every other able bodied human being on the ranch seemed to be able to grasp, but suddenly he realized it did not matter. It didn’t matter because there was never going to be understanding from this man. Scott signed loudly, shook his head, and continued into the barn to collect the things Sam had requested. The differences between East and West tumbled through

his mind, and, like Johnny representing the West, Scott realized that in his mind, Harlan Garrett represented the East. And right now, he didn't need any input from that quarter.

"Scotty?" Garrett inquired, taken aback by the boy's attitude.

"Go home, grandfather." Scott yelled from the other side of the barn. "Get your things together today. I'll take you into town tomorrow when I know Johnny will be all right."

"Aren't you going to even tell me what happened? How did John get injured?" he asked, sounding hurt. In his mind, however, all he needed to know was if young Stedman was going to be a problem.

"There were two kidnappers," Scott explained as he dug through some harness rigs. "One shot his partner, and I shot the other but not before he shot Johnny. It's over."

"So you saved your brother!" Garrett sounded pleased, but it wasn't for the reason Scott assumed.

"And Johnny saved Teresa, Murdoch and Sheriff Crawford. It's all neatly tied up, well, except for the part where Johnny nearly died!" Sarcasm dripped heavily from the statement, and Garrett stiffened.

"Well, I'm not going to stand here and take this attitude, so I will follow your request and go pack." He spun on his heel and marched back to the house.

Scott watched him leave the barn and shook his head. Surprisingly, he felt no guilt. As he gathered the straps, ropes and other things he needed, he let his mind wander to the intricacies of blood relatives and family. He smiled when he realized that, blood wise, he and Johnny had more in common than he and Harlan. As brothers, they both had half of Murdoch Lancer's blood. As Scott's grandfather, Harlan and he only shared one quarter blood. That must drive grandfather crazy, he thought. Then he made himself concentrate on his task, realizing that he must be more tired than he thought to let his mind wander so.

Still, he couldn't help but feel relief at the thought.



Murdoch and Scott sat in the great room trying to piece together leather into a shape close to what Sam had sketched for them. The closer they got to it, the more apprehensive they became. Still, it was better to be busy than to be pacing the floors waiting for answers.

"He's going to hate this," Scott said lowly as he spliced two pieces together in a way his brother had showed him years ago.

"I agree. Maybe the pain will convince him. After what I saw on the trail . . ." he let the sentence stop there. Neither one of them wanted to deal with a scene like that again. Murdoch decided to change the subject. "Scott, how are you doing? We

haven't had time to talk much since . . ." Again, the sentence trailed off to its obvious end.

Scott concentrated on the leather, feeling the pain of loss sharply. "I'm still a bit foggy," he said lowly. "I feel like I'm standing in quicksand sometimes. Like I'm not able to move or think. It's like being frozen." His voice hitched at the last word, and he rubbed his eyes tiredly. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. "It's draining, Murdoch."

Murdoch paused, then rose and filled two glasses with his best Scotch. He handed one to his son and studied him for a moment. Scott looked depleted. When he replied, it, too, was in a quiet voice. "I'd like to tell you it gets better, son, but I can't."

His elder son raised his head and gave a very weak half smile. "I know. I'm just glad to have you all. Alexandra . . ." his voice cracked again, and he took a moment to swallow the pain. "Alexandra loved you all so much."

"To love, then," Murdoch said, raising his glass in a toast.

"To love," Scott repeated in a stronger voice.

They both took a sip and then heard slow footsteps on the stairs. Sam, followed by Maria and Teresa carrying armloads of things, descended the steps. The doctor turned into the great room while Maria hustled to the kitchen. Teresa paused at the great room doorway and spoke before Murdoch had the chance.

"I got some sleep and I'm fine. Now talk to Sam." She whisked away before anyone could protest.

Scott and Murdoch rose to their feet as the doctor joined them.

"Sit, sit. Jelly's with him now and he's still out. He'll be asleep for a little longer. I gave him some morphine just before the operation. I'll give him some more in a bit."

"Sam," Scott started.

Dr. Jenkins raised his hands in surrender. "I know, I know, he hates the stuff. Believe me, I do know that, but he has to lie still until we get the traction set up. How's it going? And do you have another one of those?" The elderly doctor pointed at the Scotch.

"Of course, Sam. Well, we're pretty close. . ."

"And he's going to hate this more than the morphine," Scott said morosely, fingering the leather in his hand.

The doctor took the moment to give Scott a visual once over. He was pale, thin and tired looking, but something in his eyes had changed. Feeling the exam, the young man looked up and that's when Sam saw a measure of peace in the haunted blue eyes. Sam raised his Scotch. "To family," he said simply.

They all downed the amber liquid as one, and then the family friend sat them down and told them what went on upstairs in the past hours.



Harlan Garrett's mind worked furiously as he packed. Everything had gone perfectly, but the expected outcome hadn't occurred. His grandson should hate this place. The violence of the war had nearly driven him over the edge, and this wasn't much different. Blood was blood, and there was enough shed in this uncivilized country to push anyone over the edge.

Anyone, that is, but his enigmatic grandson. What did I overlook? he thought. What did I fail to consider? Gambling on peoples' reactions had gained him favor in the stock market and business. What worked there apparently didn't work here, and he was perplexed. But then again, Harlan Garrett wasn't one to take a beating and give up. He filed the whole incident away as a learning experience to possibly draw from in the future.

He may have lost this round, but Harlan Garrett wasn't out of the fight. He'd go back to Boston, keep his ears open, and simply wait for the country to wear Scott Garrett Lancer down. When the opportunities arose to make the process faster, he'd take them. It was simply a matter of time, he concluded smugly as he continued to pack.



The application of traction was both interesting and sickening to Scott. Sam patiently directed the proceedings while father and son assembled the items Jelly handed them one at a time.

For a moment when they'd first entered Johnny's room, Scott couldn't take his eyes from the thick, blood stained bandage that encased his brother's thigh. A wound like that would be cause for immediate amputation in the war, and the ex-cavalryman clearly saw in his mind's eye the brutal surgery that usually took place without anesthesia. The screams echoed in the back of his mind, and he immediately pushed it aside with a shake of his head and a mental condemnation to himself. He looked at the obscene device with a new respect, knowing the alternative was worse.

Basically, Johnny was strapped to the bed frame at the hips, low enough to prevent his sliding to the foot of the bed but enabling him to sit up. Pillows and blankets were under both thighs to also prevent sliding down the mattress. A wooden frame cradled the injured leg from hip to ankle to keep it straight with cross straps keeping the knee from bending. The ankle was surrounded by what looked like a small halter, to which a line was attached and threaded through a small pulley suspended from a frame attached to the bed. Acting as a weight at the end of the line, a small bag of flour twisted lazily.

When it was done, both Scott and Murdoch could see the purpose of the device, but they also saw the restrictions. They were both glad Johnny was asleep.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

“He can be propped up to sit for a little bit each day, but the leg must be kept straight and the weight constant. Until the bone knits, the thigh muscles can spasm and separate it again and we’re right back where we started. Both the surgery and his head wound should be checked often for infection.”

“The head wound looks all right?” Murdoch asked blearily.

“I cleaned it out and re-stitched it. Fortunately, it looks like it will heal fine with Jelly’s poultices. As far as the concussion goes, we won’t know anything until he’s awake. If he hit his head in the fall, it could complicate things. We’ll see.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Murdoch sighed. “It’s the middle of the night. There’s a room waiting for you when you’re ready.”

“I’m more than ready,” Sam replied, stretching tiredly. “The injection should be wearing off soon. I’ll go after I give him another dose. That should hold him until mid-morning.”

As if on cue, Johnny’s head rolled to one side and his arm twitched. Scott immediately stepped to his brother’s side and laid a hand on the warm forehead. He glanced up and saw the doctor filling a syringe. Scott’s mouth opened to issue an automatic protest, but the haunting screams of the battle field echoed in his mind and he closed it again.

Johnny’s arm jerked when the needle pierced the skin and foggy blue eyes were visible for a few seconds when his lids dragged partially open, but soon his whole frame seemed to sag into itself with the effects of the drug. Scott felt a small measure of both relief and guilt.

“That gives us all at least six hours of rest.” Sam packed away the drugs and picked up his bag. “Come and get me if you need me, and I suggest the rest of you take the opportunity to sleep.” He joined Teresa in the doorway, and she escorted the tired doctor to his room.

“I’ll sit first,” Scott said immediately, moving an armchair next to the bed. He still wasn’t ready to face his own room anyway. Jelly told him when to change the poultice, and the tired blond nodded as he fell into the chair. “I know what to do. You get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Jelly humpf’d and said good night.

Murdoch gave Scott’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Try and rest yourself while you have the chance,” he said with concern. “We both know what’s in store for us.”

Scott rubbed his eyes, feeling the beckoning of sleep already. “Yes, sir. Seems like it never ends, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes,” Murdoch mused. “But there are a lot of good times that overshadow the bad. Let’s concentrate on those.”

Scott’s brows furrowed at that idea and he realized that his father’s comment was meant to entail more than just this incident. Taking the Old Man’s advice, Scott

settled down and focused on happier times. Soon, he was in an exhausted sleep, and for the first time in over a week, it was peaceful.



After showing Sam to his room, Teresa paused in the hall to gather her thoughts. When she'd come into Johnny's room after the surgery, she had been momentarily taken aback by the amount of bloody bandages. She's seen the size of the wound Sam was closing and felt her stomach churn.

She must have made a motion or a noise, because the elderly doctor threw her a glance over his shoulder and managed to give her a weak smile. "Come here, young lady, and I'll tell you what I did so you'll be prepared. All right?"

After nodding numbly, she moved next to him and found herself studying the wound with more detachment as Sam explained what he had done. As he described the broken bone, the picture became clear in her head. His description of how the muscles then reacted suddenly made some kind of sense, and she was able to grasp what was needed before the doctor explained it more fully.

She took over the final bandaging as he checked and re-stitched Johnny's forehead. Maria bustled about, picking up the remains of the surgery. They worked like as a well-rehearsed team, and Teresa felt an odd sort of comfort in their familiarity of each other; it helped her to push aside the dark feeling of violation she'd had since her kidnapping.

Intellectually, she knew her capture could have been worse. Much worse. But still, the violation of her sense of safety hung heavily on her feelings of security. She wondered if she would ever be able to ride alone on Lancer land again and feel that special kind of freedom. Teresa pressed her lips firmly together as she finalized the wraps on Johnny's leg and stood back.

Freedom. Here before her was a man that symbolized the word. Scott meant security, Murdoch and her father Paul equaled strength, Jelly persistence, and Maria loyalty. Alexandra had come to mean poise and grace, along with sisterly bonds, and the young girl was very grateful for the time they had together. She felt tears well in her eyes, and immediately used what she had learned from her sister-by-heart about grace under pressure and pulled herself together. Teresa squared her shoulders. She wouldn't allow strangers to take what was hers ever again. She would ride Lancer land someday soon.

In a perverse way, she realized the kidnapping had pulled the Lancer family together under one roof, and her foundation was back under her feet. They would be fine; she could feel it. As Sam tied the final stitch, Teresa moved with newfound grace to his side and began to apply the poultice Jelly had prepared. She could hear the doctor gathering his things and calling to Jelly, and when she was done, Teresa assisted Maria with the laundry.

## SCHISM OF THE HEART

It was time for everyone to heal and Teresa O'Brien would make sure she was there to insure they didn't stray again. She followed the doctor and Maria from the room.

She knew Alexandra Salvadore Lancer would be proud of her.

**THE END**