

AN OLFACTORY OFFENCE



BY ROS HUTCHISON

“Okay horse,” the man growled to absolutely no one. “You an’ me are gonna have words.”

Johnny Madrid Lancer was a horseman – NOT a walker. His boots were designed for riding. His clothes were designed for riding. Hell! He was designed for riding!

But here he was – walking home dejectedly.

He was not a happy man.



Johnny wheeled Barranca to the left and then cut quickly back to the right – effectively cutting off the path of the stray steer.

Well, he didn’t really have much to do with it. Barranca was a well-trained cow pony and did a lot of the work himself. The horse and his rider worked in one fluid movement.

Had there been anyone there to watch them, they would have sat, enthralled, applauding the horse and rider. They made a good team.

Actually they made a handsome team. The golden hide and flowing white mane and tail of the palomino stallion made a great contrast to the tanned dark haired and handsome rider. They both moved with exquisite grace and seemed to understand each other completely. Between them, Johnny and Barranca rounded up six strays and herded them into a small canyon, perfect for holding a few cattle just

long enough to finish his task before heading them back to the rest of the herd.

Johnny herded the last of the six obstreperous beasts into his makeshift corral and sat back on the horse for a minute to take stock of his efforts for the morning. He took his hat off and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve. The perspiration was literally dripping off him.

It was a hot day – in the middle of summer and nearing noon by his calculations. Time for a bite to eat and a rest in the shade.

He put the hat back on his head lightly and pulled a battered old pocket watch from his pocket. It was close enough to midday to take that break – just like he’d thought.

Johnny had lived without a watch his whole life – until Murdoch had given him this one. Mostly, he still didn’t really need it, and Murdoch had suggested getting him a spanking new one for his birthday, but Johnny had said no.

This one meant a lot to him. It had been the first thing his father had given him freely and without expecting anything in return. To Johnny, it was priceless.

Nope – this one would do him just fine.

He dismounted lithely and patted the palomino’s neck proudly as he stood beside him.

“You did good this mornin’, big fella,” he said with a smile and he led the big horse over to the shade of an oak tree. There was plenty of shade there for both of them, and enough green grass left there to keep the horse content for a while.

He took his canteen, unscrewed the lid and took a swallow of the tepid water. It might not be cold, but it was enough to quench his thirst for now. He went to the saddlebags and took out the sandwiches that Teresa had provided for him.

Strolling over to the log under the tree, he pushed his hat back so that it hung behind him, put the canteen down on the ground beside him and opened the wrapping around the sandwiches.

The log was a little unstable and shifted under his weight while he made himself comfortable when it finally came to a stop.

“Ya know, Barranca, a man could get real spoiled around here,” he said to the horse. “Three square meals a day an’ I haven’t had to draw my gun for over a month.”

The big palomino whinnied and lifted his head to shake it. His white mane flew about elegantly and Johnny wondered, as he sometimes did, if that horse didn’t know just how good he looked when he did that and was maybe just a little be vain about it.”

“Yeah, alright,” Johnny answered. He grinned and took a bite out of the sandwich. “Guess I shouldn’t say that, hey boy?” he added as he swallowed. A twinge of superstition bit at him when he realized he might be pushing his luck saying something like that.

“Well, we done a good mornin’s work anyway, Barranca. Don’t think there’s any more strays ‘round here, so we’ll be able to

meet Scott and Hank with the main herd way b’fore I’m supposed to.”

He looked over at the horse and grinned again. “Be kinda nice to be early for a change.”

Johnny finished off the sandwich and leaned forward to pick up the canteen. It banged against the log as he lifted it by the leather strap and Johnny thought he heard a scratching sound coming from inside the log.

He looked up and listened intently, but he didn’t hear anything and put it down to his imagination.

He unscrewed the cap and took a swig of the water but, as he put the lid back on, he heard the scratching sound again and knew he hadn’t imagined it this time.

There was definitely something inside the log.

It could be any number of things but he ruled out a snake right off, since the sound appeared to be claws.

He stood up carefully, knowing that he had disturbed whatever was in there more than enough already. He turned around and stepped back cautiously.

Sure enough, a tiny, pointed black nose poked itself out of the hollow in the log.

The little nose stopped, lifted to sniff the air a couple of times and wiggled from side to side once or twice.

Johnny drew in a breath and took another step backwards, trying very hard not to attract the creature’s attention. He knew what he was up against without seeing the rest of the animal’s body. He’d seen enough of them before now to know that he had to move very carefully if he was going to get out of this spot with his

dignity intact.

Right then, Barranca moved just a foot or two to another enticing tuft of grass. The creature heard the horse's movement and timidly crept out of the log to look around.

If he'd needed confirmation of his suspicions, he had it now – right down to the long bushy tail and the twin white stripes running down the center of the little black animal's back and joining on the top of its head.

Johnny held perfectly still, his mind going over his options. He could back away slowly and easily so as not to frighten it and hope that it wasn't already too late. On the other hand, he could turn and run away as fast as his feet would carry him, doubtlessly startling the animal into spraying but hoping he would be fast enough to escape unscathed.

He watched the skunk waddle slowly out of the log and look around it and he took a very careful step backwards. It didn't seem to be worried by his movement so he took another cautious step backwards. He'd managed to put about six feet between himself and the animal and he was beginning to feel more confident.

The skunk seemed calm enough and hadn't shown any signs of fear. Maybe he could just back off nice and easy without startling it into doing anything he might regret.

He'd faced more gun battles than he cared to remember, but this one shy little creature had him ready to run?

Oh boy, did it ever?

A few yards away, Barranca carelessly swished his tail and snorted noisily. Johnny looked over at the horse angrily and then back to the skunk. The little animal had stopped and looked towards the noise. It sniffed the air and

hissed, stamping its front feet agitatedly.

Johnny might have thought it funny, if he hadn't known what it was a precursor to. He knew he was in trouble now. There was no cautiously backing away this time.

He turned on his heel to make a run for it, but his left foot hit a small rock and he lost his balance and found himself on his backside. He knew he had no chance now.

The skunk had already turned around and had its tail fluffed up and in the air when he looked at it. He put his arm up in front of his face to protect his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

And the inevitable came within seconds. He knew it had gotten him good – his nose told him when he got a whiff of the putrid smell of ammonia and musk.



Johnny threw the canteen on the ground furiously.

“Oh great! Just great!” he growled.

He looked the creature in the eyes and he'd have sworn he could see satisfaction there.

“You happy with yourself?” he said to it, scowling hard. “Oh yeah, you can smile, can't ya? Get outa here 'fore I forget myself an' put a bullet between them beady little eyes o' yours.”

It sniffed the air, lowered its tail and turned around, and then it waddled complacently back into the log.

He looked over at Barranca and his temper flared again. If it came to a choice of who or

what was to blame for this fiasco – the skunk, the horse or his own bad luck – Johnny was going to plump for Barranca and his lousy sense of timing.

Okay, there was nothing for it now but to head back home and try to clean himself up, hopefully before his brother got wind of him. This was likely to take some living down.

Johnny picked up the canteen and got to his feet. He pulled his hat back up onto his head and stalked over to where Barranca was still quietly grazing, totally unaware of the events that had unfolded around him. Maybe he'd stop at the river and try to wash some of the stink off of himself. It wouldn't take it all off, but he was ready to try anything at this point.

He got close enough to Barranca to reach for the reins, when suddenly the horse threw his head in the air in fright. His upper lip lifted and his nostrils flared as Johnny got close enough for the horse to get a whiff of him and he pulled back quickly.

Johnny lost his temper this time. "Barranca, hold still. You got me into this mess in the first place. Least you can do is get me home good an' quick so's I c'n clean up."

He reached again for the reins, but this time Barranca didn't just pull back from him. The horse neighed shrilly in apparent panic and lifted his front hooves just clear of the ground, and then he turned tail and ran off.

"Barranca, come back here," Johnny yelled furiously. "Barranca!" He tried whistling, but, for once, the horse ignored him and kept going.

Johnny pulled his hat off his head and slammed it into the ground petulantly. He knew the horse would stop eventually. He'd be able to follow his trail easily enough and

catch him when he calmed down.

But, in the meantime, he was faced with walking in the middle of the day in the hot sun.

And Johnny wasn't fond of walking.

He figured it was only about six miles to the hacienda and wondered if he'd catch up to the horse before he made it back to the barn.

Well, there was nothing else for it. He picked up his hat and dusted it off on his pants leg then he picked up the canteen. He shook it a little to see how much was left in there. It was about half full so he'd have to be careful with it.

He looped the canteen's leather strap over his shoulder and turned towards home, the steers forgotten for now – a waste of a morning's work.



Twenty minutes later, Johnny spotted Barranca in the distance, halted under a grove of young oaks and he sighed with relief. The sun had sapped him of energy already, and his feet were beginning to feel the pinch from boots that weren't made for walking.

He stopped and took off his hat so he could wipe the sweat from his brow with his shirtsleeve. He fanned his face with the hat and he could feel the perspiration running down his back. His shirt was wet through and clung to his body uncomfortably.

"Okay, Barranca," he said to himself. "Time to start actin' like yourself."

He put the hat back on his head and took a deep breath. Standing here wasn't getting him

anywhere. He started towards his horse, feeling every step jar his sore feet and within a few minutes, he was close enough to Barranca to croon reassuring words to him.

The horse lifted his head and looked at Johnny. There was recognition in those eyes – Johnny could see it.

“Good boy,” he whispered soothingly. “It’s alright. I know it wasn’t your fault, boy.”

He edged closer, slower than he normally did with his own horse. He’d trained Barranca himself and hadn’t had to handle him this carefully in a long time.

“It’s okay, Barranca. Take it easy an’ we’ll get on home to a cool drink an’ a nice clean stall.”

Barranca lifted his head and whinnied in recognition of the voice.

“Good boy, Barranca. I knew I could count on you,” Johnny said quietly. He smiled as he stepped up to take the reins and pat the horse’s neck.

But Johnny’s pleasure was short lived. The moment he got within reach of the horse, that top lip lifted again and the animal’s head went up in the air in panic. Within a snatch of getting hold of those reins, the horse was gone again.

“Okay horse,” the man growled to absolutely no one. “You an’ me are gonna have words.”

He watched Barranca disappear from sight and sighed heavily. He looked around for somewhere to sit down, but the only things handy were a couple of logs and he was way past taking that option, so he opened the canteen and swallowed some more water.

When he’d put the cap back on, he shook it again. There wasn’t much there. If he wanted

to make it last he’d have to take it a lot slower than he had been.

It wouldn’t be easy. As it was, his mouth was dry already. Even on horseback, on a day like this, he’d need plenty of water. But on foot he’d need a whole lot more. This was going to be a long, hot and thirsty walk home.

“Damn you, Barranca,” he cursed angrily and set off again.



“Wasn’t Johnny supposed to have met us by now, Scott?” Hank asked the elder Lancer son as he pulled his horse to a stop beside him.

“He probably found more strays than he expected,” Scott reasoned. “He’ll be here soon enough. I hope so anyway. I’m looking forward to getting down to that river.”

“You lookin’ to throw yourself in?”

Scott laughed. “I just might,” he answered, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his face with it.

“Hey, Scott,” Hank said curiously. He pointed off to the right. “That horse over there, ain’t that Barranca?”

Scott turned to look in the same direction as Hank. There was indeed a horse in the distance. He could see that it was saddled, and he knew it was his brother’s palomino. There was no mistaking that horse.

“Yes, it is. Come on,” he said quickly, urging his horse forward.

It didn’t take long to reach the horse, standing quietly with the reins trailing free. Scott slowed as he reached him so as not to spook

him.

He dismounted and walked cautiously over to where Barranca stood. The horse was edgy and Scott turned back to warn Hank to stay back. Quietly talking to the horse, he worked over to his side and took the reins. He patted the animal's neck and started to look him over.

"Easy boy," he said gently. He ran his hands over his brother's horse, but couldn't find anything wrong. In particular, he didn't see any blood on the horse or the saddle and he found some consolation from that.

"Where's Johnny, Barranca?" he asked anxiously, wishing the animal could answer him. He turned around to where Hank sat, still mounted. "He seems to be okay. He's a little spooked, but otherwise I think he's alright. Can you see any sign of Johnny?"

"Not from here. You want me to look around?"

"We'd better. I don't know any reason Barranca would be here on his own, unless..."

He didn't really want to think about the possibilities – couldn't bring himself to express them in words, but he had to face them. There might be any number of reasons why the horse could be here alone, but they all came back to the likelihood that Johnny might be lying hurt somewhere.

Scott tried not to think about that yet. He had to find his brother and get him to help if he needed it.

Hank rode in a wide circle around the horse, but came back with nothing. Scott had mounted again, holding Barranca's reins in one hand firmly.

"Anything?" he asked Hank when he got back.

"Nope, no sign of him," the man told him dejectedly. "But there's some clear tracks so we can backtrack Barranca's trail and we might find him that way."

"Good idea," Scott agreed. "I don't like this. Johnny could be hurt."

"Don't worry, Scott. We'll find him," Hank reassured him. He was confident that they would find him. There was plenty of light, and the tracks he'd seen were clear and easy to follow. What worried him was what condition he'd be in when they got there.



"Scott, there he is," Hank called excitedly, pointing ahead of them.

Johnny was walking slowly towards them, so they pressed their horses forward to meet him.

As he got close enough to see his brother, Scott was relieved to see that he seemed unhurt. Relief washed over him, only to be replaced with a surge of curiosity.

Why was Johnny on foot if he wasn't hurt and Barranca wasn't lame?

"Johnny," he called out as they approached him. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Johnny called back. "I'm just dandy."

He sounded less than happy. "Then what's wrong? What happened?" Scott asked as he pulled his horse and Barranca to a halt just in front of him.

He'd no sooner asked the questions than his horse began to jerk his head up and tried to pull back. Barranca was doing the same and, while he tried to keep control of both horses, he saw Hank was having some trouble with his own.

He soon knew what the problem was.

"Phew! Johnny, what the hell have you been rolling in?" he asked, wishing he could trust the horses enough to cover his nose. The stench was unbelievable. Ammonia came immediately to mind and he turned his head aside to try to escape it.

Hank got hold of his own horse when he backed him up just enough to escape the smell. "Ain't what he's rolled in, Scott," he said with a laugh. "It's what he's tangled with."

"Skunk!" Scott exclaimed as he realized what must have happened.

"Yeah, you're both real funny," Johnny said ill-temperedly. "Just hang on to that dang horse o' mine so's I c'n get hold of him."

It sounded easy enough, but Scott was having trouble holding one horse – so two was a real problem. And he could hardly blame them. Johnny stunk so badly that, frankly, he didn't want to be near him either.

Johnny came closer to Barranca and both horses became more agitated until, finally, Scott couldn't maintain his grip on Barranca's reins and control his own mount as well. The palomino gave one more desperate jerk and the leather slipped from Scott's hand allowing the horse to pull free and run off – again.

Scott clamped his legs tightly on his own mount and backed him up a little, while his brother gave full vent to his frustration.

"Dammit, Scott, why the hell couldn't ya just hold him?"

"Brother," Scott answered him, with a twitch of a smile pulling at his lips. "You can hardly blame Barranca. Have you got any idea just how bad you smell?"

"Funny," he growled. "Well, since ya couldn't hold onto my ride, the least ya c'n do is offer a hand."

He took a step towards Scott and the horse backed away quickly.

Scott couldn't hold back any longer. He burst out laughing. "Sorry, Johnny. I don't think it will work. Poor Charlie just won't stand for it. You come much closer and I'm likely to end up getting thrown. There's no point in both of us being on foot."

"Scott...?"

"Sorry, brother," Scott repeated, trying hard to muffle the laughter bubbling in him. "It's only another couple of miles to home. It won't take you long."

"Scott, it's hot, an' I'm tired an' thirsty. Ya can't just leave me here!"

Scott really did feel sorry for his brother, but "skunk" wasn't exactly life threatening. He knew he'd get home safely, if hot and tired – and maybe just a little put out with him.

"I'm afraid so, Johnny," he said, smiling.

"I ain't even got much water left," Johnny told him angrily.

Scott unhooked his canteen from the pommel and tossed it to his brother. "There's enough there to get you home, brother," he told him. "Just make sure you clean up before you try

walking in the door. If Teresa or Maria get a whiff of you, they'll toss you right back out."

"Oh, you're a million laughs, Scott. I'll remember this next time you need a hand."

"Oh, come on, Johnny. It's not that far and you might even catch up with Barranca again if you hurry."

The expression on Johnny's face was too much for him. He lost himself in a fit of laughter that shook him uncontrollably.



Johnny cursed furiously as he walked towards home. *So much for 'brotherly love'! So much for "I'll get your back!" So much for "You can always count on me, brother!"*

His feet hurt like hell, now. He limped visibly and his wet shirt clung to him. He stopped for another swallow of the water from the canteen his brother had so graciously given to him and, he had to admit, tepid water had NEVER tasted so good.

The Lancer arch came into sight at last and stood like a beacon signally 'home'. But, by now, his head hurt as well. He knew why. The sun and the heat had gotten to him.

He doggedly kept up the pace, putting one foot in front of the other. It wasn't far now and he'd be able to put his feet up, have a cold drink and dunk his head in the first cool water he came to!



Murdoch heard Jelly yelling for him. He rose quickly from his leather chair and ran for the front door. Pulling it open quickly, he looked

outside to see what was wrong.

"Jelly, what's so important?" he shouted angrily.

"Boss!" Jelly called back at him. "Barranca's just come in – alone."

Murdoch's anger vanished. "Alone? No sign of Johnny?"

"No, an' he looks like he's been runnin' for miles. He's plumb tuckered out."

Murdoch strode over to where the palomino stood. The horse stood by Jelly, his flanks quivering. He stepped aside edgily as Murdoch approached, but quieted to the man's soothing words of reassurance.

"Ya needn't bother lookin', Boss," Jelly told him. "I already checked him over. Ain't nothin' wrong with him but bein' hot an' tired." The old man looked away for a moment and then continued. "An' there ain't no sign o' blood nowhere neither."

Murdoch sighed. "Well, that's something anyway."

"You think mebbe Johnny got thrown?"

"Could be. He might be hurt out there somewhere." He considered his options and came to a quick decision. "Get together what men you can find. We've still got plenty of daylight, and we might be able to find Barranca's tracks and follow them back to Johnny."

Jelly nodded his approval of the plan. "Sure, Boss. An' don't you go worryin'. We'll find him."

The old man disappeared to round up the few men that were working in and around the yard.

They could pick up Scott once they got moving. Scott would want to help.



Johnny heaved a sigh of relief. He was home. The nightmare was over at last – shade, a cool drink and somewhere to clean up!

He walked up to the back door and put his hand against the wall, lovingly touching the adobe and relishing the feel of home.

The kitchen door was wide open. It usually was during the hot days of summer. It got hot in there with the stove going.

Johnny headed in through the door, looking forward to a cold drink, and he found Maria there preparing supper.

He didn't get inside. Maria turned around quickly and shouted his name.

"Juanito!" she called out happily and then scowled at him. "Ay yi! Qué es ese olor?"

Johnny stopped. "Maria," he said suavely. "Cómo está?"

"No, Juanito, para allí!" she called to him. "Tu hueles horrible!"

"Ah, come on Maria. I don't smell that bad, an' I'm hot an' tired!"

She screwed her nose as she got closer to him. "Mofeta!"

"Yeah, I know," Johnny admitted. "I tangled with a skunk. I just wanna get a cold drink an' sit down for a while. Then I'll get cleaned up. Come on, Maria. I'm tired."

Maria picked up her broom and ran to the

doorway. "No, Salte! Out!"

"Maria!"

She aimed the broom at him threateningly and shooed him out the door. "Ahora, Juanito!" she shouted at him. "Now!"

In the face of the furious little whirlwind, Johnny backed up a step. He could usually talk his way around Maria. She fussed over him like he was her own child. But it didn't look like he was going to be able to get around her this time.

"Sige!" she screamed shrilly. "Y ve banate!"

"What the devil's going on in here?" a loud voice yelled from the door to the Great Room.

Murdoch Lancer stormed into the kitchen. He had more than enough worrying him without Maria screaming like a crazy woman.

But when he got into the room, he pulled up short. "Johnny! Are you alright? Barranca came home without you and we thought you must be hurt." He strode across the room, saying, "We were just going..."

He stopped dead in his tracks, frowning at the smell. "Phew, son! Is that skunk I smell on you?"

"Si, señor, mofeta!" Maria shouted angrily. "Skunk!"

She shoved the broom at Johnny once more and Murdoch grinned. "I don't think you'd better try coming in here, Johnny. If you think Maria's bad, you wouldn't want to run into Teresa smelling like that in the house."

"Come on, Murdoch. I've walked for miles. I'm hot an' tired – an' my feet hurt!"

“Barranca wouldn’t let you near him either, hmm?” Murdoch suggested, trying hard to keep the laughter at bay. “How far have you walked?”

He had to admit Johnny looked like he’d had too much sun. He was flushed red in the face and he was sweating heavily – a fact that wasn’t helping to allay the smell of the skunk. “Miles!” Johnny complained. “An’ Scott was no help either. If he couldn’t hold onto my horse, you’d think he could give me a ride home.”

There was no help for it. Murdoch couldn’t look at Johnny’s disgruntled face without laughing. He burst out in a loud guffaw that nearly doubled him over.

Johnny tried to control his temper. He’d had about enough of people laughing at his situation. “Real funny, ain’t it?”

Murdoch forced himself to take control of the laughter. “I’m sorry son,” he said, the words bubbling out over another threatening laugh. He walked over and poured a glass of water for him and took it over to where his son stood. But he stood as far back from Johnny as he could while reaching out to hand him the glass.

Johnny took a step forward to take the glass from his father, but it set Maria off again. “No, para allí!”

“You’d better not come any further, Johnny. She means business.” The laughter threatened again, but he bit the inside of his lip to keep it at bay. Johnny was offended enough already.

Johnny drank the water quickly and handed the empty glass back to his father, keeping a wary eye on Maria and her broom when he moved.

“I think a bath is called for Johnny,” Murdoch suggested.

“Si, ve banate, Juanito!” Maria agreed emphatically.

“I’m afraid plain water won’t do much good, Maria,” Murdoch told her. “But I don’t think there’s enough tomatoes on the entire ranch to get rid of that stench.”

“Vinagré,” Maria suggested.

“Good idea, Maria,” he agreed. “Get him a couple of bottles of vinegar.”

Maria looked doubtful and looked at Johnny malevolently.

“It’s alright, Maria. He’s not going to come in before he gets cleaned up,” Murdoch told her.

She relented and lowered the broom. She turned back to the kitchen and walked over to the pantry, quickly grabbing a couple of bottles of vinegar. Then she took them over to pass them to Johnny.

When she got there, she found that she couldn’t bring herself to get close to that smell. She put the two bottles on the floor in the doorway and stepped back to allow Johnny to pick them up.

“Thanks,” he said gracelessly. He was feeling more and more like an outcast, and his head and feet still hurt. No one seemed to care though.

“Go take that bath, son. I’ll get you some clean clothes.” Murdoch smiled at him. “And I suggest you use all of that vinegar. That skunk got you good!”

Johnny picked up the bottles and strode angrily out back to the bathhouse.



“Some family I have!” Johnny growled belligerently.

It was some hours later after scrubbing himself raw in a bath of vinegar and water. Then he’d had to take another bath to get rid of the smell of vinegar! His clothes were soaking in vinegar and water and Maria said she’d have to air them for at least a month.

The blisters on his feet still hurt and the headache from the sunstroke lingered determinedly, but at least he was allowed into the house so he could sit down in comfort.

He looked around the room at his father, his brother, Jelly and Teresa. Oh yeah, they could smile!

“I thought I could rely on my family,” he added, still angry.

“Come on, Johnny,” Scott answered with a laugh. “Are you telling me you wouldn’t have done the same thing? Your horse couldn’t even stand you!”

“My horse is a dumb animal!” Johnny snapped at him. “I’m supposed to be able to trust you to watch my back!”

Scott shook his head, trying to hold back another peal of laughter. “I’ll watch your back anytime you need me to, Johnny. But from a distance in this case.”

“You’ll laugh about this one day, son,” Murdoch assured him. “I’ve been skunked myself once.”

“Me too,” Jelly piped up.

“Yeah, well when the day comes that Scott

gets his turn, I’m gonna wanta be there to have a laugh!” Johnny told them.

“How are the feet anyway, son?” Murdoch asked him, hoping to relieve the tension in the room.

“Blistered,” he told him, casting a malevolent look in his brother’s direction. “An’ my head still hurts, too.”

“Well, I think an early night might be the best thing for you then,” his father suggested. “All this will blow over by morning.”

He didn’t add that the whole ranch was aware of the story. He’d had to go out and call off the search party for his son, and telling Jelly what had happened to assure him that Johnny was safe and sound meant that everyone knew within a few minutes. He’d take some time to live this down.

“I’ll bring you something for the headache, Johnny,” Teresa told him sympathetically. “I’ve got some salve for those blisters, too.”

“Thanks, Teresa,” he said gently. Alone of all of them, she hadn’t laughed at him and he appreciated it. At least there was one person in the house who cared about him. “I think I will turn in early.”

He turned to go upstairs.

“Johnny?” Teresa called to him quietly.

He turned back. “Yeah, what is it, honey?”

“Johnny, you... you...er...” She looked into his eyes and seemed concerned about him. He was touched that she didn’t find it all funny like the rest of the family.

“What is it, Teresa?”

She looked down at her hands awkwardly. “Johnny,” she finally said. “You didn’t shoot that poor little skunk, did you?”



AUTHOR'S NOTE

This little ditty was inspired by a “stroll through the park” that I took with some other Lancer Ladies at the 2004 Homecoming. It was great research for walking through Lancerland, though I’m glad to say we didn’t run into any of the four-legged problems that Johnny does!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

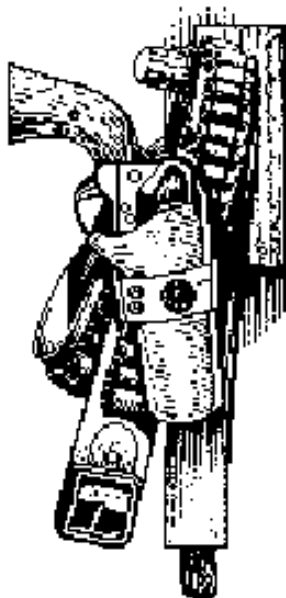
Ros Hutchison – lives in Brisbane Queensland in Australia. She has been a fan of Lancer and of James Stacy since Lancer showed in its original season in Brisbane – way back when.

Married, but separated, with a married son and daughter and one granddaughter, Ros works full time and writes whenever possible. She has always wanted to write and never really tried until she stumbled across the Lancer groups. Now she has a ball with it and has learned a lot from her betas and readers.

Ros loves reading other Lancer fanfic and is thrilled at how good some of them are. She also enjoys reading (has a passion for Dorothy Dunnett books), counted cross stitch, swimming, and watching cricket and Rugby League Football.

Last year Ros was lucky enough to save enough to cross ‘the pond’ and attend the Homecoming Convention, 2004. She met the best group of ladies and it became one of the highlights of her life. Meeting James Stacy and his lovely friend Tigger made it even more special. She’s saving like mad to try to do it again this year for Homecoming 2005.

Send any feedback for Ros to rozzahh21@hotmail.com



ALWAYS AND FOREVER



BY TINA COATES

Murdoch glanced up when he heard the room to Johnny's door slam for what seemed like the hundredth time in less than a week after storming up the steps to his room for the night.

Scott too, heard the slamming door. He glanced up from his book and when his eyes met those of his questioning father's he could only shrug in answer to the unspoken question.

Murdoch flicked the newspaper between his hands and folded it haphazardly upon his lap. He sighed and decided to talk to Scott one more time about his brother, "Something must have happened between you two."

Scott shook his head and said, "I told you before, nothing's happened. I don't know what's eating at him. He's been this way for at least a week now and I'm just as puzzled as you are."

"Did you talk to him like I told you to?" Murdoch asked.

Scott sighed and put his book face down on his lap, "Yes sir I did."

Murdoch's eyes narrowed and he asked, "When?"

Scott grinned, "Today, yesterday, the day before..."

"Alright, alright. I get it," Murdoch said frustrated, holding up a halting hand.

"Have you tried?" Scott asked knowing full well his father hadn't tried. No one, least of all their father had wanted to approach Johnny for the past week, his temper had been that bad.

Murdoch shook his graying head, "No son, I haven't. Frankly I've been hesitant to say anything to him, let alone ask what's bothering him.

Scott's brow furrowed in concentration, "Maybe we should just let him work it out himself. If it's something serious, he'd come to us, wouldn't he?"

Murdoch picked up his folded paper and tossed it on the floor next to his chair, "I don't know. But I do know this nonsense has to stop. He's driving everyone crazy and I for one want it to end."

"So what do you propose to do about it?" Scott asked.

"I propose another try at talking to him. Only this time I will do it and there's no time like the present," Murdoch said dryly as he stood up.

Scott half chuckled from his chair, "You sure you want to go up there alone? Maybe I should come with you," he suggested.

Murdoch waved him off saying, “No. But thanks for offering. I somehow get the feeling this is something I have to do.” He walked past Scott on his way to the staircase giving his son a squeeze on the shoulder, “Go back to your book. But Scott...”

Scott turned his head to look back at his father, “But what sir?” he asked cautiously.

Murdoch grinned, “If I’m not down in an hour, come up and rescue me, will you?”

Scott had to grin, the thought of having to rescue his father and not his brother was laughable, but nevertheless he shook his head and told him, “Sure thing.”

Murdoch started up the stairs and heard, ‘Good Luck’, shouted at him from behind. He snickered to himself and thought he just might need that luck.

Johnny’s door was closed, so Murdoch rapped on the wooden structure firmly waiting for a reply. When none came, Murdoch turned the knob and slowly opened the door to find the room in complete darkness with Johnny lying on the bed, his back to the door.

His son hadn’t come up but just a few minutes ago, so Murdoch thought it was highly unlikely that Johnny was asleep, “Johnny, I want to talk to you son,” he told him stepping toward the head of the bed and lighting the lamp on the table with a match from his shirt pocket.

The room glowed and still Johnny had not said a word. Murdoch placed a hand on Johnny’s shoulder and spoke to him again, “Son, we need to talk.”

Johnny tugged at the extra pillow on his bed pulling it toward him, wrapping his arm over

it, tucking it in close to his chest and stomach, “I don’t want to talk,” he said, his voice muffled by the corner of his pillow.

Murdoch sat down on the edge of the bed, heedless of his son’s words. “Johnny, I don’t know what’s going on son, but if you’re in trouble or need help with something, then I want you to know that I’m here for you. All you have to do is talk to me.”

Johnny shrugged his left shoulder as if he were trying to ward off the offered words, tugging the pillow even closer if it was possible, “I’m not in trouble. I just want to be left alone,” came his muffled reply.

Murdoch sighed heavily the sound of it drifting to Johnny’s ears in the form of defeat. He tried again only this time he touched Johnny’s shoulder once more before speaking, “I know something’s wrong. I can tell.”

Before Murdoch knew what was happening, Johnny sat up quickly, shifting across the head of his bed, dragging his pillow with him. He tucked it up to his chest, pulling his stocking feet up and wrapped his arms around the pillow and his knees, laying his head down on the clean white pillowcase as he eyed his father from that position. “There’s nothin’ wrong Murdoch,” he told him tiredly, blinking at the light that sat on the table next to his bed.

Murdoch heard him sigh and watched as he closed his eyes against the dancing flames of the lamp. He waited; hoping Johnny might open up to him even though he said there was nothing wrong. His patience paid off, but what Johnny had to say wasn’t what he expected.

“I wish I was older,” Johnny told him quietly, thoughtfully, his eyes still closed. “Then maybe...”

Murdoch's eyes squinted at his son, wishing he would open those expressive blue eyes that spoke so much louder than any words Johnny could say, "Then maybe what?" Murdoch asked hoping Johnny would continue.

Johnny hadn't realized he had spoken the words aloud. Now his father was expecting an explanation and the last thing he was going to do was talk to Murdoch about what was rolling around in his head. Murdoch couldn't fix what ailed him and neither could Scott. No one could and this fact bothered him more than he cared to admit. *'Nope. This problem is all mine,'* he thought. *'Not a thing they can do. Sides that, they'd probably just laugh at me.'*

The minutes seemed to tick by slowly as Murdoch waited for his son to answer him and then wondered briefly if Johnny had fallen asleep with his head nestled on the edge of his pillow. If he had known that Johnny's thoughts were tumbling around crazily in his head, or what they were about, he might have laughed at his son's predicament, just as Johnny thought, but he didn't know and Johnny looked as if he wasn't going to tell anytime soon.

Murdoch sighed again and gave Johnny a pat on the shoulder. Obviously his son was in no danger so he decided to let things go for now. Maybe it was enough that Johnny knew he could talk to him if he wanted to. He hoped so. "I'll be downstairs if you decide you want to talk son."

Murdoch stood and Johnny opened his eyes fully, giving Murdoch a glimpse into their secret depths he had so hoped for only minutes ago. Unfortunately there were no answers there. In fact, if Murdoch were to have taken a guess, he would have said that Johnny looked lonely or sad even. But he

shook his head at that crazy thought. He couldn't be lonely, why there were at least four maybe five other people in the house. Any one of whom Johnny could be spending the evening with if he wasn't in such a foul mood. And as far as he knew, there was nothing untoward that had happened recently to cause any sorrow.

Johnny spoke just before his father left his room, "Is Scott going into town tomorrow?" he asked, surprising Murdoch further by the question.

Murdoch stood in the doorway of Johnny's room and turned back to him, "It seems I recall him saying some such thing during supper." He eyed Johnny and saw that his son seemed to want to ask another question. "You want me to tell him you'd like to ride in with him?" he asked, thinking this was perhaps the question that Johnny wanted an answer to.

Johnny blinked a couple of times and swallowed before answering with a silent nod of his head.

"Ok son. I'll let him know." He started to leave and then suddenly thought of something else, "You didn't have supper yet. Want me to have something sent up?"

Johnny scooted down on his bed, lying back down on the pillow he left abandoned when he first scooted away. "Naw. I'm not hungry."

Murdoch turned down the wick in the lamp, watching overtly as Johnny tucked the extra pillow he'd been holding under his arm and up to his chest, sapphire eyes closing in sleep as he left the room, shutting the door behind him with a soft click.



“Well, you’re still in one piece. Did you have any luck?” Scott asked when his father came back into the great room.

Murdoch shook his head negatively and poured himself a glass of scotch from behind the couch. “No, I didn’t.”

“What did he say then? You were up there long enough to have had some kind of conversation,” Scott told him, curious to know what was said.

Murdoch took his drink back to his chair, picked up his paper and plopped it down on his lap as he sat down heavily. “He wanted to know if you were going into town tomorrow and asked if I’d tell you he wanted to go along.”

Scott’s brows rose curiously, “Is that all?”

Murdoch nodded and drank a small amount of his liquor, “Pretty much.”

Scott couldn’t believe that in all the time his father had been up there, this was the only thing the two of them had talked about, “You were up there a lot longer than it takes for that to be the only thing you two talked about.”

Murdoch sighed, “Well he did say something a little strange, but he wouldn’t say anything more when I asked him about it.”

“What’s that?” Scott wanted to know.

“He said, he wished he was older and then a few seconds later he said, maybe then,” Murdoch told his son. “What do you make of it?”

Scott shook his head, “I’ve no idea.”

“Whatever it is, the one thing he did assure me of was that he was not in trouble.”

Scott snorted a half laugh, “I guess that’s something to be thankful for.”

Murdoch looked down at the drink in his hands thoughtfully then back up at his son, “Take him into town with you tomorrow. Maybe he’s just feeling cooped up and overworked. This season has been grueling for everyone and I know Johnny has put in more than his fair share of time with the cattle and the fence lines.”

Scott’s brows lifted at this observation, his brother did work hard, harder in fact than most of the other men on the ranch and often times came in after long hours spent finishing up when everyone else had already gone home for the night. The fact that their father recognized this was a triumph and Scott fervently hoped that Murdoch had told Johnny he noticed. “Did you tell him?” he asked the older man.

Murdoch looked at Scott questioningly, “Tell him what?”

“That you noticed,” Scott said with a bit of mild irritation lacing his voice.

Murdoch heard the irritation and immediately regretted that he had in fact, hadn’t said anything to Johnny about all his hard work and effort. “Regretfully, I didn’t.”

Scott looked at him as if he would like to give him a lecture but Murdoch was quick to rectify the situation, “I’ll tell him tomorrow son. I should have before now, I know. But honestly when I went up there I didn’t think about it at all. I was more into thinking about keeping my head on my shoulders if Johnny was of a mood to remove it.”

Scott had the good grace to relent and gave his father a laughing smile, "I can understand that. But make sure that you do. Maybe that's part of what's troubling him. You know he tries really hard to please you and do what you tell him, even if you two have to butt heads to have your say."

Murdoch knew Scott was right. "I won't forget. First thing tomorrow morning, before you leave, I'll make sure he knows."

Scott's mouth turned up in a grin, "Good." Standing up he set his book down on the table, making his way toward the staircase, "Think I'll turn in. Goodnight, Murdoch."

"Goodnight, son," Murdoch replied watching the strong straight back of his eldest son disappear around the corner.

Murdoch looked around the room, finding himself sitting for the first time in the past year, all alone. Resting his head back against the chair he listened to the sounds of the house, the soft movement of Scott, as he got ready for bed upstairs, the ticking of the grandfather clock, the lilting tunes he could hear Teresa humming from her room as she readied herself for bed. Sounds that in the past year he had come to love and appreciate more than he ever thought possible. *'Tomorrow,'* he thought. *'Tomorrow I'll make sure I say something to Johnny. His sound is the only one I can't hear.'* The one sound needed to make all the sounds he had come to expect at this hour, complete.



The next morning didn't go the way that Murdoch expected. In fact no one followed the usual routine any more than they had the

night before when everyone went to bed early for a change, except him.

By the time he came downstairs, breakfast was ready and on the table, his first cup of coffee poured and waiting for him. Teresa was busy getting the laundry together for washday, and Scott was just coming in from outside, pulling his gloves off as he sat down at the table and took Murdoch's cup of coffee without asking.

When Murdoch sat down he watched Scott drink his coffee, his head and eyes moving up and down with Scott's hand motion from the table to the lips and back to the table. Scott laughed good-naturedly at him and said, "Good morning," as he reached behind him and grabbed another cup, putting it in front of his father. "Sorry 'bout that." He poured him some hot coffee, "It's cold out this morning."

Murdoch humphed, "I see," and picked up his new steaming cup, blowing on it before settling for the first sip of the day. "Is your brother down yet?" he asked.

"Right here," a cheerful Johnny said as he came into the room. "Looks like I'm just in time." Johnny poured a cup of coffee and grabbed a biscuit off the platter on the table. "Got the horses saddled?" he asked his brother, eyeing him over the brim of his cup.

"Just got finished," Scott told him.

"Good," Johnny replied with a grin on his face, a much different tone and attitude this morning than the night before. "Let's go."

Scott grabbed a biscuit and took one last sip of his coffee before their bellowing father stopped him and Johnny, "Now wait just a minute you two. Neither one of you have hardly eaten a thing. Sit down and have

breakfast first,” he told them a little more sternly than he intended. It was bad enough that everyone had gone off to bed early last night, but now they were all leaving before breakfast was properly served or eaten.

“Johnny I wanted to tell you this morning what a good job I think your doing with all the work you’ve been getting done,” Murdoch began as he waited for them to join him at the table.

Johnny stuffed the last of his biscuit in his mouth and spoke before he had swallowed it, “Uh, that’s great Murdoch but we can’t stay. We want to get our work done and go to town early.” He managed to keep backing out of the room with one hand clutching at Scott’s sleeve, tugging as he pulled his brother toward the front door. Scott had a second to shrug apologetically at their father before disappearing past the doorway.

‘Well so much for trying to tell his son what a good job he was doing,’ Murdoch thought. He could hear them scrambling to get their gun belts off the rack and securely strapped around their waist before the door was slammed shut behind them. He looked at the mound of food sitting on the table in front of him and sighed heavily wondering why in the world Maria had even bothered.

His thoughts were interrupted as Teresa entered the room with a basket of dirty clothes on one hip and a smile on her face when she saw him. “Good morning. Did the boys leave already?” she asked setting the loaded basket down on the floor and sitting down at the table with him.

Murdoch snorted a gentle laugh and held his coffee cup up for a drink, “Like a whirlwind,” he told her mildly.

She smiled back at him, patting his hand in understanding, but before he had a chance to say anything else she was up again and taking the laundry out the back door, leaving him alone just like the night before without a by your leave or have a nice day. Murdoch was beginning to think that maybe there was a conspiracy going on but refrained from saying anything about it since there wasn’t anyone to say anything to, now that Maria was off doing her own chores for the day.

Setting his cup down, Murdoch thought on the morning and the whirlwind of activity that stopped as suddenly as it started. “At least Johnny seemed like he was in a better mood this morning. At least some changes are easy enough to deal with,” he said to the empty room.



Scott and Johnny finished up the last of a small section of fencing before heading to town. The work had been easy and with the morning started fresh and early both men put their tools away with hardly a sweat and mounted up.

Scott was anxious to get to Green River and the mail station. He was expecting a newly published book his grandfather was sending to him and then afterward had plans to buy a few things at the local tailor. He wanted to be fitted with a new suit for the upcoming Cattleman’s Association dance and knew he would need to be early or risk losing his appointment to Walter Ridgemont, who had already tried twice to bribe his way into getting Scott’s coveted scheduled time slot.

Since the tailor was the only one in the area, Scott wanted to get in first for his fitting;

otherwise he would be stuck going in at a later time and he was too anxious to get home and open the package he knew would be waiting for him by the time they got to town. There were other items he would purchase too but he would take care of that after picking up his mail and just before his fitting if he timed it just right. If things went well, they would be heading home by three, maybe four at the latest. Plenty of time to get things done and get home for supper and then a nice relaxing evening spent reading.

Johnny on the other hand, wasn't going to the tailor's yet if he ever decided to at all; he only came to town with Scott for one purpose and one purpose only. He wanted to see Emily. So far the girl had barely given him the time of day, but he was hoping that today would be different. Every day this week and last week he had found time to ride into town, if only for an hour, hoping she would look his way just once or speak to him when he attempted to catch her attention. So far his luck hadn't worked nor his easy charm.

It hadn't been for any lack of trying on his part. The fact of the matter was the girl ignored him completely and thoroughly. She wouldn't talk to him, acknowledge him or even look his way unless he flat out stepped right in front of her. The main reason he had come home last night in such a foul mood.

The Day Before:

For the first time in two weeks Emily had been standing right in front of him. They ran into one another as he came out of the barbershop, his hair still wet and clinging to the back of his neck after Neely Owens, the barber, had washed and barely trimmed it for him.

"Sorry," he said, when they bumped chest to chest into one another. His heart had started pounding and all the things he had wanted to say to her turned into mush in his mouth. The fragrance she wore drifted up to him and all Johnny could think of was how good she smelled now that he was close enough to catch a whiff of her perfume. Her scent was intoxicating and all thoughts of asking her to the Cattleman's Association dance, escaped his mind as he reeled from the unexpected feelings her closeness caused him.

He could have reached out and touched her golden honey colored hair if he been able to find the strength or the courage to do so, but she would never let him do that sort of thing, '*not in public*,' he thought. Her big brown doe colored eyes stared into his and without a word, she moved past him and down the walkway.

Johnny turned seeing his moment fast slipping away and ran after her, coming to stand in front of her as if she had never left him. "My name is Johnny... Johnny Lancer." He knew her first name - Val had told him what it was two weeks ago when he saw her for the first time coming out of the dressmakers shop.

"I know who you are," she said without blinking those big brown eyes of hers.

"You do?" Johnny asked, surprised she would know who he was. She was new to the area. She and her father had just moved to Green River a few weeks earlier and Val had told him that they were staying at the hotel until their new home was built on the north end of town. Val couldn't remember their last name since he had yet to meet them personally, but he knew her father intended on selling shoes and boots, his information having been handed down by Mabel Tanner, the owner and best cook in the county, who generally brought

him a meal from the Tanner restaurant when he worked late.

“Yes. Excuse me,” she said trying to go around him. Johnny moved to his right and kept her from going anywhere by blocking her way with his body.

“I’ve tried to talk to you a few times, but you never seemed to notice,” he told her.

“I’ve noticed. And if you didn’t notice, I was ignoring you,” she told him flat out.

“Why would you do that?” Johnny asked his ego now thoroughly ruffled after all the foolish attempts he had made to get her attention.

“Because I don’t like you,” she told Johnny bluntly; twisting the invisible knife she thrust into his heart.

“You don’t even know me, lady,” he told her, hurt and angry at her words.

“I know you’re kind,” she parried and thrust once more into his heart.

“What do you mean by that?” he wanted to know, thinking he would have never suspected her of being prejudice.

“The love ‘em and leave ‘em kind,” she replied, chasing away the prior thoughts that Johnny was having about her. This new prospect wasn’t much better but at least she wasn’t telling him ‘no’ because she didn’t like the color of his skin. Immediately he wondered if she’d been hurt before and that’s what she meant by her remark.

Johnny cast his eyes down and started to tell her that he wasn’t ‘the love ‘em and leave ‘em kind,’ but when he looked up again she was

already walking past him and crossing the busy street.

He followed her, running across the street, holding up his hand when a man on his horse came trotting by and the two nearly collided. He caught up with her just before she was about to enter the general store, tipping his hat at two ladies who walked past him speaking to one another and then smiling at him when they saw who it was.

He was well known in Green River and for the most part he thought people generally liked him, especially the ladies. So it was baffling to him that the one girl he wanted to get to know, wouldn’t respond to him in like manner.

“Emily,” he said, calling her name for the first time and letting her know that he knew it, just like she knew his.

She stopped short just before going into the store, “I didn’t give you permission to call me by my given name. We don’t know each other as you so aptly reminded me a few minutes ago.”

Johnny wrapped an arm around the overhang post and said, “I don’t know your last name. What else was I supposed to do?”

“You weren’t supposed to do anything. We are not having this conversation. Now go away or I will call upon the sheriff and tell him that you keep harassing me,” she informed him coldly.

“Why? All I’m doing is trying to talk to you. Last I heard that wasn’t even a mild offense in the eyes of the law. Besides that, Val’s a buddy of mine. Don’t think you’ll get much help from him.” Johnny’s tone was smug and knew he said the wrong thing as soon as the

words came out of his mouth and her face turned bright red.

She walked up to him and said, "I don't care if he is a friend or not. I have given you no reason to think that I am interested in you. You're too young, brash and rude. Now leave me alone or else."

"Or else what?" he asked playing along with her.

"This!" she said stomping on the toe of his boot as hard as she could.

Johnny howled and Emily flounced away from him and into the store. Laughter could be heard from down the boardwalk and Johnny found that he was the afternoon entertainment for several of the hands that stood outside the saloon with beers in their hands and sly smiles upon their drunken faces.

Most of them belonged to the D Bar D ranch and Johnny knew that news of his foot injury would soon be spread throughout half the county before the night was over. His humiliation tripled, leaving Johnny angry and frustrated as he stomped half limping across the road and mounted his horse in front of Bill's shop. He pulled forcefully on the reins; sorry for his roughness as soon as Barranca shook his head irritably and trotted off toward home. Behind him, raucous laughter filled his ears, turning them beet red. As he rode away Johnny cursed the D Bar D ranch and all their ranch hands, deciding that Emily hadn't seen the last of him. He would ask her to the dance come hell or high water if it were the last thing on this earth he ever did.



Present Time:

Scott and Johnny rode up to the saloon and dismounted, wrapping the reins of their horses around the hitching post. Scott ran his hand down the rump of Sheridan's backside, coming round to stand next to his brother, "So little brother, what are you going to do while I'm getting fitted?" he asked pushing his hat back off his forehead.

Johnny scanned the street very quickly not finding any sign of Emily anywhere. He hadn't really expected to just waltz into town and there she'd be, but he had hoped it would be that easy. Just now though, with Scott by his side, he was grateful not to see her. The last thing he wanted was for his brother to witness another annihilating dismissal from the girl he was trying so desperately to get to know. "Think I'll mosey on down to the general store and then wait for yah back here at the saloon," he told Scott casually, hoping he didn't sound or look as if he were anxious to get rid of him. Johnny squinted into the sun, looking down toward the office where he knew Val would be, jutting his chin in the sheriff's direction, "Might even go visit Val for a while. He's always good for laugh or two," he added.

"Sounds good. I have to go to the general store myself. Why don't we go together? I can pick up the mail on the way and you can take my package and goods back to the horses when we're done," Scott suggested.

Johnny's eyes darted up and down the street, the object of his intentions nowhere in sight. He nodded his head saying, "Guess so," with a resigned air of defeat. He wondered where she was and how he was going to find a way to talk to her again without making a fool of himself.

Scott smiled, ignorant of Johnny's true reasons for wanting to come to town in the first place, "Alright. Let's go then. I want to get done as quickly as possible and head home."

Johnny shrugged and Scott turned away, ignoring his brother's half hearted enthusiasm about being in town for the day and not having to ride fence. Scott's excitement at getting fitted first and picking up his new book was enough to overshadow any downcast feelings projecting from his sibling, thinking that once his brother got done with his shopping and visited his friend Val, he would most likely be in a better mood than the one he seemed to be in at the moment.

As they walked down the boardwalk, Scott threw an arm around his brother's shoulder and pulled him in closer, "You know, Walter Ridgemont is going to be green with envy when he sees my new suit. Grandfather sent me pictures recently of the newest styles in Boston," he patted the pocket over his heart, "Only the best for the best, little brother. Alison and all the other ladies are going to be lined up a mile long when they see how smart my new suit is."

Johnny had to laugh, he didn't think a new suit in any style was what turned the ladies on, but he wasn't going to say so to his grinning brother who thought the whole affair was some kind of contest to see who could out-suit the other and win a fair maiden's hand. He supposed it was all Walter Ridgemont's fault. Ever since the city slicker had come home from college, back to live on his father's ranch, it seemed that he and Scott found themselves constantly in competition with one another over the smallest of things. They both compared the latest hats, shoes, shirts and slacks, like nobody else's business, to the point that Johnny tended to stay as far away

from them both whenever the two of them were together, which these days seemed to have happened a lot in his opinion.

Johnny didn't begrudge the new friendship; he just didn't understand why they each felt the need to one up on each other. In his mind, the only thing he could imagine being was who he was and not what kind of clothes he wore. If the ladies didn't like him the way he was dressed then he didn't want to be with them anyway, he wasn't going to change his style just to suit the crazy ideals of some woman.

As soon as he thought this though, he suddenly thought of Emily and wondered if she would ever try and make him change or want him to dress funny in duded up clothes like his brother. Then he shook his head, wondering why on earth he was even thinking such a think. Hell, he hadn't even been able to talk to her for more than a few minutes without getting his foot stomped on and told he was too young and brash, whatever that was.

They got to the telegraph and mail depot first. Scott opened the door and went inside, Johnny following closely on his heels. Scott's face was lit up like the fireworks on the fourth of July Johnny thought as his brother asked Phil if a package had come for him yet.

"Give me just minute Scott and I'll go see," the telegraph operator said, pointing a finger at his machine. "Give a holler if it starts goin' off will yah? I'll be back in minute."

Scott leaned on the counter, his elbows firmly planted on the polished surface, "Sure thing Phil," he said, turning his head to look at Johnny who planted his shoulder on the glass window that overlooked the street. "See anything worth mentioning little brother?" he asked Johnny.

Johnny sighed and pulled away from the window to stand next to his brother, his elbows matching the same pose as that of Scott's, "Naw, ain't nothin' but dust movin' around out there. It's early though. Folks are workin' right now. Might pick up later while you're gettin' fitted by that fancy dressmaker you're so fond of."

Scott grinned patiently, "You know little brother, it's not a bad idea for you to have a suit made up for the dance. Just think how splendid you'd look all tailored out in fancy new attire for the biggest social event of the year in these parts."

Johnny snorted, laughing to himself, "Now you sound like Murdoch. No, let me take that back, like Teresa and Murdoch," he said stressing their names as he stared down at the countertop. "The old man and Teresa would like nothin' better than to see me all trussed up like some kind of Thanksgiving turkey."

Scott said thoughtfully, "Why not, it couldn't hurt to do something a little different just for once."

Johnny shrugged, "Cause it just ain't my style." Then thinking more on it he said, "I wouldn't feel right. I wouldn't feel like me. Does that make sense?" he asked keeping his eyes averted from his brother's.

Scott clamped him on the shoulder and Johnny looked up at him, "Yes it does," Scott told him sincerely, because he truly did understand where his brother was coming from and he knew, just like Johnny knew, it wasn't his style or his way. If his brother wanted to dress up, he would. And Scott knew that no matter what he decided on, it would look magnificent on his little brother. The few times he'd seen his brother 'dress up' more for the special occasion he had never been disappointed

because his brother had always looked extremely handsome and as his grandfather would say, 'debonair', dressed in his own style of clothing.

Phil came back into the room, a brown wrapped package in his hand, "From Boston it says," he told Scott, setting it on the counter, "Just sign here and it's all yours," he told him, pushing a ledger across the counter and handing Scott a pencil to sign with.

Scott signed the book with a satisfied 'ah' and with a final pointed tap of the pencil tip, he handed it back and took the package. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Scott held the present from his grandfather in his hand and said, "I can't wait."

Johnny grinned lopsided at his brother, pushing his hat off his head to dangle down his back, "Another book?" he asked incredibly, fingering the edge of the package.

"Yep," Scott told him all smiles.

"What's this one about?" he asked, not really wanting to know but feeling it necessary to show an interest since Scott was so obviously overjoyed at getting it.

"That, little brother, is something you may find very interesting," Scott said with a gleam in his eye.

"Oh yeah?" Johnny asked inquisitively.

"Oh yeah. It's about a submarine and an insane captain, called Nemo," Scott told him, hoping to capture Johnny's imagination for a good telling later on.

"What's a submarine?" Johnny asked.

Scott grinned, now he had his little brother, “It’s a metal ship that can travel under the seas,” he told him with a mysterious air, hoping his little brother would be intrigued by the very idea.

Johnny blinked, not knowing if he should believe his brother or not. He had never heard of a ship that could travel underwater and it almost sounded as if Scott was telling him some kind of tall tale. “Is there really such a thing?” Johnny wanted to know; his curiosity piqued more than he would care to admit to anyone.

Scott pursed his lips together and a soft laugh come up from his throat, “Yes, little brother, and when I get done reading it, I’ll tell you all about it if you’re still interested. Better yet, maybe I could read it out loud to everyone. I think Teresa and Murdoch would enjoy the story as well.”

Johnny thought on it, “Maybe so,” he reflected, more curious than he wanted to appear.

Scott clasped him on the shoulder, “Come on. I have an appointment and the last thing I’m going to do is lose it to Walter, the pompous ass.”

They exited the building and Johnny asked, “I thought you liked Walter?”

“I do. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t a pompous ass,” Scott told him as they walked toward the general store.

Johnny followed along side him, “I know what an ass is, but what’s pompous?” he wanted to know.

Striding down the boardwalk Scott said, “It means he’s arrogant, self important...”

“Ok, ok, I got it, he’s an ass. Only a little more flowery the way you put it,” Johnny finished for him.

Scott nodded his head at Johnny’s clear understanding of his definition, “That’s right,” then stopped when they got to the general store, “Here we are,” he remarked, going inside and heading straight for the men’s toiletry items.

While Scott looked for the things he wanted, Johnny sauntered over to the far corner on the left hand side of the store, where Bill Watson kept his stock of guns, knives, bullets and other accessories of the like. As he peered through the glass countertop, inspecting the new assortment of handguns Bill had for sale he caught the faint fragrance of honeysuckle drifting toward him, reminding him of why he had wanted to come to town in the first place.

Stiffening his back he turned around silently and saw her from across the room. Her back was to him and as far as he could tell, she hadn’t seen him when she came into the building. Johnny watched as she fingered the brightly colored fabrics on the tables and moved from one section to the other, noting how her golden halo of hair cascaded down her back in thick rippling waves clear past her waist and beyond. Once again his fingers itched, just wanting to run his hands through it’s heavy mass, knowing without ever having touched it that her hair would feel thick and heavy, satiny to the touch in his hands.

Licking his lips and finding not a muscle in his body that would work, he stood where he was and watched her. Never in his life had he felt so immobile or short of breath as he felt while following her every move. His heart lurched when she came to stand just behind his brother who was haggling briefly with Bill over the cost of cuff links at the jewelry

counter. When Emily tried to ease past him, Scott suddenly stood up straight and took a step back, knocking into her when he did so.

From his corner of the world, Johnny watched his brother turn around, excuse himself with an embarrassed smile on his face, and a tip of his brown felt hat. In that instant Johnny saw his world go suddenly dark and ominously filled with a rage he never would have expected to feel toward Scott. It wasn't that Scott had done anything other than be polite but it was the fact that he had been able, without even trying, to get the girl he wanted so badly to like him, look up into his face with the most radiant smile he thought he had ever seen. A smile that he had wished over and over again the beautiful girl had given to him. He heard her say, "It's quite all right. No need to apologize, but thank you."

As Emily swept past him, Scott felt piercing eyes watching him and looked up to find his brother across the room with a look on his face that was so unlike anything he had ever witnessed. Before he could register what it was, the look disappeared and Scott was left baffled and wondering at what was going on in the mind of his brother. Johnny casually turned away from him with what Scott thought was his infamous Madrid mask well in place and for all the world he wondered why.

Shaking his head and not having the time to sort things out on his time crunch, Scott paid for his items, thanked Bill, gathered his things and made his way over to where Johnny was standing.

Stepping up beside him and looking down into the glass counter he asked, "Everything alright brother?"

Seconds passed before Johnny answered and when he did the anger he felt was barely

hidden in his tone, "Yep, everything's fine brother."

Scott arched his eyebrows, waiting, hoping Johnny would say more or at least let him know what was going on. It soon became apparent though that this was not going to happen. "You still willing to take my things and put them in my saddlebags for me?" he asked almost hesitantly, feeling as if the anger Johnny was trying to hide was somehow directed at him.

Johnny sighed, seeming to come to grips with whatever was going on in his head and looked sideways at Scott, "Yeah. I'll put them in your saddlebags. Give 'em here before you drop 'em," he answered, deciding in a flash that it really wasn't Scott he was mad at and it wasn't fair to take his anger out on him. He reached for the items and the package that Scott had picked up earlier, giving his brother a stiff smile, hoping he accepted the unspoken apology that went with it.

The silent communication was clear and Scott was smart enough to realize that whatever had been going on in Johnny's head had been pushed to the background temporarily. At least enough anyways for his brother to drop the Madrid mask he had seen briefly on his face. *'There's something definitely wrong here. I don't know what it is little brother, but you and I are going to have a little talk on the way home.'* Scott thought, making a mental note to discuss the afternoon and the past week with him later.

With a curt nod and one last look at his brother, Scott turned and walked away, saying over his shoulder, "Meet me in two hours over at the saloon. I think we'll both need a beer before we go home."

When Scott didn't hear an answer from his brother, he turned at the door and looked back to find Johnny standing where he had left him, arms laden with his things and staring across the room at the girl he had bumped into earlier. The girl had her back to Johnny and didn't seem to notice there was anyone else in the room, but the look that was on his brother's face spoke volumes and for the first time in two weeks Scott thought he knew just what it was that was troubling his little brother. Without another word he left the store and made his way to the tailor's, all the while pondering the new revelation that crowded his thoughts. He laughed to himself thinking, *'Johnny's love sick.'*

With Scott gone Johnny was left in the store with Emily as the only other customer. Bill Watson walked over to the gun counter, "Yah want to look at anything, Johnny?" he asked tapping the glass case over the handguns. Johnny was one of his best customers when it came to purchasing any kind of weaponry or ammunition and he thought Johnny might be in the market for one of the new knives or guns he had in stock. The shopkeeper had seen the thundercloud look on Johnny's face earlier and thought his hopes for selling one or the other was very good today if Johnny wasn't in his usual hurry to leave.

Johnny shook his head, "Not right now Bill. Maybe later. I see you got some new stock, so you never know," he replied to Bill's inquiry.

Bill sighed a little disappointed, twitching the black mustache under his nose, "Any time Johnny. You know I always got somethin' for yah."

"I know, Bill. Thanks. Go on about your business, I'm just about to leave," he told the shopkeeper idly, leaning casually against the frame of the counter.

Bill had known Johnny for almost a year; long enough to know it wasn't like the young man to just hang around for nothing. If Johnny wasn't shopping for something specific in mind, a long list of supplies were usually handed to him with a quick 'here yah go Bill, I'm goin' for a beer,' and a 'be back in a while.'

On this day, Johnny lingered behind uncharacteristically, and Bill was certain it had to do with the young lady who was browsing the fabrics on the other side of the store. He smiled, walked back to the register and noted Scott's sale in his ledger, glancing up only now and then with amusement to what might happen between these two. There was one other thing that Bill knew about Johnny Lancer. and that was the boy never gave up when there was something he wanted, and in this case, it looked as if there was something he wanted real bad on the other side of his store. Slicking back the hair on his head, Bill picked up a black visor cap off the counter next to the register and put it on. The bill of the cap would hide his eyes while he waited to see what Johnny would do next, hoping he looked inconspicuous enough that neither person would notice he was watching.

Johnny moved Scott's packages into his left arm, spying a small yellow skein of yarn on a table just in front of him, picking it up; he tossed it deftly toward Emily. It flew past her, landing quietly on the stack of fabrics to her left.

He could tell that she had seen the yarn land from the corner of her eye. Johnny watched her pick it up, glancing over at Bill curiously as if he had thrown it there. From his vantage point, Johnny thought she looked totally perplexed when Bill casually shrugged his shoulders at her then buried his face in his

ledger, a co-conspirators smile hidden from Emily's view by the black visor.

Johnny watched her put the yellow skein back on the stack of fabric with a shrug that matched Bill's. Deciding that getting her attention was taking too long, Johnny walked across the room to stand behind her silently. He made sure he walked with a light step, so Emily wouldn't hear him, holding Scott's things firmly in his left arm so as not to drop them if she were to suddenly whirl around on him and catch him sneaking up on her.

When Emily didn't hear him, temptation got the better of him and Johnny decided to get revenge for the stomp on the foot she gave him the day before. With a fast hand, he pulled at the blue bow that was holding part of her long wavy hair together and quickly tossed it onto the pile of fabric in front of her, just out of her reach but close enough that if Bill wanted to help get it for her, he could with no problem at all. He laughed as he walked out of the door, hearing her squeal his name as he left.

By the time he had taken about ten steps down the boardwalk he felt something hit the back of his shoulders. Turning around slowly as if he hadn't a care in the world, Johnny looked down and saw the blue bow he had taken from Emily laying at his feet. He laughed knowing she had to of practically jumped atop the fabric to have gotten it so quick.

He looked up seeing Emily standing just outside the door of Bill's store. With hands on her hips, Emily's eyes flashed at him angrily. Johnny smiled at her mischievously as he bent down to pick up the fancy hair ornament. He twirled it around in his hand, looking from it to her as she stood there with fire in her eyes, one foot tapping a furious rhythm on the planks beneath her shoe.

Grinning he said, "This yours lady?"

Emily pursed her lips infuriated by Johnny, "You know darn good and well that's mine Johnny Lancer," she told him.

Johnny cocked his head and stared up at the awning then back down at her, "Nope. Never seen it before," he teased.

"Oh, you!" Emily said gritting her teeth. She fairly stomped up to him and made a grab for the bow, only to have Johnny lift it high over her head and out of her reach.

Emily sighed heavily, returning her hands to her hips, fingers rapidly thrumming a chorus of frustrated taps against the cotton fabric of her pale blue dress. With her lips pursed tightly, she held out her hand and waited impatiently for Johnny to return the bow to her. When he didn't she told him irritably, "You're a pest Johnny, you know that?"

He grinned at her and put his arm around his back, the bow held firmly in his fingers, "Been told that a time a two. Mostly by my mama though."

She went to reach around his waist, but Johnny stepped back, rocking on the heel of his left boot, "Give it to me," she said, bringing her hand back with nothing in it.

Johnny laughed, his smile broad and teasing, "Nope. Not until you tell me your last name and say...please." Johnny waited to see what she would do, his eyebrows shooting up when she just stood there staring at him angrily, thinking hard on whether or not she wanted to play his game.

He could tell the moment she made up her mind. Emily's face softened, her shoulders relaxed and the tap tap tapping of her foot

ceased, "Thompson...please." Short and simple, she thought deciding it was better to play along than to suffer any more of his childish behavior.

Johnny smiled at the quick answer she gave him. *'She's so darn pretty,'* he thought holding the bow just out of her reach. Emily made a grab for it but Johnny pulled the hair ornament back just before she could get her hands on it.

Exasperation set in on her face, "What now?" she asked dropping back to her previous stance.

Johnny bit his bottom lip as he studied her and then down at the tips of his boots when he said, "Say pretty please," he teased, lifting his face to hers, daring her to do what he said.

Emily's chest heaved, "You are the Devil Johnny Lancer. Give me back my bow right now!" she fairly shouted at him.

Johnny held the bow up and wiggled it in front of her, "Say...pretty please. And tell me you're sorry for stomping on my foot yesterday," he added, reminding her of what she had done to him.

Emily didn't need any reminders of what she had done to him yesterday. In fact, she was quite sorry by the time she got inside the store and watched him limp away amidst the cackles of the men who were hanging out at the saloon. She knew she had embarrassed and humiliated him in front of the other men, unknowingly of course at the time, but she had been so flustered by his presence and his persistent desire to get to know her that she had acted out impulsively without realizing the consequences of her actions.

She was even more mortified, when she found out later that Johnny wasn't exactly the character she had used to describe him. Mabel Tanner had heard about what happened and told her that evening as her and her father had dinner in the restaurant, "You're a lucky gal, Emily. All the girls in these here parts have been trying to tie one or both them Lancer boys down ever since they came home."

Well Emily knew this was true, she hadn't been in town more than a few weeks when the topic of one or both brothers could be heard being gossiped about by several of the young ladies her age she had come to be associated with since her arrival. Always she kept her thoughts to herself as this girl or that, talked about the day Scott or Johnny asked for their hand in marriage. Her newest girlfriends, Louise and Becky were so confident in their ability to catch one of the Lancer brothers they went so far as to talk as if each had gained the affections of the men in question and there was no hope left for any of the others. And unfortunately, as they so aptly put it, that included her.

This warning was enough to make her stay as far away as possible from the two men with whom she had yet to meet in the first place. Not knowing Louise or Becky for very long, she didn't have a clue that all the aspirations for holy matrimony was just fluff and stuff that the girls had made up in the hopes of appearing as if they had a claim on the brothers. If she had known that they were jealous of her good looks, her confident manner and her hourglass figure, she might not have been so rough on him when she finally got her first opportunity to meet Johnny Lancer face to face. Now she wondered if what all they said was true or not. Johnny Lancer seemed mighty interested in her but she thought he had a strange way of showing it. The thought made her smile, but

by now, they were in a battle of wills over her bow and she couldn't let him win.

"Pretty please. And I apologize for stepping on your foot," she said lifting her chin slightly and waiting for him to hand over the prize with an outstretched hand.

Johnny grinned, '*this is too easy,*' he thought. He started to put it in her hand and when she was just about to close her fingers around it, Johnny pulled it back. She looked questioningly at him, the fire in her eyes going up a notch, "I'm not saying please again," she told him.

Johnny shrugged, "Don't have to," he told her turning away.

'*What is he doing?*' she thought watching incredibly as he walked away from her. "But you said I could have it back if I said pretty please and apologized," she hollered down at him.

Johnny stopped and turned around, "Yep, that's what I said. Only now I've changed my mind. I'm keeping it."

"But that's not fair!" she shouted at him.

Johnny's eyes crinkled and he laughed quietly to himself, "No it ain't. Guess if you want it back bad enough, you'll let me take you to the dance in two weeks." He watched her eyes go wide, and what looked like mad anger flit across her face. Ignoring it he said, "I'll be back in town tomorrow. You can let me know then," he called out to her, turning on his heels and walking away.

Emily pushed her hair back behind her ear and went back into the store. Bill Watson looked up when she came back in, a tiny smile on his

face. Dark eyes twinkled when he asked, "Can I help you find anything Miss Emily?"

Emily stood in the aisle of the store; sighing as she looked around, "Guess you can help me find something nice to make a dress for a dance in two weeks."

Bill laughed and Emily looked up when he did. "He's a good boy Miss Emily. You could do a lot worse if you ask me." The shopkeeper came around the corner of his counter and put his arm around her shoulder, "Got some real pretty stuff out in the back. Real nice for a special occasion and I'd say this calls for the good stuff." When she didn't answer, Bill Watson gave her a couple quick fatherly pulls toward his shoulder and led her in the direction of 'the good stuff' as he put it.



"How'd it go in town son?" Murdoch asked Scott when he knew for sure that Johnny was out of the house for a short time.

Scott looked around, "He outside or something?"

Murdoch nodded, "Went to groom Barranca. I take it you do have something to tell me."

Scott let out a brief sigh and poured himself a drink holding up the bottle in silent question to his father. Murdoch nodded his head and Scott poured two drinks, bringing one to his father and then sat down in the chair opposite from him.

"Where's Teresa?" Scott asked before telling his father about Johnny.

Murdoch looked down at his drink, “Off spending the night with Louise Washburn. She won’t be back for a couple days in fact. So what do you know?”

“Well I don’t have much to tell you sir. Except I think I may know what’s bothering Johnny,” Scott began.

Murdoch’s brows furrowed thoughtfully, “Go on.”

Taking a drink then setting his glass on his knee Scott said, “I think our Johnny is in love,” he stated frankly and with a hint of a smile on his lips.

Murdoch drank from his glass then set it down in like fashion to Scott, “Johnny...in love?”

Scott shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, “It’s not impossible you know.”

Murdoch closed his eyes briefly and then opened them taking a deep breath through his nose, “I know son. It’s just...”

When Murdoch hesitated Scott prompted by asking, “Just what Murdoch?”

Murdoch waved a hand in the air, “He’s so young. So...so...”

Scott waited knowing his father was having a difficult time with the idea, “So what, sir,” he asked, hoping to help his father form the thoughts he couldn’t seem to put into words, “So unsettled, maybe?”

Murdoch slapped the arm of his chair, “Yes! That’s it exactly.”

Scott lowered his head staring at the glass on his knee. He wondered if it really was that his father thought Johnny was too young and

unsettled or if it was just that Murdoch, having only had his sons home for a short time dreaded the thought, the very idea of one of his boys falling in love and perhaps one day moving away from him so soon. It was a very real quandary and one that Scott didn’t think his father was aware that he participated in.

His thoughts were soon justified when he heard Murdoch say as if to himself, “He’s only been home a year. It’s too soon and he’s too young to be getting so serious with a girl.” As Murdoch’s thoughts continued to ramble in between sips of scotch, Scott heard him add, “He hasn’t settled in yet...he hasn’t...you haven’t...”

Scott almost felt heartbroken by his father’s trailing thoughts concerning his younger son and himself. He knew how his strong willed father felt about them. Anyone with a blind eye could see that he loved both of them. Only they had never said so to one another yet and Scott reasoned that this was the biggest dilemma of all. *‘Well, that and the fact that he still worries we’ll leave him one day,’* Scott thought remorsefully.

Scott stood up and walked over to the French doors looking out across the compound to see if Johnny was on his way back. When he saw that the barn doors were still open and there wasn’t a sign of Johnny sauntering back, Scott took a chance and went back to where his father sat contemplating what he’d told him.

Squatting down next to the arm of Murdoch chair, he placed a hand on Murdoch’s arm. The older man looked over at him with expressionless eyes, “If Johnny has fallen in love, it’s only at the beginning stages. But that’s really beside the point I wanted to make,” he said clearly.

Murdoch looked down at the slim hand on his arm and then back up into Scott's slate gray eyes, "What is the point then?" he asked quietly.

Scott looking down at his hand as his father had done, placed his other one on Murdoch's arm and looked up into his aging blue eyes, eyes that had lived a lifetime full of eventful sorrows, "The real point is...we love you. Johnny and I. One day we're both going to fall in love and get married. But I can tell you this. You have no worries. Johnny and I plan to stay. This is our home and you are our father and this is where our children will be raised. And they, unlike their fathers will know you all their lives."

Scott had never seen his father cry. In fact he would have thought it was impossible for the tall giant of a man to feel so strongly where they were concerned, but he must for there was a sheen in his eyes that spoke of deep feeling and love glowing brightly because of his unshed tears.

Murdoch couldn't speak because of the tightness in his throat. He cleared past it, coughing into his hand, taking his eyes from his son, swiping at the moisture that dared to blur his vision. When he had himself composed he looked back at Scott, patting his hand and said, "Thank you son. I needed to hear that. You sound so positive, so sure...you give an old man hope."

"That's because it's true Murdoch. I swear. Johnny and I have talked about it. It what I want...it's what he wants. Now it's up to you to believe that what I'm saying is true."

Murdoch nodded his graying head, "I do son. I do."

They were still this way when Johnny came through the front door, loud and breezy, as was his habit. He stopped dead in his tracks though when he saw the two of them looking as if the world had come to an end when they looked up at him. Looking from one to the other he asked seriously, his tone going automatically to that protective voice they had come to love and appreciate about him, "Is something wrong?" he asked fingering the butt of his gun, cautiously stepping closer to the corner of the dining area as if someone might be hiding just around the corner.

Scott stood up quickly and Murdoch gulped down the last of his drink, feigning ignorance of what Johnny might be thinking. Scott managed to cover their previous actions by saying, "Nothing at all little brother. I was just telling Murdoch about my new book. If you're done spoiling that horse of yours I suppose you wouldn't mind sitting around tonight while I read a bit of it. What do you say?" he asked nonchalantly as he walked away from his father's side.

Johnny's eyes kept darting back and forth from one to the other. He bent at the waist, peering around the corner of the dining room and seeing that all was well, decided he must have been seeing things that weren't really there between his father and his brother.

Shrugging out of his tan leather jacket and hanging it on the coat rack by the door Johnny answered, "Sure. I ain't got nothin' else to do and I sure as hell ain't callin' it a night just yet." Johnny unbuckled his gun belt, hanging it under his jacket and then his hat found a resting place on another nearby hook.

Finding a place on the couch while his brother gathered up his precious book, Johnny took off his boots and tossed them on the floor carelessly. He lay down, stretching out on his

stomach with a pillow firmly tucked under his cheek.

In an effort to get more comfortable now that the tension had lessened for him greatly, Murdoch pulled an ottoman close to his chair and propped his socked feet on top, crossing them at the ankles. Scott snickered after he too did the same thing with book in hand, looking for all the world like the most satisfied man who had ever lived. He savored the intimate setting with his father and brother as a captive audience, hoping that they both enjoyed his newest book by Jules Verne, "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," he read to them, propping the book on a pillow he held in his lap.

The fire in the fireplace crackled and as the night began to set, three men who otherwise might not have found themselves sitting together in such a family setting only a year ago, found peace and serenity as the night wore on, with Scott's tireless rendition of what would one day become known as a classic read.



Johnny went to town late the next day, only after he had finished the duties his father had given him to work on. He let Murdoch know that he would be in later than usual since he was making the trip, a gesture on his part he was trying hard to make a habit of since coming to Lancer. He found that as long as he told someone where he was going and about what time he planned to get home, things seemed to go better for him and his father seemed more inclined to be accepting of his need for getting away once in a while. In the beginning, his taking off and leaving without saying anything had been the source of many a battle the first several months when he left

without warning them. He soon learned his lesson, the hard way, if any one was to ask him, but they didn't so he never said so to anyone other than Barranca.

Riding into town, Johnny checked his jacket pocket for the third time just to make sure Emily's bow was still there. He didn't think he would get another chance with her if he lost it on his way to see her. Tying Barranca to the hitching post outside the saloon, he made his way across and down the street to the hotel. He didn't figure Emily would be out this late so it was his intent to find her where she was residing for the time being. Opening the door he found Mrs. Mulligan, the desk clerk, snoring away blissfully behind the counter. Her plump arms were folded neatly across her generous bosom, rising in a slow even rhythm with each breath she took. A small white cap covered the top of her head precariously, threatening to fall as her head dipped and sagged toward her chest.

Not wanting to scare her, Johnny turned back around and opened the door to the hotel again. This time he acted like he was coming in for the first time only he did it louder, calling out a hello to the sweet woman who was always so kind to him whenever he saw her on the streets or in one of the shops. "Hey, Mrs. Mulligan. How are yah doin'?" Johnny asked loudly, giving the door a wide opening and letting some of the cooler evening air float inside.

Mrs. Mulligan's gray head popped up and when she saw it was Johnny, she smiled wide, showing white even teeth, specially made just for her, she always reminded him. Standing up the older woman rubbed her eyes and then her cheeks, giving them a pat for good measure just to make sure she was fully awake.

Waddling up to the counter, Mrs. Mulligan held out her plump hand and Johnny took it in his, "I'm just fine Johnny. Just fine. And how 'bout yourself?" she asked him, giving his hand a firm squeeze with her fingers now that she had it between her hands.

Johnny's eyes narrowed and crinkles appeared around the corners as his lips drew up in a matching smile, "I'm good," he told her.

"How 'bout that pa of yours and your brother?" she inquired, while watching the long lashes close over his cheeks when he looked down at her hands, the ones that kept his fingers forever locked between hers if he didn't manage to find a way to gracefully pull them away without offending her.

Still looking down, Johnny nodded and Mrs. Mulligan thought he was just as shy as the first time she had laid eyes on him, "They're good too," Johnny told her sincerely.

Lifting his hand in hers, she gave it one last squeeze and to Johnny's inner delight she finally let go, "That's good to hear Johnny. You want some milk and cookies dear. I got some. Fresh made in the back just for you," she said tantalizing and tempting him with her homemade treats.

He was sorely tempted to let things go for a few minutes with Emily but the more he thought about it, the more he thought it would be better to get his answer from Emily first. Mrs. Mulligan made the best cookies in the world and she'd swear on the holy bible her milk was even better just because it came from her cow. "Thanks Mrs. Mulligan, but maybe a little later. I was hoping you could do something for me," he told her, using his most charming smile on her.

Mrs. Mulligan reached across the counter and gave Johnny a pinch on his cheek, "You know I can't resist, you little devil you." She rubbed her hands together and smiled at him, the green in her hazel older eyes sparkling with mischief. "What can I do for you darlin'? If my ole bones could take it, I'd cross the desert to help yah out."

Johnny swallowed the lump in his throat. He knew that if he asked her too she would, and for all that, Johnny liked her all the more, "I was wonderin' if you'd let Miss Emily Thompson know that I'm down stairs and would like to speak to her."

Mrs. Mulligan pulled away from the counter, the gleam in her eyes suddenly bright and shining like the northern star. Her pudgy hands went to her heart and her cheeks got rosier than fresh rosebuds in the early spring, "My, my oh my. Are you ah sparkin' that little gal Emily?" she asked him wonderingly.

Johnny blushed and had to look down to hide his immediate embarrassment at having his business so clearly engraved on his face for all to see, "Well I'm tryin' to Mrs. Mulligan, but so far I haven't had a whole lot of luck," he said so quietly that if Fanny Mulligan wasn't such a good listener, she might have missed it.

Seeing the boy's discomfort Mrs. Mulligan walked around the counter coming up to stand next to Johnny. Her plump hand found a spot on his back and she rubbed her hand up and down in a quick gesture saying, "I'll be right back darlin'. You wait right here and ole Mrs. Mulligan will make sure she comes down."

Johnny raised his chin and gave her a grateful look. He heard her say as she went up the stairs, "Um, um. If only I was forty years younger. What I wouldn't give to be in that little gals shoes."

The color on Johnny's face turned scarlet when he heard her words drift down the staircase, it didn't matter that there was no one else there to see. He swiveled around on his heels and opened the front door. The cool breeze did a lot to chase away the blush as Johnny stuck his head out the door and breathed in a few deep cleansing breaths to calm his burgeoning nerves.

Five minutes later Mrs. Mulligan came back down the stairs with Emily following in her wake. As the older lady passed him, she said, "I'll be right in the back if you two darlin' need anything."

When Mrs. Mulligan departed from the room and Johnny was left alone with Emily standing several feet away, her hands held together in front of a soft satin blue dress she wore. He wondered if she wore the color blue on purpose as a reminder of the bow he had taken from her hair the day before. The color of her dress matched perfectly to that of the satiny bow in his jacket.

The question must have been plain as the nose on his face because she said, "I didn't wear a blue dress as a reminder Johnny Lancer."

"How'd you know I was thinkin' that?" he asked.

Emily rolled her eyes, "Cause you kept staring at it. Did you bring me my bow?" she asked. Reminding him of why he was there in the first place.

Johnny, who had his hands behind his back shrugged his shoulders, then dug his hand in his pants pocket, "This it?" he asked, pulling out a crumpled blue bow that couldn't possible be the one she had worn just yesterday.

Emily walked up to him and looked at the offending object in his hand, "No that isn't it and you know it Mr. Smarty," she said pushing his hand away.

Johnny smiled and took a step back from her. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out another blue ribbon bow, perfectly shaped and most definitely the one he took from her hair the day before. "I have the real one right here," he said dangling it out in front of him.

When Emily went to take a step toward him but Johnny took a bigger step back, "Uh, uh," he said shaking his head, "What about the dance?" he asked her, hiding the bow behind his back.

Emily looked down at the toes of her soft padded shoes, then looked up at him with those big brown eyes that Johnny thought he could drown in, "I'll go. If your other girlfriends don't mind," she told him warily, wanting to see how he reacted to her words.

Johnny blinked several times and then coughed into a hand as he tried to stifle the laugh that threatened to burst from his mouth. Swallowing hard he asked with wild curiosity, "What girlfriends?" He moved toward her. "Is that what you meant the other day when you said the...what was it?" he scratched at the side of his head trying to think what it was she had told him, causing his hat to move at an angle on his head. Brushing it off and letting it hang down his back, Johnny tried again, "Gosh dang it girl, what was it you said...somethin' 'bout lovin' 'em and leavin' 'em? Bein' too young..."

"Becky and Louise told me..."

Johnny shook his head adamantly holding out the palm of his hand to stop her flow of words,

“No, no, no. Stop it right there. I ain’t got a girlfriend or girlfriends, let alone know anyone named Becky or Louise, least wise that I can recall. So you kind of have me at a disadvantage since I don’t know what in the blue blazes you’re talkin’ ‘bout,” he said in a rush.

Emily looked away, fighting to figure out what was going on. Johnny just said he didn’t know a Becky or a Louise. Could both of her new friends have been telling her tales and letting her think things about the Lancer brothers that she ought not to have.

Johnny could tell that Emily had a pure look of confusion on her face that matched exactly to the one he was feeling right now. He took the last couple of steps toward her and reached for her chin, “Emily,” he said bending his head near hers, “I really don’t know what you mean by mentioning those other two girls but I still want to know if you’ll go to the dance with me. I promise, cross my heart,” and he did, “I don’t have any girlfriends hidden away somewhere. Just ask Mrs. Mulligan, she’ll tell you if you don’t believe me.”

Emily looked up at him and when she looked into his pleading sapphire eyes she did believe him. Of course that meant that every last word that Louise and Becky had been telling her about Johnny and his brother being theirs and both of them being half way to the alter had been nothing more than pure outlandish lies on their part. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that right now, and when she stood gazing into Johnny’s eyes she really didn’t care.

“I believe you,” she whispered. She licked her lips and said, “And I’ll go with you to the dance.”

“Really?” Johnny had to ask. Just seconds ago he thought his chances were slipping away from him faster than a runaway freight train but now his hopes just soared to the ceiling. Johnny gave her back the bow and slipped his arms around her waist, picking her up off the floor, twirled her round in a circle before setting her down gently when he was done. “So does this mean you’re not mad at me anymore and maybe you could like me just a little bit?”

Emily had to laugh at the little boy question he posed to her, her eyes wanted to mist over, but instead she nodded her head and held the bow out to him, “You want to keep this? It’s yours if you want it.”

It was such a little thing, but it turned Johnny’s heart to butter when Emily offered the bow back to him. He knew this was going to be good, this thing he felt for Emily in his heart. He took the bow from her hand and put it back in his jacket pocket, then looked back at her with that same little boy enthusiasm in which he had asked her if she could like him, “Do you like cookies and milk?”

Emily brows knitted together quickly, though she wondered where on earth the question was leading too, she soon found out when she shook her head and said, “Yes.”

Johnny grabbed her hand and pulled her with him as he made his way to the back of the hotel calling out to Mrs. Mulligan. “Hey, Mrs. Mulligan. I can have those cookies and milk now and I’m bringin’ Em with me!”

With her hand held fast in Johnny’s strong grip, Emily followed close behind, finding the sudden change in their relationship exciting and a bit strange, as he led her into Mrs. Mulligan’s kitchen for milk and cookies. A sight she never would have thought she’d see

this particular cowboy enjoying in her lifetime if anyone had asked her just twenty four hours ago.



The next couple of weeks passed in a hazy blur for Johnny. Every spare second of his day if not working was spent going to town and spending time with Emily. He met her father, Frank Thompson who turned out to be a very nice, but a very occupied man in his late forties. He still looked very young for his age, with thick corn silk colored hair the same as Emily's and eyes a lighter shade of brown than his daughter.

Johnny soon found he was all about business and making his businesses a success for the sake of being able to do so and for no other reason. If he knew he had a daughter, Johnny was hard pressed to think the man knew who she was. It wasn't that he didn't care or love Emily; he was just the kind of person, whose mind was always working, always thinking and creating, plotting his next move or next piece of strategy where his stores were concerned. He was a loner and so it was no surprise when Emily told him that her mother had just taken off one day, leaving them both behind, never to be seen or heard from again by the time she was six years old. The only other family was an aging aunt who lived in San Francisco but never traveled anywhere since her age and health did not permit such things.

It turned out that the subject of their mothers brought them both closer together. A connection that only the two of them shared and one that once they both communicated their experiences or what they knew of them sealed their relationship more tightly than any

glue or nail. They shared the same understanding of having to practically raise themselves with parents that were anything but parents. Johnny didn't have the guts to tell her everything about his life. There were just some things that were too hurtful to discuss and too soul barring for him to say so early in their relationship.

When the Cattleman's Association Dance was finally held, he took Emily to it, picking her up in a fancy carriage chatting all the way to Ernest Wilmington's ranch ten miles away about Scott and his fancy suit. Emily on her part was looking forward to the dance. Not only was she going to get to show off her beautiful new gown the seamstress had sewn for her out of the material that Bill Watson had shown her, but also she was going to meet Johnny's father, brother and sister for the first time.

She was a little nervous to say the least but Johnny fast assured her that they were all looking forward to meeting her and having her come out to the ranch for a visit. They pulled up to the Wilmington home and within seconds there was a man by Emily's side to help her down. Lifting her skirt so as not to step on it, she took the man's hand and stepped out of the buggy, grateful when she didn't fall flat on her face. Johnny came around from his side and took her hand and together they started the walk up to Mr. Willmington's front door. Before they actually reached it however, Johnny pulled her to the side of the walkway, which was lined with tall hedge plants from the end of the drive, to the front door. He led her behind the tall plants, wanting a few minutes alone with her before they went inside.

It was near dusk and the tinkling sounds of music could be heard coming from within the home, "What is it? Is something wrong?"

Emily asked more than a little curious about his strange behavior and why they would stop short of going inside.

Johnny held her hand a joyful smile lighting his eyes and said, "I forgot something."

Emily watched as he fiddled with the inside breast pocket of his black finely tailored jacket, fitted to suit him perfectly enough to make him feel comfortable wearing it. The jacket fit flawlessly over his shoulders covering an embroidered white dress shirt that sported a simple string tie that wasn't tied too tight. Black matching slacks fit snug but allowed plenty of room for movement as he requested from Scott's tailor. He had told the man if the suit wasn't made exactly to his specifications he wouldn't wear it and since the tailor's reputation was on the line knowing the big event he was attending, Raymond Moore did his best to comply.

Johnny still wondered how his brother ever talked him into having it made in the first place. He hadn't intended to, but somehow Scott made him feel that it was something he had to do if not for himself, then Emily. That was enough to change his mind on the matter, but he still didn't know for the life of him why it should have. He did know that at the time, he hadn't felt like arguing about it and Scott, taking advantage of his brother's lackadaisical attitude somehow roped him in to going to Raymond Moore's shop that very same day.

"What are you looking for?" Emily asked him when he didn't seem to be able to find what he was looking for.

"I got it," he said, holding up a small black velvet pouch for her to see. Curious, Emily reached for it and Johnny quickly pulled his hand away from hers, "Not yet," he said with the most amazing smile on his face.

'It has to be a surprise,' Emily thought quickly. In the two weeks plus, since they had been together, she was fast becoming accustomed to all the little signals that Johnny's expressive eyes gave her just before he had something to tell her or give her. This time, those eyes reminded her of the time he brought her flowers, holding them behind his back when he got off his horse in front of her at the hotel.

It was a special memory she would forever cherish because before Johnny could hand the flowers up to her as she stood two steps up from him on the boardwalk, Barranca decided he would help out and took the flowers from his grasp. When they were pulled from his hands, Johnny whipped around to find the bouquet stuck firmly between Barranca's teeth, she thought he would shoot the horse then and there for not letting go when he told him to. She had laughed hysterically each time Johnny reached for them and Barranca would lift his mighty head, swerving away from his grasp until Johnny was forced to grab his bridle and force his head down far enough to get them. By the time he finally had the flowers back in his hands, they were so chewed up and falling apart, it was hard to tell what they had been. That is, all except one lone flower, a white daisy, that made it through without nary a scratch or a torn off petal. She had picked it out from the group of headless stems, placing it on her heart as she smiled at the antics of horse and man.

"First off, I didn't tell you how beautiful you look tonight," he said shuffling his boots on the grass. "Of course you always look beautiful to me, but you look even more beautiful tonight." He looked down again at his boots then back up again, "That's a real pretty dress too. I shoulda told you when I picked you up, but I...I was more excited just to be with you than anything else." Johnny

scratched behind his left ear, feeling nervous and excited all at once. "I wouldn't care if you were wearin' a gunny sack if you want to know the truth."

Emily smiled, her eyes glowing with all his stuttered words of praise. She reached up and put her finger over his lips effectively shutting him off. When he was quiet, she stepped up to him and put her hands on his shoulders, "You look mighty fine yourself cowboy, now hush up and give me my present."

Johnny laughed and brought up his hand that held the tiny little black pouch, putting it into her smooth palm, "I hope you like it."

Emily could feel the trembling in his fingers as he put the gift into her hand. Slowly, like opening a present on Christmas morning, Emily pulled on the tie string and opened the bag. Reaching inside she pulled out a strand of small white pearls that fairly glimmered and glowed in the early light of the rising moon. "Johnny," she whispered in awe. She shook her head, "I...I...I can't accept this. It's too much. It's way too much. Dear God you must have spent a small fortune on these," she exclaimed.

Johnny took them from her hand and undid the clasp, "I did. And I would do it again if I wanted to for you." Her hair was piled on top of her head and Johnny put both his arms around her, fastening the necklace behind her neck. When he was done he ran his thumbs down her column of her slender throat and to her collarbone, his fingers tracing the curved pattern of the pearls on her bare chest. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Please keep them querida, they are my gift to you. You'll only break my heart if you give them back."

She could feel the trembling in his hands, on her shoulders, on her neck as he moved his head to put his face nose to nose in front of her, touching her forehead with his, pulling her closer than either had ever dared to do before. As if sensing that something wonderful was going to happen, Emily closed her eyes and waited, feeling the heat of his breath on her face, the distinct smell of leather and soap that was so much a part of him, assaulting her senses, weakening her knees and making her legs feel as wobbly as a new born colt.

He touched her lips to his, gentle at first, gliding and moving across the petal soft smoothness of hers. Her tremulous hands reached up instinctively finding the back of his neck, feeling the inky softness of his hair, hair she had longed to touch, wondering what the feel of it would be like in her hands. And now she knew. It was like the soft fur of a kitten, only thicker and more luxurious than she ever imagined. The feel of it running between her fingers made her senses roll, her heart to pound. Johnny moved from her lips across her cheek and down her neck, his breathing heavy in her ear as he bent his head toward her shoulder kissing the side of her neck inch by inch until he reached a spot at the base of her throat that pulsed hotly as his hands encircled her waist and moved with a sensual touch up and down her sides, just barely coming into contact with the sides of her breast. Touching, squeezing, pulling her into his masculine frame with each tantalizing and tender touch of his mouth on her bare hot skin.

'Lord help me, but I think I've died and gone to heaven!' her mind screamed. Her hands pulled on his hair, acting out impulsively as they seemed to have a life of their own. She pulled until his mouth was back on hers, pressing and touching until Johnny's tongue

found a new and more pleasing way of making her feel as if she were going to faint at any second. His tongue probed her mouth, seeking hers in a rabid fashion that was so foreign to any other experience she's ever had. Her tongue played with his and Johnny had to hold her in his arms to keep her from sliding down his chest and onto the ground with the weakness it gave her. Flames licked the inside of her belly and heat seemed to burst from every pore of her skin making her wonder how they would come out of their embrace unscathed by the fire that consumed every inch of their bodies.

Though they had moved behind the bushes that lined the walk Johnny was aware that if any one dared to try they could be seen if not heard. Impassioned as he was, he heard the sound of an approaching horse and carriage and forced himself to pull away from Emily. Breathing heavily, he bent down and clutched his knees, weak from the desires that made his heart pound and the blood surge to his brain, causing him to feel as if he had just run a mile without stopping.

He held out his hand and Emily took it. The both stood straight and Johnny pulled her to his chest whispering into the night, "Be very quiet, someone's comin'. After they go in, we'll make our entrance."

Emily did her best to still her uneven breathing, holding onto Johnny with her arms wrapped around his waist, her face pressed against his chest. She could hear his heart beating rapidly and only after they watched the partiers go inside without seeing them did they part.

Johnny pushed the stray hairs that framed her pretty oval face back behind Emily's ear and helped her make sure that her dress was still in its proper place. He stepped back eyeing her

critically and found nothing to indicate that the two of them had just spent the last few minutes in a heated embrace that gave promise of the passion that awaited them in their future.

"Do I look alright?" she asked, feeling like she must look different after what they had just done. She felt different and she wondered if Johnny could feel it too.

Johnny's heart constricted in his chest as he looked at her and answered her innocent question, "You look beautiful querida. I can never tell you enough." He touched her face with the palm of his hand, feeling the residual heat that still radiated off her. Putting his hand behind her head, he pulled her to him and held her in his arms, whispering to her, "You make my heart hurt just to look at you." Johnny swallowed, closing his eyes and trembling with the feelings of emotion that swept through him.

"Johnny?" Emily asked hesitantly.

"What, baby?" he replied pulling away from her a little to look at her.

"Do I look different?" she asked innocently.

Johnny cupped her cheeks and looked her straight in the eyes, "Only to me querida. No one else will notice a thing. I promise."

She nodded; satisfied that she could enter the house with no one the wiser for what they had done. She took Johnny's hand confidently when he held it out to her and together they went inside. Johnny in his black suit and string tie, Emily in her low cut yellow silk gown with the precious gift of pearls around her neck.



The party was fun for all and Emily enjoyed meeting Johnny's family. They seemed impressed with her charm and poise, her attentiveness to the man who escorted her to the dance and the way in which she ardently stayed by his side even while she was on the receiving end of malicious looks from the women who had called themselves her friends.

She found Becky and Louise to be jealous harpies who let her know at every opportunity that they were angry at what they deemed to be her betrayal of their hopes and dreams by coming to the dance with Johnny on her arm. There was a point when she found herself alone at the punch table, waiting for Johnny to return when Louise sidled up to her and gave her an unlady like pinch on her arm saying, "Guess you think you've won his heart since Johnny brought you to the dance."

Emily rubbed the red spot on her arm wincing at the pain of it, "I think you should concentrate on the man who brought you to the dance, Louise, instead of being spiteful and mean to me. If Johnny had wanted to go with you to the dance, then he would have asked you."

"How could he do that, dear Emily, when you went out of your way and behind my back to snag him from me," the girl replied in a heated whisper over the rim of her cup.

"I didn't snag him from you since you apparently never had him in the first place. In fact, I'd say you and Becky are the two biggest liars in the county since she didn't come with Scott," Emily slung back in her face.

"How dare you, you little tramp," Louise said with a vicious smile on her face, the cup she hid behind held to her lips to hide the hateful words that came from her mouth.

Emily lifted her own cup to her mouth and said from behind its cover, "Say that again and I won't be responsible for pulling every hair out of your head for everyone and God to see."

Louise narrowed her eyes at her adversary, "You wouldn't dare," she taunted.

"Wouldn't dare what?" a masculine voice asked from next to Louise. It was Johnny and he was looking at Louise curiously wondering why the woman would say such a thing to Emily.

"Oh it was nothing Johnny, just girl talk," Louise said batting her eyes coquettishly at him right in front of Emily.

Johnny only remembered who Louise and Becky were after he had been introduced to them by his brother Scott. It seemed at the time of their reintroduction that Scott was trying desperately to pawn them both off on him if Emily would have allowed it, but he ignored the attempt, sweeping Emily away to where his father stood so he could introduce her to him.

For all of Murdoch's initial worries over his son falling in love, as soon as he met Emily Thompson he knew deep within his soul that it was meant to be. She stole his heart the moment he saw the way Emily looked at Johnny when she thought no one was the wiser. The expression he saw on her face spoke of undying love and loyalty reminding him fervently of how he had felt toward his first and second wife during those first months when he had met each of them. He sighed as

he watched the little touches they gave to one another, the secret knowing smiles that only the two of them shared, wishing with all his heart that Maria had stayed with him or at the very least if she had been so unhappy, had left Johnny behind for him to love and raise like a father should have.

But it hadn't happened that way and Murdoch was just thankful that his son was home now, before the inevitable would have happened to him. The life his son had been living was nothing to write home about. Murdoch cringed inwardly every time he thought of how Johnny had to raise himself after the death of his mother, and how her death had ultimately led to his becoming Johnny Madrid. Gunfighter, pistolero and mercenary if the job called for it. A deadly profession that left most men dead by the time they were thirty if they were lucky enough to make that long. And in all that chaos and bitterness that life dealt him, Murdoch was amazingly surprised at how well his son had turned out. His lust for life was contagious, his care and devotion to those less fortunate than him was an outright miracle. He loved hard and could be hurt so easily, a trait that many a time had him wondering how it was that Johnny had survived in a world filled with strife, horror and loneliness.

He hoped and prayed that Emily was the real thing. The stuff that fairy tales were made of, because he for one, thought Johnny deserved the kind happiness that only the love of a good woman could bring him.

Ignoring Louise and dismissing her from his thoughts instantly, Johnny took Emily's cup and set it down on the table, asking her if she cared to dance one last dance before they called it a night. Smiling up at him lovingly, she said yes and they walked away without a backward glance at the woman who seethed with anger when she had been more or less

ignored by the man she had wanted for herself.

Johnny twirled Emily around the floor, pressing her closer than proper etiquette allowed moving as one across the dance floor to the lilting strains of a string quartet. When they were far enough away from Louise's prying eyes and ears Johnny asked Emily, "Is everything alright with you two?"

Emily moved with his body, feeling the hardness of his chest beneath her hand and the corded muscles that moved with every step in his shoulders, "No," she answered truthfully.

"Anything you can tell me 'bout?" he asked feeling like he should know what they had been talking about, since he had an odd impression that he had been the topic of their conversation.

"It was nothing really. Just petty mindless jealousy that she'll have to learn how to deal with," Emily told him.

"Over me?" Johnny asked. "I hardly know her."

"I know," Emily said.

"Do you really?" Johnny asked skeptically.

Emily laughed softly, "Oh yes. I know." She looked up at him, her steps matching his every move. "She's not your type," she said with surety in her voice.

Johnny laughed and pulled her in closer, their bodies touching as they glided past the other dancers on the floor, "You got that right, honey."

The dance ended and Johnny led her off the dance floor and toward his family who were

gathered near the front entrance. “You ready to go, too, little brother?” Scott asked when they walked up.

With a tired sigh, Johnny answered his smartly dressed brother, “I sure am.”

“Good. I think we’re all tired out and ready to go. How about you darling?” Murdoch asked Teresa.

“Oh yes. I’m so tired I’m ready to fall down,” she told him.

Scott opened the front door with Alison Smith held loosely in the crook of his left arm, all farewells and thanks for a wonderful evening having been said to their host Ernest Wilmington and his wife Dortha. Horses and buggies were lined up along the drive, with a man at each one, per the request of Mr. Wilmington, to help them into their rigs. As with any family, hugs and handshakes were given with each brother promising to be careful on their way home and more promises that their new girlfriends would come by for a visit very soon.



For the next month life was good. So good in fact that Johnny almost never thought of his past or the hardships he’d endured. Those times were beginning to fade fast and the future was now something he looked forward to with great expectations and hope filled dreams of a life with Emily.

The one thing he hadn’t done yet was tell her exactly how he felt about her. He wasn’t sure how he wanted to tell her and this thought had him deeply occupied as he and Scott dug holes in the ground and, planted new fence post and strung wire. So deep was he in his thoughts

that Scott had to stop and wait for his brother to finally notice that he was no longer helping.

By the time he got to the third hole without Scott plopping a post in the ground he finally looked up, a quizzical expression on his sweaty face, “You had enough Scott?”

Scott was sitting on the ground legs spread out before him and crossed at the ankles, an open canteen on his lap, “No. Got a little tired of talking to myself and decided I might rest up a bit. How about you?”

Johnny squinted in the sun and rubbed the back of his bare arm across his forehead, “Sorry ‘bout that. I was thinkin’,” he told his brother. “Pass me that canteen will yah?” he asked holding out his hands.

Scott plugged the cork in and tossed the canteen to his bare-chested brother. “I wish I could do that,” he said absent-mindedly.

Johnny uncorked the canteen and drank from it, holding it high and gulping deeply as the excess water ran down his chin and onto his chest. “Do what?” he asked, tipping his head back and pouring the cool water on his face and then over the top of his head. When he was done his head was soaked and the water had streamed down his hard muscled chest and belly to wet the band of his work jeans.

“Work without a shirt on,” Scott told him, catching the canteen that was thrown back at him.

“Why can’t yah? It ain’t like there’s anyone out here who can see. And besides that, it’s hell of a lot cooler than workin’ with it on,” Johnny informed him. He took a red bandana out of his pocket and began to swipe away the wetness on the back of his neck and then the front, moving it across the black hair on his

chest and down the front of his flat stomach, before stuffing it back where it came from.

“In case you haven’t noticed little brother, I’m very fair skinned. Unlike you I would burn to a crisp if I went all day without a shirt,” he replied.

Johnny walked over to Scott and plopped down on the hard earth next to him, “So just take it off for a little while each day. Sooner or later you’ll get dark enough it won’t matter.”

Scott shook his head negatively. He had thought of that and didn’t think it would work for him. He told Johnny, “I tried that once and it didn’t work. I forgot to put my shirt back on when it was time to and I got burned so bad, I was sick for almost a week from it.”

Johnny pulled his knees up and crossed his brown arms around them, “How old were yah when that happened?” he asked propping his chin on his arms.

Scott’s light colored brows furrowed in thought, “I don’t know exactly. Maybe eleven or twelve.”

Johnny turned his head until his cheek rested on his arms, “That was a long time ago. Maybe it would work better now that you’re older. I could help,” he offered.

“How?” Scott asked, pushing his hat back a little and looking over at Johnny.

“Oh I don’t know. I guess I could tell yah when your times up or something like that,” Johnny told him.

Scott laughed, “Sort of like watching a chicken bake,” he said.

Johnny smiled and the weathered crinkles around his eyes deepened, “Yeah. Somethin’ like that.”

Scott brought his knees up like Johnny did and laid his head on them in the same fashion with his arms crossed around them, “I know a great way we could start while it’s still early,” he added mischievously.

The grin was back on Johnny’s face quicker than a flash, “You know a good place?” he asked.

Scott lifted his head and smiled brightly, “Boy, do I know a place. You game?”

Johnny sat up, “What about the old man?”

“What about him?” Scott asked with the palm of his hand held out, “Do you see him here, ‘cause I don’t?” he asked playfully.

Johnny leaned back with his hands resting on the ground behind him, “Naw, I don’t see him,” he replied looking all around. “Guess that means we’ll just have to ask someone else that’s in charge.” He looked at his brother, “You care if we shuck this job for a while and go swimmin’?” he asked in mock seriousness.

Scott leaned back and perused the work they had done, “Why no I don’t brother Johnny, but let me ask my partner just to be sure it’s ok.” He looked around again and then back at Johnny, “Oh there you are partner. You care if we shuck this job for a while and go swimming?” he asked, using the same serious tone his brother had used.

Johnny smiled and looked around like Scott had, “Nope. Don’t care if yah do. Just make sure yah get the job done by tomorrow.”

Scott sat up and smacked his hands together, "All right then. That was easy. Lets go."

An hour later found them making their way down a faint path that ran along the edge of a forested hillside. Johnny surmised they were still on Lancer land but much farther southwest than he had so far ventured since he came home.

Neither had spoken much as Scott led the way. Instead they had both admired the beauty of the land that was now theirs to share. The longer they traveled though the more curious Johnny was beginning to get. When they finally reached a particular spot that didn't seem to go anywhere else but up, Scott stopped his horse and dismounted.

Johnny sat still, his hands resting on the pommel of his saddle, his reins held loosely between his fingers. He looked around and found nothing but dense forest and woodland vegetation to his right, a high climb to nowhere in front and scattered bushes and trees dotting the sloping range to his left. "Are we lost?" Johnny asked with a trace of mild humor in his voice.

"No we are not lost." Scott answered studying the thick forest and poking at some of the branches with his hands, "Get down. I want to show you something."

Johnny sighed wondering what the heck Scott was up to but decided to do as he was asked. He got down dropping Barranca's reins to the ground. He stood behind his bent over brother and watched as Scott kept pushing aside tree limbs as he gradually moved to his left.

"What are yah lookin' for Scott? Maybe I can help."

"Shhhhhh. It's here, I know it is. I just have to find it," Scott replied ignoring the offer of help.

"Find what?" Johnny tried again.

"Find this!" Scott declared with excitement pushing aside a tree limb further down from where he started. "Grab Barranca's reins and follow me."

Scott stood up, happy with his discovery and grabbed the reins of his horse, "Come on Sheridan," he said pulling on the leather straps.

The next thing Johnny saw was Scott leading his horse under the limb he had just found and disappear within seconds of entering the deep dark overgrowth of tree limbs. If he hadn't just witnessed his brother entering the dark forest from where they stood he would never have guessed that there was an entrance to be found.

Taking Barranca's reins in hand, he pulled on his horse and followed the mysterious path his brother was leading him on. The light of the day was diminished greatly as he walked beneath the canopy of the trees. The forest was thick and black and if not for the slim slivers of light that managed to find their way to the forest floor Johnny was sure that he would not have been able to follow. The darkness enshrouded him and made him feel like he was suffocating. A strong feeling of terror niggled at the back of his mind and visions of old nightmares began to crop into his thoughts. He stopped, taking a deep breath and looked back at his horse, backing up steadily until he was within his touch. *'This is real'*, he told himself standing next to Barranca, taking comfort that the horse was there with him. He slid a hand down his neck and over his face as he turned his head in

every direction. The forest was quiet except for the sounds of rustling creatures and chirping birdcalls. He had just about decided to turn around and head back when he heard Scott calling his name from well in front of him.

“Johnny?” Scott yelled.

Johnny dropped his arm from Barranca’s neck and followed the call of his brother. “Scott, where are you?” he called back as he led the golden horse further and further into the thick black forest.

“I’m just up ahead, It’s not much further,” Scott called back to the unseen Johnny.

“This had better be good,” he muttered to Barranca pulling on his reins and shoving the feelings of fear from the shadows of his mind. Right about now he didn’t care one wit whether Scott got ten minutes of sun without his shirt on.

Fifteen minutes later and several calls back and forth, Johnny could finally see a bright spot of light well in front of him and his brother’s silhouette. He trudged on and finally made his way to where Scott stood waiting for him with the silliest grin on his face.

Stepping aside from the opening, Scott swept his left arm to the side as if offering up a grand prize to Johnny. Johnny emerged from the dark woods to find them standing in an enclosed grassy oasis surrounded by cliff walls rising several hundred feet into the air with the forest closing in what the cliffs could not.

Johnny’s jaw dropped in awe as his eyes took in the natural beauty of the scene before him. A deep blue pond was nestled up against the cliff wall, filled by sparkling waters that

cascaded from high above. The waterfall was loud to his ears after the deafening quiet of the forest. He watched, as little droplets of water splashed against the rocks below, sparkling brilliant, like millions of tiny diamonds lit by the glory of the sun.

Flat boulders of varying sizes and shapes surrounded the pool of water, made inviting by the bountiful display of wild poppies and clumps of daisies growing by their side and littering the open field as he and Scott walked toward the waters edge.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Scott reflected.

Johnny turned completely around, taking in the whole scene before replying, “It is.”

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Scott said grabbing at Johnny’s shirtsleeve.

Johnny dropped Barranca’s reins and followed Scott. Leading him to one of the flat boulders, Scott climbed up with Johnny right behind him. Walking to the edge of the rock, Scott pointed down at the water. “Look,” he said.

Johnny stood beside him and looked at the water. It was crystal clear and he could see all the way to the bottom of the pond. Shaking his head, Johnny laughed, “I can’t believe you found this place.”

“I can’t believe it either, sometimes,” Scott said.

Johnny watched as Scott laid down on the surface of the rock and swished his hand in the water, “Water’s not too cold.”

Lying down on his stomach next to Scott, Johnny reached down and ran his hand through the water mimicking his brother. “You’re right,” he said.

“Did you doubt me little brother?” Scott asked sitting up with his boots planted solidly on the surface of the rock, his knees bent with his hands splayed backward on the hard surface behind him.

“No not really, just thought it might be cold sein’ where it’s comin’ from,” Johnny said. He sat up crossed legged and looked high above him as he said his words.

Scott grinned, “Let’s go for a swim.”

Johnny squinted and tilted his hat back from his head, “I don’t know Scott.”

“Oh no, you don’t. I brought you here for some fun and some sun, and some fun and some sun we shall have,” Scott told him before Johnny could say he didn’t want to. He jumped up and held a hand out to Johnny. Pulling him up he said, “Just don’t forget to warn me if I start to look like a lobster.”

Johnny eyed the inviting pool and the splash of the waterfall. He grinned finally getting into the mood of things, “Let’s swim.”

Scott and Johnny raced back to their horses and unsaddled them for the afternoon. Both boys undressed and naked as the day they were born climbed the rocks and dove into the water. They swam and played, swimming in and around the large boulders, diving in the waters that turned out to be quite deep. They explored the bed of the pond as they held their breath and dove the bottom, picking up colored rocks and sparkling pebbles to bring to the surface and compare to one another’s.

Swimming to where the waterfall landed Scott motioned for Johnny to come nearer as he tread in the water. Johnny swam to his side and Scott said in a loud voice over the roar of the falls, “Follow me.”

Holding his breath, Scott ducked under the water and Johnny followed him. He could see his brother swimming just ahead of him in the clear pond toward what looked to be a very dark hole in the wall of the cliff. Holding his breath for longer than he was used to, Johnny hoped it wasn’t going to be a very long before they found an opening to come back up in. What seemed like minutes but was really only seconds as Scott surfaced inside a cave with his brother right behind him.

Johnny was miraculously surprised that there was light and plenty of it coming from an opening far above their heads.

Scott grabbed the side of a ledge and looked up to where the large shaft of light was coming from, “There must be some kind of other entrance from way up there,” he said pointing to the light source and holding on the ledge with one hand. “I’ll bet there’s no way down from that angle. Looks like it’s a straight drop to me.”

Johnny held onto the edge of the ledge and said, “I think you’re right.” Looking around and then pushing back the wet hair on his head, Johnny said, “You gotta tell me how you found this place, brother.”

Scott laughed and the sound of it echoed off the walls, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he said. “Just chalk it up to curiosity and a crazy horse,” he told him laughing.

Using their arms to haul themselves up, Scott and Johnny pulled themselves out of the water and sat on the jutting ledge of the cliff wall, their feet and calves dangling in the water. “So do you like my little secret getaway?” he asked Johnny.

Johnny shook his head, swishing his dark legs back and forth in the cool water, “Yeah I do.”

This place is somethin' else," he said in wonder, looking around the room they were in. "You ever brought any body else here?" he asked, thinking how great it would be to bring Emily here one day.

Scott looked down at his knees and then bent down to run his hand through the water. He knew what Johnny was thinking and was glad he could give his brother this place to come to whenever he wanted with his girl, "Only you." He looked over at Johnny who sat looking down at the dark water below him. From where they sat they could both see the light that showed the way out from well below the waters surface, "It would make a nice place to come if a person wanted some privacy," he told him. Hoping that Johnny understood what he was inferring.

Johnny sighed, "Yeah that's what I was kind of thinkin'," he replied to the hint. Johnny looked over at Scott and asked, "You think Emily would like it if I brought her here someday?"

Scott smiled, "What, do you think I plan on asking Alison someday?" he said teasingly.

Johnny laughed, "Maybe we ought to make sure we tell one another if we plan on doin' somethin' like that. Might get kind ah crowded if we got the same idea on the same day."

Smiling Scott said, "Sounds like a plan."

"Hey, Scott?" Johnny asked quietly.

"Yeah?" Scott answered.

"I'm thinkin' of tellin' Emily how I feel about her," Johnny stated.

Scott looked away and then back at his brother, "And how do you feel about her Johnny?" he asked, knowing full well but also knowing that it wasn't often that his brother came to him and talked to him about something so private. Johnny had tried once before, long ago when they were still fairly new to one another, but at that time, Scott had been preoccupied with his own fun and games and hadn't given his little brother the time of day, let alone any good older brother advice. He hoped their conversation now, made up for it just a little.

Johnny crossed his left arm across his chest and with his right hand began to scratch, then rub his left shoulder almost nervously with his hand, "I..." he gulped, "I..."

Scott took pity on him and gave him a little help, "Love her?" he asked.

Johnny nodded his wet head, unable to speak just thinking about it.

"So what's the problem?" Scott asked clinically.

Johnny took a deep breath and relaxed his arms down, putting the palms of his hands flat on the ledge, "What if she doesn't love me? What if all this has just been..."

"A game?" Scott asked.

Johnny shrugged and Scott watched him lift his right hand to the back of his neck and start rubbing at it nervously like he had done to his shoulder. "I don't know if I could take it, if she told me she didn't feel the same way," Johnny said, sounding tormented at the very idea.

“What makes you think for one second that she doesn’t feel the same way?” Scott asked helping his brother to reason out his feelings.

Johnny shook his head back and forth slowly, his eyes closing and opening almost in slow motion as Scott looked on, “Because I ain’t had much luck in that area in case you haven’t noticed,” he said getting more dejected by the minute when he thought back on the few times he thought he had fallen in love with a woman, thinking she would feel the same way. Each time though, he had been let down and dropped like a hot potato for one reason or another and Johnny was scared of it happening again if he spoke his feelings too soon.

Scott flicked the water with his foot, “You want my advice?” he asked.

“That’s why I’m talkin’ to you ‘bout this ain’t it?” Johnny replied half jokingly but in truth seriously wanted his brother’s advice on the matter.

“Then my advice would be to go for it,” Scott told him. “I don’t think this is like anything else you’ve ever gone through, Johnny. And since your asking, I’ll tell you what all the rest of us already know. Emily loves you. It’s as plain as the nose on your face. Only you’re the one in the middle of it and you can’t tell for sure because of all the hurt you’ve had in your past.”

Johnny swallowed and Scott thought it looked like it hurt the way his face pained up, “You sayin’ I’m scared?” Johnny asked him.

“Simply put, the answer is yes,” Scott answered truthfully.

Scott waited for Johnny to speak but it was a long time coming as he sat waiting patiently. “Guess I am just a little.” Johnny said softly.

He laughed the sound coming out short and breathy from his chest.

“It’s like anything else that’s been difficult for you Johnny. You have to summon up that courage you have hidden inside you and take another chance. Only this time I have a feeling it’s the right one.” Scott held up his hands as if he were giving up, “Of course that’s just my opinion, but one that I think I’m right about this time. Oh, and let’s not forget the fact that I am your older brother and I know everything.” He looked at Johnny with a laughing smile on his face hoping to brighten his brother’s mood.

It did and Johnny was soon laughing with him, the sound hearty and light to Scott’s ears. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting cold. You ready to swim back?” he asked.

Johnny nodded and the two of them slipped into the water and swam back through the hole and into the bright shining light of day. They swam to the large boulder they had been standing on when they first arrived and climbed on top to dry off in the sunshine. “Guess we should be headin’ back soon. It’s gonna take us a couple of hours to get home by the time we dry off and leave,” Johnny remarked as they lay prone on the slab.

Scott watched the clouds drift lazily by and said to his brother, “You’re right about that. What time do you think it is about now?” he asked.

“I’d say around three, accordin’ to where the sun is,” Johnny answered opening one eye to see where the sun was in the sky above them.

Scott sighed, regretting they had to leave so soon. He enjoyed spending the afternoon with his brother playing hooky from work, but it was time to go home so he said, “I guess that

does it then. I'm pretty well dried off, are you?"

Johnny laughed, "Good enough I suppose. What ain't dry now, sure will be by the time we get home."

"Then let's go. The last thing we want to do is make Murdoch mad by not getting home in time for supper. You know how he hates to wait," Scott reminded him.

Johnny sat up shading his eyes from the sun as he turned to his brother, "How you gonna explain that?" he said touching his brother's arm with a fingertip.

"What?" Scott asked looking down at his arm where Johnny was touching him. When he saw the white impression left on his arm when Johnny pulled his fingertip off, Scott groaned, "I'm going to regret letting you talk me into doing this."

Johnny laughed hard, "I didn't talk you into anything. If I remember correctly, you were the one made the suggestion."

Scott was beet red by the time he got his clothes on and they could be heard arguing back and forth all the way home about how they were going to explain why Scott was sunburned from head to toe.



Johnny sat on the couch next to Emily in her new house a week later. She had been waiting anxiously the whole day to talk to him and tell him the news that she was going to have to make a trip to San Francisco to stay with her aunt Elizabeth for a short time until the older woman was feeling better. She had come

down with pneumonia and the doctor had telegraphed her father saying that someone from the family should be present in case she didn't make it through the illness.

Wringing her hands and pacing back and forth across the room, Emily nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard Johnny ride up. She didn't think her news would be well received no matter how gently she told him or many times she promised to come back as soon as she was able. In the two months she shared with him, Emily knew without them ever having discussed it, that Johnny had a fear that things would change between or that she would leave and never come back. Oh it wasn't that he ever said so, but it was there and she knew all about it from the way he talked about his past, his family or the few true friends he'd had and then lost later, almost always in a manner that one should never have to come to expect as being the normal way of things.

So it was with a heavy heart that she would broach the subject with him, hopefully finding a way to break the news that wouldn't make him feel as if he were losing her too as so many from his past.

From the window of her home she watched him dismount and tie Barranca's reins to the fencing rail outside walking up to the front door with a smile on his face when he saw her watching him. Johnny waved and she went to the door and opened it. As was his habit with her, Johnny threw his arms around her waist and lifted her off the floor, giving her a kiss on the cheek and then her mouth.

Setting her down Johnny took her hand and made his way to where the couch was in the main room. He didn't know anything at all about her new plans. In fact he had decided just that morning that he was finally going to

take his brother's advice and tell Emily how he felt about her for the first time. Johnny had waited a week, mulling it over and going over every possible way in which he wanted to say it. He decided after a long week of careful planning, that he would take her to town for dinner and tell her afterward, presenting her with a small token of his declaration, a gold filigree heart pendant with 'I love you' engraved on the back.

His hands had shaken so bad when he picked it up the day before, he thought he was going to drop it when Dan Meyers had given it to him for his inspection. He carefully looked it over and was happy with how the design had turned out, blushing red-hot when Dan remarked over how charming his wife thought it was for him to do something so romantic for his girl.

Johnny had him wrap it up and as he sat on the couch with Emily by his side, he slipped his hand inside his jacket, checking to be sure that it was still there inside the breast pocket. "Where's your Pa?" he asked looking around the room.

Emily holding his hand replied, "He's not here. He's still at the shop."

Johnny hadn't expected this. Her father was always home by the time he came riding up to the hotel or the house to see her. It came to him that maybe he should tell her now and take her out to dinner afterward. At least here in Emily's home it was private and he could say all the things he wanted without prying eyes watching. Before he had a chance to say anything though, Emily interrupted his thoughts by saying, "Johnny I need to talk to you about something."

Her tone sounded serious and Johnny's heart began to skip a beat. Finding that courage that

Scott told him he had, Johnny asked with some trepidation, "What about?"

Emily lowered her head pulling her hand away from Johnny's and placed them on her lap nervously, "I don't know any way to say it other than to just come right out and tell you."

Johnny swallowed thinking the worst. From deep inside the courage he thought he had and knew he had when it came to facing off an enemy, crumbled at his feet leaving him raw with anxiety and fear. He stood up and walked to the empty fireplace across the room, his back to her, an instant moment of anger and regret igniting, building in his gut for allowing his feelings to get carried away so completely for her. He thought by the ominous tone of her words she was going to tell him she no longer wanted his affections and for an instant he was sorry he had listened to his brother's advice.

Emily knew she had made a mess of things by the way the shutter fell across Johnny's eyes. When he pulled his hand from hers, standing up to walk away from her, she regretted the way in which she started the conversation immediately. If it hadn't been for the deep sadness at having to leave him, she was sure her words would have come out more clearly without him getting the wrong impression. She stood up and crossed the room to stand behind him, touching his shoulder, saying, "Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged her hand off not being able to stand her touch when he thought she was going to tell him she didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. The complete opposite of how he thought things were between them. When he felt her lightly touch the back of his shoulder again, he said, "Please don't touch me," nearly choking on the words.

In a rush Emily said, "I'm not telling you that I don't want to be with you Johnny. It's my aunt in San Francisco. I have to go stay with her for a few weeks," she told him.

Johnny blinked rapidly and then closed his eyes for several seconds before turning around to face her. His palms felt sweaty and he rubbed them on the seat of his pants nervously hoping he had heard her right. He stared at her, all gold and honey, dressed in a pale pink dress with white lace trim. With his heart in his eyes, he asked, "You're not leaving for good? Or telling me that we're over?" he asked so softly Emily could barely hear his words.

Tears welled in her eyes as she shook her head adamantly to his question, her silky hair moving softly across her back in soft flowing waves. She smiled at him, a wispy laugh catching in her throat as she moved toward Johnny, arms outstretched for his embrace.

He reached out and grabbed her to him, hugging her close with his face buried in the hollow of her neck. Emily could feel the trembling in his hard lean frame, hugging him even tighter to ward off the last remaining feelings of doubt he may have had toward her. She pulled back from his chest, clasping his face between her hands, "How could I leave you forever or think of ever telling you we're over when I feel so much love for you in my heart Johnny Lancer?" she asked him with all the raw emotions she felt for him. "You stole my heart the first day we met and I promise you now cowboy, I will never want it back."

Working hard not to let her see how much her words affected him, Johnny reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiny wrapped box that contained the gift he had for her. He thought now was the best time to tell her what he'd hoped to tell her when he first got there.

Emily's breath caught in her throat when he handed it to her. When she got it unwrapped, Johnny helped her open it with trembling fingers and took out the gold filigree pendant from its resting place. He placed it reverently in the palm of her hand. "I had this made for you," he told her shakily, his eyebrows moving up as he tried to keep himself from getting over emotional. He turned the pendant over in her hand and said, "It's engraved."

Emily held it up and read the words inscribed on the back. She whispered the words between them, "I love you." Before the last word was uttered a single tear spilled over her lashes and rolled down her cheek. She looked up and all the love she felt for this man was shining brighter than any beacon in the depths of her eyes.

Johnny pulled her to him and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Holding her tight, he swayed her back and forth, whispering hotly into her ear, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said returning the endearment, holding him for dear life and not wanting to ever let go. "It's so beautiful."

Several shaky minutes later, Johnny pulled away and took the pendant from Emily's hand, pinning it on her dress. Stepping closer when he was done, he lowered his head to hers placing his hands on each side of her face, kissing the top of her head, her brow and lower until he got to her lips. Those he kissed hungrily, savoring the delicate softness of them and the salty taste from her tears that mingled with her natural sweetness.

They pulled apart and Johnny said heavily, "Let's go outside. I need to cool off some."

Emily could only nod and follow him out without a word, for she too, felt the need for

some fresh air. The night was fast approaching and with it came a slight breeze that did wonders to cool their all-consuming ardor that left them both feeling weak in the knees. Holding her hand, Johnny led her out onto the front porch, sitting down on the first step with a gentle tug.

Emily sat next to him and Johnny took her hand holding it lovingly on his lap, their fingers intertwined. Sighing heavily he asked her, "Why do you have to go to San Francisco?"

Emily pushed her hair back behind her ear and turned her head to his. "It's my aunt Elizabeth. She has pneumonia and the doctor isn't sure if she is going to make it or not," she told him. "My father is sending me to stay with her for a few weeks because the doctor wired him and said she might do better if there was family there to care for her."

"Then why doesn't your father go?" he asked a bit stubbornly, feeling almost selfish for suggesting it.

Emily smiled, "I wish he could. But he can't right now. Not after he's just opened the new shop. He doesn't have anyone to run it for him."

Johnny already knew this, but he was grasping at straws to keep her from going. That old persistent fear of his rode him night and day, that if he let her go for any length of time she wouldn't come back to him. He knew this was stupid thinking on his part, but his fears were justified in his mind when he thought back on his mother and all the friends he had lost in his short lifetime.

Pushing those thoughts away he told her more calmly than he felt, "I know."

"Daddy says I should only be gone a few weeks," she said trying to placate him.

Johnny squeezed her hand, "That doesn't help," he said smiling sadly at her.

Emily's frowned, "I know. It didn't help when Daddy said it to me."

Johnny's brow furrowed, "When does he want you to leave?" he asked suddenly realizing the she must be leaving soon if the situation with her aunt was bad enough that she had to go in the first place.

Emily pulled her hand from his and covered her face to hide her tears, "Tomorrow!" she cried, tormented by the sudden timing of her father's decision.

"Tomorrow!" Johnny shouted standing up and stomping down the steps. "That can't be!"

Emily threw her hands in her lap, the tears she had been hiding, pouring uncontrollably down her cheeks, "It is. Daddy already bought the ticket for the stage and I'm supposed to leave at noon," she cried and then buried her head in crook of her folded arms on her pulled up knees.

Johnny ran back up the steps and pulled her into an embrace, brushing the back of her hair as he held her to his beating heart. "Shhhh. Don't cry, querida. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm not making any of this easier on you. Shhhh, baby. Don't cry." He rocked her in his arms until her tears subsided, "It's ok."

Emily pulled away and looked up at him, "I don't want to go," she said drearily.

Johnny leaned over and kissed her forehead, massaging her side of her neck with his

thumbs, "I don't want you to go either. But I don't see any other way. Do you?"

Emily shook her head, "No. I tried to think of something else. But I couldn't. She doesn't have any other family but Daddy and me," she told him.

Johnny realized with a broken heart there were no other options. The best he could do for now was be supportive of the decision her father had made and help Emily come to grips with it for her sake. The last thing he wanted was for her to leave feeling the same kinds of fears that haunted him. "Then you have to go. You can't let your aunt down at a time like this. She needs you," he said, hoping he sounded supportive and ignoring that niggling voice that told him if she left, she would never come back.

Johnny pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dried her eyes, then gave it to her to blow her nose. "It'll be alright. You'll see," he told her with more confidence than he felt.

Johnny stayed until late that night. Frank Thompson had come home and they all sat at the dining room table talking about his older sister Elizabeth and the trip that Emily would be making on the morrow. Emily's father made the decision to travel to San Francisco with his daughter. The more he thought about it the more he didn't like the idea of having her travel such a great distance all alone. He would take the stage back to Green River the next day after making sure that Emily suitably settled in Elizabeth's home. It also gave him the opportunity to see his sister for himself and make a few arrangements for her care once Emily was no longer needed to be at her side.

In some respects this made Johnny feel better about Emily leaving. He hadn't liked the idea

of her traveling alone either, so it was a relief to hear that her father would be escorting her there. By eleven o'clock he took his leave, saying goodnight to Emily on the front porch and kissing her fervently before they parted company, telling her he would be at the stage to see her off before she left.



"Five minutes, folks!" the driver called as he loaded up the last of the bags and boxes that filled the top of the stagecoach.

Johnny stood with Emily and her father next to the open door of the stage. Shaking hands with Frank he held the door as the older man stepped inside and got settled on the seat, leaving his daughter to say goodbye to Johnny in private.

Johnny pulled her to the corner of the stage depot and there they stood one in front of the other. There were no tears of sadness or words between them. He put his hands on her shoulders, pulling her close to him and putting his chin on the top of her head.

"Three minutes," the driver shouted.

The minutes seemed to be speeding by rapidly. Johnny and Emily felt the rush of overwhelming misery that they would soon be parted. Pulling away from her, Johnny drowned in the deep glossy pools of her eyes that were swimming with unshed tears.

Johnny wanted to speak but found that he couldn't past the tightness in his throat. He watched as Emily reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded slip of paper, his name elegantly written on the outside. "Read this...later," she told him, doing her best not

to fling herself into his arms and cry her heart out.

Johnny took the letter from her, undid one button of his shirt and slipped it inside.

Emily watched his lean fingers button his shirt back up wanting so badly for those fingers to touch her face just one more time before she left. Her wish came true when he traced one long finger down her face and then pulled her to him, resting his cheek next to hers.

Turning his face to her ear he whispered, "Make sure you come back to me."

Emily turned and kissed him, "I'll come back. Just make sure you're here when I do."

"It's now or never Johnny!" Karl yelled from the top of his driver's seat.

Johnny led Emily back to the stage and opened the door. Taking her hand he helped her inside, his hands firm on her waist as she got inside. Emily sat by the window and leaned her head out, her hands clasped tightly to the frame.

Johnny tipped his head up to her mouth and kissed her one last time saying with all his heart, "¡Te amo!"

Karl slapped the reins and the stage jerked and pulled away, leaving Johnny's words trailing in the air as he watched the stagecoach pull away, taking Emily with it.

Johnny watched the stage until he could no longer see anything other than the trail of dust it left behind. Visions of her lovely face poking out from the window the last thing he would remember when he thought of their last day together.

A voice in his head nagged at him, teasing and taunting him mercilessly after she was gone, *'She won't be coming back. She's left you just like all the others...just like your mother...'*

Johnny closed his eyes to the tormenting words that echoed viciously in his head. When he opened them again, the trail of dust was gone. No sign or reminder that the stage had ever been there or that his Emily was gone.

Slapping the post of the depot, Johnny turned around making his way to the saloon. Pushing through the batwing doors, he walked in strolling up to the bar without a glance to see who might be inside first as was his usual habit.

"Hey there Johnny, what'll you have," Larry asked him as he rubbed a clean cloth across the counter.

Johnny leaned his elbows on the counter, propping his booted foot on the rail that lined the bar, "Tequila," he said, tapping his fingers on the glossy surface.

Larry threw his towel across his shoulder and put a glass on the counter. Before he could take his hand off, Johnny covered it with his. "A bottle," he told him.

Larry's sooty brows rose in surprise and he nodded his head at Johnny, "You want the whole bottle?"

Sighing Johnny said, "The whole bottle."

Larry pulled his hand out from underneath Johnny's and grabbed a bottle from underneath his display of liquors. He banged it down on the counter in front of Johnny and said with a understanding look on his face, "Seems to me like you're gonna want the good stuff, amigo."

Johnny stared at the bottle, wondering briefly if he should even take it, but the hateful voice in his head kept taunting him with cruel predictive words, *'She's not coming back, she's not coming back,'* over and over again, made him decide otherwise.

Looking up, Johnny saw his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. The man he saw there wasn't the same man he remembered seeing just the other day when he had come to town with his Scott for a beer late one evening. The image he saw today was pure Johnny Madrid. The professional persona he sometimes hated because of the painful reminders of how he had come to exist in the first place; an alternate personality that kept him from feeling or caring about anything or anyone. A personality who drove away the pain of a man who had lost everything and everyone he had ever loved or cared about and in return gave him a reputation he'd rather not have.

Wrapping his hand around the neck of the bottle, Johnny reached into his pocket and pulled out several coins, tossing them on the counter. He swept the bottle into his hand saying, "You might be right, Larry."

The bartender watched Johnny walk away; shaking his head at the young man he knew was Murdoch Lancer's son. It wasn't the first time he had seen that look on a man's face before. He snickered to himself and began cleaning the glasses behind the bar, *'Hope your Pa and brother can pick up the pieces by the time you get done with that bottle,'* he thought knowing that Johnny was probably going to spend the rest of the night on one hell of a drinking binge.



Larry had been right. Johnny took his bottle and rode up to his favorite thinking spot, high on a hill that overlooked the ranch he now called home. Dropping Barranca's reins to the ground, he spent the rest of the day and part of the evening sitting with his back against an old oak tree, drinking and trying desperately to stave off the fear that Emily might never return.

He knew he couldn't stay out the whole night. His family would worry and Johnny thought they had enough on their plate without going out in the middle of the night to look for him. So when he had finished the tequila, down to the last drop and the stars were twinkling high above him, Johnny got to his feet unsteadily and mounted his horse. Pulling on Barranca's reins he turned him toward the hacienda, his home and the bed that awaited him, if he got there in one piece.

He hoped his family was in bed for the night. He supposed though that Murdoch or even Scott might be still waiting up for him. But he hoped they weren't. He didn't feel like talking to anyone just yet, let alone a worrisome brother or a concerned father with the state he was in.

It wasn't often that Johnny drank so heavily. In fact he didn't like to at all. Drinking hard did nothing other than dull his senses and slow him down. A fact that Johnny was all too aware was a dangerous thing for anyone and most especially for himself.

Riding up to the barn, Johnny dismounted and would have fallen on his backside if he had not kept hold of the pommel on his saddle. He tested his ability to stand on his own by letting go slowly and standing by Barranca's side while he got his brain to working straight and his balance under control.

Taking the horse's reins in his hand, he staggered noisily into the barn and after much tussling and grabbing hold of the wooden walls of the stall, Johnny managed to get Barranca unsaddled and bedded down for the night. He knew his tack wasn't put away properly but there was no helping it for the time being. By now he was totally intoxicated and doing his best not to fall over flat on his face.

Moving cautiously, Johnny's head swam as he made his way to the front door and opened it. The door swung backward with his hand still holding the catch firmly in his grasp, dragging him forward with its heavy strength. He fell to his knees and pulled himself up when the door finally banged up against the wall behind it. When he was finally standing, albeit unsteady but upright, he shut the door, pushing none too gently with one hand, hoping the click and thump it made wasn't as loud as it sounded to his ears and began to work at getting his jacket off.

He pulled one arm out and reached around to pull the other sleeve off turning in a circle as he worked to keep from falling down again. When he eventually got it off, he dropped it to the floor and looked down at the gun belt that hugged his slim waist. His eyes closed and he could feel himself stumble backward off balance until his back was up against the wall.

'That's better,' he thought, grateful to have the wall holding him up. He fumbled with the buckle, his fingers working almost recklessly to get it unfastened, getting more and more frustrated by the second when he couldn't get it unhooked.

He blinked hard trying to clear his head and settle his mind, but no matter how hard he tried the darn thing wouldn't come undone, he was just about to give it another go when he

saw another set of fingers that weren't his own, deftly pull back on the leather and release the metal clasp that kept his gun belt together.

He looked up to find his father staring back at him. "Hey, Pa," he said his words slurring together, his tone surprised at who it was that was helping him. Black inky lashes closed over flushed cheeks and with a drunken sigh Johnny said, "Thanks for helpin' me." Johnny started to slide sideways against the wall, his hat coming off in the process and falling to the floor. Murdoch grasped his son's shoulders and kept him upright between two strong hands.

Murdoch smiled indulgently at his son, "Hey yourself. You all right?" he asked.

Johnny nodded his head, regretting it immediately when it made his stomach roll, "Yeah...I think so." He swallowed, looked down at the floor then closed his eyes, clasp at his stomach when he felt it start to lurch. He could feel himself sliding sideways again and then his father's strong hands pulling him back to an upright position.

Murdoch grasped his son under one arm and started leading him to the great room. They hadn't gone more than a few steps when Johnny stopped short, opening and closing his eyes when the room began to swim in front of his face, "I need to sit down," he croaked.

"Why don't we get you to the couch first," Murdoch said calmly. He wasn't used to this sort of thing in either of his sons. In fact Murdoch couldn't remember a time since they arrived that either one of them had come home as drunk as Johnny appeared to be. He wished now that he had told Scott to wait up with him just in case he was needed. It was too late now

though, and he would just have to do the best he could by himself.

Johnny shook his head and this aggravated the rolling in his stomach further. "I don't feel good," he told his father sickly, holding his hand to his stomach.

Murdoch grabbed one of the dining room chairs and pushed Johnny onto it, "Sit here for a minute, I'll be right back," he told him, heading for the kitchen to find a receptacle and some clean cloths for Johnny in case he needed to throw up. He didn't need to worry about it though, because by the time he got back, Johnny had gotten up and ran out the front door, leaving it wide open in his haste to get out. Murdoch found him off in the yard by one of the larger trees that shaded the house, throwing up the contents of his upset stomach.

Going to Johnny's side, he waited until his son was done. It took several minutes before Johnny finally stood up straight grasping the trunk of the tree to keep him somewhat steady on his feet.

"Feel better?" Murdoch asked handing him a clean wet cloth to wipe the sweat off his face.

Johnny took the offered cloth and wiped at his face, using the tree as a brace to keep him from falling, "A little," was all he could manage to say.

"Think you can make it inside now, if I help you?" his father asked.

Johnny took a deep breath and said shakily, "Yeah."

Murdoch took Johnny's arm guiding him back inside the house one faltering step at a time. It was slow going but this time they managed to get all the way to the couch without incident.

Making sure his son was settled Murdoch poured Johnny a glass of cool water from a pitcher and handed to him.

Johnny took the drink gratefully and sipped at the water, hoping it didn't make him throw up again. He didn't think his stomach could take another bout of heaves like the one he'd just gone through outside.

"You feeling a little better?" he heard his father ask.

Johnny swallowed a bigger drink of water this time and said, "I think so. I just wish the room would stop spinning round and round."

Murdoch laughed under his breath, "From my vantage point the room is perfectly still." He sat down next to Johnny, "I think you had a little too much to drink, don't you?" he asked.

Johnny sighed, closing his eyes, "Murdoch don't start on me." He shook his head forlornly. "I can't take it right now."

Murdoch shook his graying head. "I'm not starting anything with you son. I'm just concerned and wondering if you're going to be all right."

Johnny was about to give him a smart retort then thought better of it. His father was just concerned and he had every right to be. Especially when one of his sons comes home so drunk they can hardly stand on their own two feet.

Johnny propped his elbows on his knees and held his head in the palms of his hands, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Murdoch reached over and rubbed his hand along Johnny's back. "Was Emily's leaving

that hard on you son?" he asked taking a chance that Johnny might talk to him for once.

It seemed ages before he got a reply and when he did, Murdoch's heart went out to his young son. He watched Johnny close his eyes again and nod his head; his long tapered fingers massaging his temples, "I hated it." was his honest, soft-spoken reply. "I don't know how you ever got over...what happened to Scott's mother, let alone what . . . my mama did to you."

Murdoch's hand stopped moving on his son's back, the loneliness and grief of those times coming back to haunt him with Johnny's words. He understood the personal hell that his son was feeling and it gave him a wealth of sympathy that overwhelmed him. "It wasn't easy, son. It never is. But you have to remember that Emily isn't like either one of them. She's healthy and she loves you. She'll be back and this . . . well . . . this will all have been nothing more than a test of your faith in her."

Johnny lifted his head, his eyes gleaming and wet. "You sound so sure."

"That's because I am." Murdoch moved his hand up and down Johnny's back in an attempt to reassure and comfort his son. "I'm your father and even though things didn't go the way I had hoped for myself, I think I'm qualified after what I have been through, to be a pretty good judge of character by now. At least I think I am," Murdoch stated solemnly, his hand rubbing slower, feeling the tension in Johnny's back loosen with his parental efforts to make sense of things.

The closeness and the touching wasn't something Johnny was accustomed to his father doing. It felt good though. It felt the way he always imagined it would be to have a

father to lean on when he felt troubled or unsure of himself. Murdoch's calm assurance that he was right was another thing that Johnny needed to hear and hold on to.

Sitting up he asked his father, "Is that why . . . you never got married again?"

Murdoch's hand stopped moving as he pondered Johnny's question, "In some respects, yes. But that's not the only reason."

Johnny sat back and Murdoch lifted his arm until he was able to drape it around Johnny's shoulders. "Are you scared?" he asked, keeping his eyes looking straight ahead, waiting for the answer.

"Of falling in love again?" Murdoch wanted to know.

Johnny shook his head and then turned to look at his father, wanting to see as well as hear the answer. It was important to him because it was how he felt about Emily and why it had taken him so long to tell her how he felt about her in the first place. It was also the reason he dreaded having her leave. He was scared she wouldn't come back to him even after she told him that she loved him.

Murdoch sighed, pulling his son closer to his side, "We're all scared son, every last one of us. Love is a wonderful thing. It can make us or break us, but the good thing about it is the way we feel when we're in love. And truthfully...if I had it to do all over again...I would."

Johnny had doubts about what Murdoch just said. In his mind he couldn't understand how after all the heartache and sorrow his mother had put his father through he could ever say such a thing. In his mind Maria's deception and disloyalty toward Murdoch made him

wonder if she ever loved him, or if the product of that so-called love had just been a pawn with which she used him to mentally torture his father over the years.

Seeing the doubt on Johnny's face, Murdoch put his right hand on Johnny's stomach, leaning closer to his face, "It's the truth son. No matter what you are thinking."

Johnny looked at him, their faces so near to one another and looked back, casting his eyes down to the hand that rested on his belly. It was then that he remembered the letter that Emily had given him tucked inside his shirt. "She wrote me a letter."

Murdoch sat back and twisted around so that he was facing Johnny's side, "Have you read it?"

Shaking his head, Johnny said, "No."

"Is that what I felt inside your shirt?" Murdoch asked.

"Yes," Johnny replied.

Murdoch got up and went to the lamp that sat on a nearby table, turning up the wick, "Why don't you read it now, son?"

Johnny rubbed his face up and down with his hands, his fingers mussing the bangs that hung across his forehead. He fumbled with the buttons of his shirt finding it rough to get them undone when his fingers trembled from drink and fear of finding out what she had to say to him.

Murdoch was quick to help, squatting down in front of him and pushing away at his hands. He slipped the buttons through the holes, reaching inside when he was done and took the letter out, fastening them back up when he

was finished. He handed the letter to Johnny and said, "Can you make it up to your room if I leave you alone?"

Holding the letter between his hands, Johnny quickly looked up, swallowing hard before saying, "I don't want to be alone. Will you stay . . . just a little longer?"

Hearing the desperate plea in his son's voice, Murdoch nodded and sat next to him on the couch for support.

Johnny looked over at Murdoch, his chest beginning to heave with nervous anticipation. He opened the letter and began to read:

Dear Johnny,
My heart aches as I write this letter to you. I haven't left yet and already I miss you more than words can say. I know what your fears are and I share them with you my darling. Please know that my every waking moment will be spent thinking of you, loving you and counting the days until I can come home to you. You are my heart, my soul and my every dream come true. I love you. Forever yours,
Emily.

Johnny lost the battle to keep himself under control. The alcohol in his system further aided his inability to stop his flow tears. With head bent over the note, great droplets fell from his eyes and onto the letter, causing the ink to spread in places before he had a chance to stop it.

Murdoch took the letter from his hands and laid it on the couch next to him. He watched Johnny wipe away his tears with the palms of his hands, wondering if his son was happy or sad at what he read. The temptation to read the letter was great, but he ignored the feeling, his paternal need to comfort his son overriding any curiosity he had at the moment.

Johnny got up gingerly, weaving as he stood there with an anxious father getting up to stand next to him, a strong hand on Johnny's arm for support. Johnny turned unsteadily and picked the letter up, folding it and stuffing it in the band of his pants.

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, Murdoch asked him cautiously, "Is everything alright?"

Johnny swiped at his eyes again nodding his head in affirmation as he stood in front of his towering father. Impulsively he wrapped his arms around Murdoch's waist, laying his cheek against his father's hard chest, squeezing his eyes shut tight when the tears threatened to fall again. He felt Murdoch's strong arms encircle him, the feeling more than he could bear with his emotions all tied up in knots. He cried. The sound coming from him in an emotional outburst that was wretched to Murdoch's ears.

Words of anger, hurt and sorrow spilled from his lips like an overflowing dam of destruction. Bitter words of hatred that Murdoch suspected all along for what Johnny's mother had done, came crashing down upon his head. There were painful, clipped memories of corporal punishment that tarnished the loving memory of his little boy and fueled his growing rage with each and every word.

Johnny didn't stop there, he cried of being hungry and scared, sick and lonely with no one to turn to and no one who cared. He cried for all that he missed in life, his sobs wracking his body uncontrollably as he remembered his past and told Murdoch about the death of his mother, and the fear that took control that same night when he killed the man who had slain her, taking the only person from him, he had ever loved.

With great hiccoughing sobs he spoke of Madrid and how he hated the life he had been forced to accept in the name of survival, tearing Murdoch's heart to shreds as he held Johnny close, his rough cheek buried in the dark hair on his son's head.

He didn't have the whole story about anything, just bits of broken pieces he would have to put together another time. But what his son did say was enough to never want to let Johnny go again. He cried for him, wishing he could take away all the pain that Johnny had ever suffered in his short life.

When his cries died down, Johnny was left feeling weak and tired, hardly able to stand on his own two feet. Murdoch sensed that the last of his reserves were at last gone, so made him sit on the couch and then lie down, stuffing a small pillow under his head when his son obeyed without question.

Walking over to a chest that sat up against the wall, he opened it and pulled out two blankets, returning to Johnny's side with them. He put them down, seeing that his son was already fast asleep from drunken exhaustion and pulled off his boots. Murdoch covered him up, brushing back the thick hair over his forehead with gentle fingers that trembled, remembering another time just like this one, long, long ago when his son had only been a young toddler. Only now his son was no longer a toddler, but a man full grown and his heart wept for all the other long ago times they could have had.

Murdoch hadn't been lying when he told his son, he would do it all again. But not for the reason his son thought it was. It had more to do with the fact that God had given Johnny to him by having Maria come into his life. And for that, Murdoch would do it all over again, if it meant having Johnny as his son.

With his large hand resting on Johnny's inky black hair, he whispered down to him, "I love you Johnny." Words that for some reason were hard to say in the bright light of day, but ones he promised to tell his son the first chance he could find.

Murdoch wasn't sure just how much Johnny would remember about tonight. He hoped for both their sakes that if Johnny remembered everything that things wouldn't change between them. Johnny needed him, whether he admitted it clear-headed and sober to him or not. And he needed him. Without Scott and Johnny, Murdoch acknowledged to himself that he was only half a man with half a soul, his two sons making up the other half that had been empty and bleak for way too long.



The next morning Johnny woke up groggily to the bright morning sun that shined through the window and French doors of the great room. For a moment he wondered briefly why he was sleeping on the couch and then it all came rushing back to him in a flood of embarrassing hazy memories.

Mortified over his actions and his behavior, Johnny rubbed his face with the palms of his hands. His father probably thought he was crazy after last night and Johnny couldn't blame him. His stomach churned when he thought of how he had cried in Murdoch's arms and thought about going outside and finding a big hole he could crawl in for the rest of his life. But then he thought of Emily and the letter he had read and knew that he would just have to suck it up and take whatever Murdoch had to dish out at him for being such a crybaby.

His stomach rolled again at the memories and his courage to face his father was fast losing ground the more he sat there. *'Why did I have to lose control like that!'* his mind screamed. *'Why couldn't I just be a man and not let all this crap get to me like it did?'* he questioned himself hotly.

He pounded his fist on the couch cushion and regretted it instantly. His head hurt like the dickens and all day he would pay for his foolishness. That thought only added to his ire and made him want to crawl in that imaginary hole all the more. Throwing back the covers he got up a little too quickly and nearly fell back down when his head began to throb unmercifully.

He could hear voices coming from the kitchen and the agonizing smell of breakfast cooking on the stove. Not wanting to face anyone so soon, especially his father, Johnny went outside and around the house until he found the stairs that led up to the upper level. He climbed them wearily, opening the door near Scott's end of the hallway and made his way to his room down the other end.

He wished he hadn't fallen apart the way he did last night, but in some small way he was glad that he had said some of the things he did. He couldn't remember everything he said and even though he was thoroughly embarrassed for the way it had all happened, the weight on his shoulders seemed lighter for having done so.

Opening the door to his room, he was grateful the drapes were still closed, shutting off the sunlight, giving him a chance to recover slowly as he splashed his face with the cold water from his washstand, cleaned his teeth and shaved.

By the time he was dressed in clean clothes he felt much better and ready to face the world again. The only thing missing were his boots, which he figured were still downstairs. He hid his letter from Emily under the clean clothes in his drawer, saving it to read again later. Johnny figured he would most likely read it every day until the day she came back.

Walking across the room, Johnny pulled back the long curtains and opened his window. The cool crisp morning air did wonders for him and helped him gather the courage he needed to go downstairs and face his family. He wondered briefly if Murdoch told them what had happened last night. He hoped not. It was bad enough that he felt the need to apologize to his father without having to suffer the looks he might get from Scott and Teresa.

With his courage bolstered by the morning air, Johnny left his room, resolving on the way down never to let himself get so drunk ever again. It only left him feeling like a fool.

He padded down the stairs, easing past the kitchen without anyone the wiser for having not seen him, and found his boots on the floor beside the couch. He was just getting the first one on when Murdoch came into the room.

Johnny let his booted foot drop to the floor, his face blushing furiously when his father stopped and saw him sitting on the couch, one boot on and one boot off. He dropped his head not knowing what to say or what to do.

Murdoch smiled and said, "Good morning, son. You look a lot better today."

Johnny raised his eyes to his father. He saw no condemnation on his face of any other trace of disappointment that he had expected to see. "Uh . . . Thanks. I feel better," he said quietly.

Murdoch shook his head and walked past him to his desk, sitting down behind it in the large leather rocker he pulled closer in order to get at all his paperwork, "Breakfast is ready. There's coffee too." Murdoch shuffled his papers and opened a ledger. "When you and Scott get done, come in here and we'll go over the jobs we need to do today."

Johnny pulled on his other boot, "Yes sir," he said, wondering why Murdoch didn't say anything to him about the way he came home drunk and acted last night.

He stood up and walked over to the corner of Murdoch's desk. He picked up one of his paperweights and moved it from hand to hand as he waited for his father to look up from his work.

Murdoch could see from his peripheral that Johnny was nervous and waiting for him to look up. He decided before going to bed that the best thing he could do about last night was to act as if what happened was normal and not make a big deal out of it. His intentions were to have that talk with Johnny eventually about how much he loved him and was glad that he was home, but he knew that Johnny's first issue would be the breakdown that occurred in his arms the previous evening and whether or not he told anyone. He hadn't and he wouldn't. It was between them and that was where it was going to stay unless Johnny decided to tell someone himself.

Looking up Murdoch asked gently, "What is it, son?"

Johnny stared down at the object in his hand and then set it down carefully on Murdoch's desk, "I just wanted to apologize for last night. I'm sorry for putting you through all that. I . . . I . . . he sighed, "I didn't mean to," he

finished, feeling like his apology was lame compared to what happened.

Murdoch rolled his chair back and got up to stand next to his son. "Don't apologize, Johnny. I'm glad I could be there for you." He walked up to Johnny and pulled him to his chest, feeling the stiffness relax almost instantly just before he let him go. "It's just between you and me. Now go have some breakfast and get yourself a cup of coffee. I'm sure you could use one this morning," he told him briskly, walking back to his chair.

Johnny smiled, thinking this had been easier than he thought it would be. He turned and started to walk away, stopping with his back to his father when he heard him say, "Next time, just have a few drinks, instead of the whole bottle. It isn't good for you."

Murdoch had been guessing at the amount of liquor that Johnny had consumed, but like anyone else that had parents, Johnny was surprised when his father seemed to know all without having been there. He laughed under his breath, "Yes sir," he said and walked away feeling better, regardless of the reasons why.



A week later Murdoch had his private talk with Johnny. It went well and Murdoch was relieved to have it done and over with. His son had been receptive to everything he wanted to talk about, though they didn't venture much into Johnny's privately guarded past the way they had done somewhat the night he had come home drunk. But it was a start and Johnny seemed more than interested in learning about his Scottish side of the family, a topic that both men felt safe in discussing.

That evening they talked some more, but this time Scott was also present and he asked several questions of his own. Afterward they settled in for the night, relaxing in the great room, while Scott read the next chapter of his book, his family hanging on to his every word.

Days later Scott and Johnny were riding home near suppertime. The repairs that needed to be done on a fence line abandoned like the time before, for a day spent at Scott's secret oasis.

"Swimmin' sure makes a man hungry," Johnny said when they rode under the arch, glad to be getting home in time to eat. His stomach rumbled from lack of food and Scott laughed at him.

"You're always hungry little brother, whether you're swimming or not," Scott told him grinning.

Johnny snorted, "Like you ain't hungry too," he retorted laughing.

"Now I didn't say I wasn't hungry, but you have to admit you eat a lot more than I do," Scott replied.

Riding up to the barn they reined in their horses and Johnny said, "I do eat a lot, but that's because I work harder than you," he said jokingly to his brother.

Scott dismounted, raising his eyebrows over the seat of his horse at Johnny, "Says who?"

"Says me," Johnny said laughing at the look on his brother's face. He dismounted also and led Barranca into the barn, Scott close on his heels with Sheridan in tow.

"I beg to differ, then," Scott exclaimed while they unsaddled their horses. "I work much

harder than you and everyone on this ranch knows it.”

“You call workin’ on the books hard work?” Johnny asked throwing his saddle and tack on a rail. He began rubbing his horse down.

“I call everything I do around here, hard work little brother and anytime you want to take over the books, you just let me know,” Scott teased taking care of his own horse’s needs.

When they were done, the two brothers grabbed each other around the necks and walked to the door of the barn. They were just about to start toward the house when Johnny stopped dead in his tracks, letting Scott get several feet past him. From where they stood Johnny could see that there was a buggy tied up at one of the stone hitch rails.

Not seeing it for himself and not needing to, Scott looked back at him and asked curiously, “You coming?”

Johnny ignored the question as he stared toward the front door of the house. “Someone’s here,” Scott heard him say cautiously.

Scott looked back toward the house, moving more in Johnny’s direction to get a better view from his brother’s vantage point. There was indeed a horse and buggy waiting outside the house. He didn’t recognize it though and idly wondered with feigned ignorance whom it could be that was visiting so late in the day. His first thought was to suggest that Sam was here for a visit but as they started walking toward the house again, he could tell it wasn’t the doctor’s usual rig and knew his brother would also know that fact.

“Who do you think it is?” Scott asked just when Johnny caught his arm and kept him from going on further.

Johnny didn’t know who it was, but he got a funny feeling in his stomach the closer they got to the house. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled and his heart started to quickly palpitate in his chest. He dropped his hand from Scott’s arm and let them dangle casually at his sides, nervous tension tingling in his fingertips, waiting anxiously, hopefully, for what he believed he already knew in his heart.

Scott saw the change on Johnny’s face and knew without looking, the second the door to their home was open. He turned from his brother’s side gazing across the yard toward home, a bright smile lighting his face when he saw who it was in the entry way.

Turning back to Johnny, he could tell his brother was shocked; not believing what his eyes or senses told him were true. Happy for his brother, Scott walked up to Johnny, leaning near his ear and whispered, “What are you waiting for?” Scott gave his brother a gentle push in the middle of his back, laughing softly when he realized that it was all the prompting his brother needed.

The smile on Scott’s face grew bigger when Johnny shot away from him, calling Emily’s name. He could see their father in the doorway, with a huge grin that matched the happiness of his own, the two of them watching as Emily ran from the door, into the yard and straight into Johnny’s arms.

Johnny swept Emily up, twirling her round and round, her golden hair flying and swirling in great rippling waves that cloaked them both. His darkness and her light, a stark contrast of coloring set against the backdrop

of the setting sun as they passionately embraced each other.

Scott strolled past the happy couple to stand next to his father in the doorway. Murdoch wrapped an arm around his shoulders and said, "Perfect timing, son. Did he have any idea?"

Scott shook his blond head, "No, not at all."

Murdoch squeezed his shoulder, "That was a great acting job."

Scott bowed his head, "It wasn't easy pretending I didn't know who it was."

Murdoch sighed, giving Scott a tug, "Let's go in and leave these two alone."

"I second that," Scott said, watching the young couple kiss. "I know I wouldn't want to have an audience at a time like this."

"Neither would I," Murdoch remarked with understanding as he and Scott turned away from the scene and went inside, closing the door behind him with a barely audible click.

Johnny slid Emily down the front of his chest until her feet touched the ground. He held her face between his hands and kissed her eyes, the tip of her nose and then her mouth.

With her forehead pulled against his, Johnny said breathlessly, "You came back to me."

Emily's eyelashes fluttered closed, she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, inhaling deeply to calm her wildly beating heart, "I told you that I would," she whispered intimately, her fingers running through the hair at the back of his neck.

Johnny closed his eyes, his body tingling from her touch, dropping his hands to her waist, stepping closer to her body, "I know," he said whispering back to her. His palms moved to the curve of her back, pressing her into him, his need to touch and feel her crushing his sanity. Johnny pulled his head away, drowning in the warm depths of her radiant eyes, "I was afraid . . . and I doubted you," he told her brokenly, admitting the lack of faith he'd had in her promise.

Emily stood on the tips of her toes, kissing his lips so tenderly it made Johnny want to melt. The voice in his head said he didn't deserve her and it made their reunion all the more bittersweet because she defied the taunting specter and filled his heart with her love for him to overflowing.

Emily pulled back, not leaving the circle of his arms, but just enough to look him square in the eyes and say with total devotion, "I love you Johnny Lancer. Always and forever."

As they kissed, the setting sun left the sky burning on the horizon with deep purple and orange hues. A glorious sunset made for two people in love, showering their reunion with a promise of a bright and hopeful future.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tina L. Coates was born and raised in Ft. Worth, Texas. Currently, she lives near the beautiful Mt. Rainier in Covington, Washington, with her husband Dave of fifteen years, their son Michael, and one large, always hungry dog, Apollo.

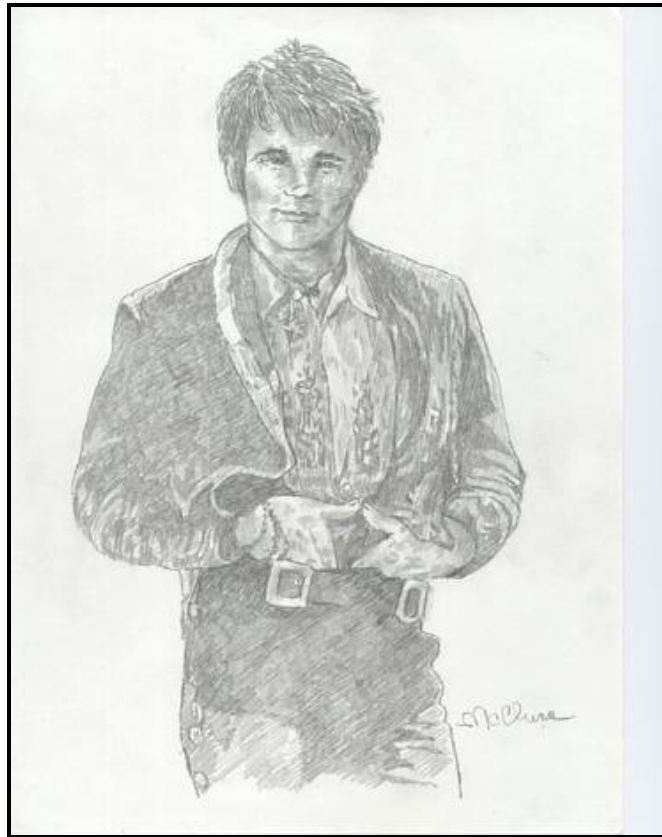
In her spare time she likes to read and write. Her favorite authors are Leigh Greenwood

and Ralph Compton, who inspire her with their vision and tales of the old west.

She collects old hardback westerns and prints painted by Jack Sorenson, Tom Ryan and Bill Hughes, masters of the western art world.

Her favorite outdoor activities include camping and rafting, going to the rodeo and attending as many Mariner baseball games as she can!

Send any feedback for Tina to audie143143@yahoo.com



FULL JOHNNY BY JEANNIE MCCLURE

THE CHUCKWAGON



COMPILED BY GERALDINE

In 1866, when cattleman Charles Goodnight needed a way to keep his drovers fed while trailing cattle from Texas to points north, he merely took an old Army supply wagon and bolted to its back a wooden box divided into different compartments. He covered the box with a hinged lid that when opened and supported by a single leg, could serve as a worktable or wide shelf.

The box was a simple contraption, but it revolutionized the cattle industry. Food and cooking utensils were stowed in the pigeonholes of this traveling kitchen cabinet. There were other uses for the wagon as well. Bedrolls, medicine, lariats, branding irons, whiskey and water - they each found a place attached somewhere on the wagon.

It was no difficulty coming up with a name for Goodnight's invention. Since early 17th century England, individuals involved in the meat business referred to a lower priced part of the beef carcass as the "chuck." Although less glamorous than other cuts, the chuck was an important source of nutrition for the working man.

By the next century, "chuck" became a catch-all phrase for good, honest, heart-warming food. The term encompassed beef, vegetables, bread, dessert, coffee and anything else that could be eaten. On the ranch, the hand ate "chuck" at the "chuck" house.

Goodnight's all-purpose compartment on the back of the Army wagon became the "chuck"

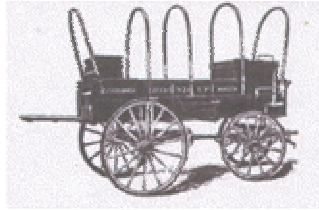
box. And a wagon with a chuck box became a "chuck" wagon.

The chuck wagon quickly gained independent status. While the wrangler or trail boss set the rules outside the camp, he and all the other hands obeyed the cook within the sphere of the chuck wagon. The cook brooked no interference with his cooking nor his utensils, and the cowboys never rebelled against his rule. They paid him tribute each day by roping dead mesquite or oak wood and dragging it into camp for the fire.

After ranchers fences the open range with barbed wire, and the extension of railway lines made the trail drive unnecessary, the chuck wagon lived on. Many times, neighboring ranchers helped with the roundup, the branding, doctoring and other chores in return for the same consideration during their time to ship. When this happened, one chuck wagon might make the rounds of all the area ranches and be out for weeks at a time throughout the working season to feed dozens of persons.

Today, the chuck wagon remains a vital part of the cattle industry. It not only feeds working cowboys on larger ranches, but it also is a social gathering place during cowboy celebrations, fairs, meetings and other important events. For everyone, even those who are eating behind a wagon for the hundredth time, the chuck wagon is a special place, and the time spent there eating, meeting and greeting with friends is forever filed away in the catalog of that person's special memories.

CHUCKWAGON RECIPES



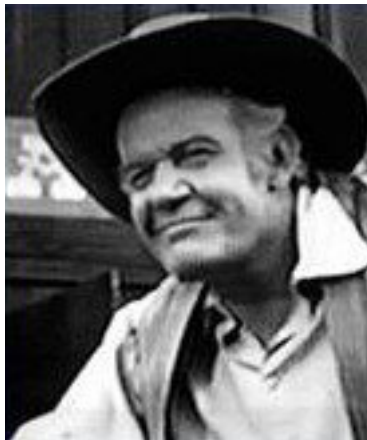
CAMPFIRE CHICKEN BREASTS

- * 4 Chicken Breast Fillets, Skinned and Boneless
- * Lemon Pepper, Italian Seasoning
- * Olive Oil
- * 1/4 Cup Water

Take paper towel and rub skillet with olive oil. Heat pan on fire till better than warm. Brush chicken breasts with olive oil and season both sides with lots of lemon pepper (the more, the better!) Sprinkle 2 pinches of Italian seasoning on each breast. Toss in the skillet and let cook on medium high heat until juices run clear. Add water after cooking to make a flavorful sauce for dipping chicken. This is great with Angel Hair pasta and garlic toast.



COWBOY CAVIAR



- * 2 tablespoons Red Wine Vinegar
- * 1 1/2 teaspoons Salad Oil
- * 1 1/2 to 2 teaspoons Hot Sauce
- * 1 Clove of Garlic, Minced
- * 1/8 teaspoon Pepper
- * 1 Firm, Ripe Avocado
- * 1 (15-ounce) Can Black-Eyed Peas
- * 1 (11-ounce) Can Corn or Kernels From 2 Ears of Fresh Corn, blanched
- * 2/3 cup Chopped Cilantro
- * 2/3 cup Thinly Sliced Green Onions
- * 8 ounces Roma Tomatoes, Coarsely Chopped
- * Salt to Taste

Mix the vinegar, oil, hot sauce, garlic and pepper in a bowl. Cut the avocado into 1/2 inches cubes and add to the vinegar mixture, missing gently. Drain and rinse the peas and corn. Add the vinegar mixture with the cilantro, green onions and tomatoes; mix gently. Add salt to taste. Serve with tortilla chips. Serves ten to twelve.

EASY BOSTON CREAM PIE

- * 5 1/2 ounce Vanilla Pudding and Pie Filling Mix
- * 2 1/3 cup Milk
- * 2 ounces Unsweetened Chocolate - chopped
- * 1 tablespoon Unsalted Butter
- * 1 teaspoon Almond Extract
- * 1/2 cup Whipping Cream; Whipped
- * 1 Yellow Cake Layer, Baked and Cooled, 8 or 9 inch



Mix together pudding mix and milk in saucepan. Cook over medium heat until mixture comes to a full boil. Remove from heat. Combine 1 cup hot pudding with chocolate and butter. Stir until chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth. Add almond extract. Stir to mix well. Fold in whipped cream.

Split cake layer in two. Place one cake layer in an 8 or 9 inch cake pan lined with plastic wrap. Cover with vanilla pudding mix. Place second layer on top and spread with chocolate pudding mix. Chill a few hours.

To serve, lift "cream pie" out of pan and lace on serving plate. Cut into wedges and serve.



ABOUT THE COOK

Geraldine lives in Maine, working at a variety of jobs, including writing, editing photos and creating art for the greeting card and giftware field. Always trying something new, some of her recent projects includes an oil painting of two Palominos by the sea, compiling restored Lancer photos into a disk library, mounting a one-person show of nudes, and writing a column about the film business in Maine. Her Lancer Web site can be seen at <http://www.tvwestern.com>, and some of her paintings at mainewomeninthearts.com.

Any feedback about Geraldine's cookin' can be directed to gaikman@adelphia.net



INTERVIEW WITH ALAN ARMER,

PRODUCER OF 'LANCER'

SEPTEMBER, 24, 2004



BY FAY MITCHELL

QUESTIONS DEVISED BY KAT PARSONS

Dear Fay - Sorry to take so long getting back to you. I'm going to answer as many of your questions as I have time for.

At what point in the show's evolution did you enter the picture?

I was in Hawaii when I received a telephone call from the head of Fox television asking me if I'd be interested in producing a western series. I promised to look at the pilot as soon as I got back to the States.

I ran the pilot, liked it and agreed to produce the series. This was (?) 1968.

Could you explain something of the function of a producer in terms of what we see in the finished product?

I can only describe what I did when I worked as a producer. I spent most of my time working with writers, developing stories. I also spent time casting, sitting in on readings with actors whom I wasn't familiar with, looking at dailies (film that was shot the previous day), running rough cuts (film that has been assembled by an editor), sharpening the scenes, getting rid of bad or awkward moments, getting it down

to size. I hired the directors and frequently went with them to scout locations.

What would you say were your biggest contributions to the development of the series and its characters?

That's too tough a question. Can't answer it without sounding immodest.

Were you actually present on the set all, most, or some of the time?

Some of the time. Not as much as I would have liked.

How much real time passed between filming of the pilot and commencement of filming for the series?

A guess: 10 months to a year.

Viewing these episodes as an adult, I realize that every one of them carries a theme of family in some form, whether family of blood or family of choice. Was this a requirement in the show's bible?

No. This was the choice of the show's producer (me). You'll find some of those

same family values in 'The Fugitive' series which I produced a few years earlier.

The one thing that seems to universally frustrate fans is the relative rarity of episodes in which the brothers operate as a team. Why were so many episodes solo adventures?

A good question. Were I to tackle the series again, I'd have them operate more frequently as a team. There was some jealousy between cast members, brought to our attention by the actors' agents. Andy Duggan's agent actually counted the number of shows in which he had starring or important roles.

What would the third season have brought us? One draft of a third season episode ('Beef to Fort Bowie') has turned up. Were there other scripts already in the works?

Yes, we had additional scripts prepared (not many) in the event of a 3rd season. The show was cancelled because the ratings simply were not high enough. You have to understand that we were at the tail end of the western cycle, following 'Gunsmoke', 'Bonanza' and others. Audiences had begun to tire of westerns.

Were any blooper reels ever made? Was there a series bible?

No blooper reels were ever made. There

was no series bible.

Was it intended to bring Chad on as a third season regular, or was he to remain a recurrent character?

Yeah. We were trying to revitalize the series, to give the network a reason to continue Lancer for a 3rd year.

Any comments or memories you would like to share regarding the late Andrew Duggan?

Andy was a good guy, a solid actor and a marvellous narrator. He was also a good personal friend. Weird fact: his wife Betty died about six months after he did.

Any comments or memories you would like to share regarding the late Paul Brinegar?

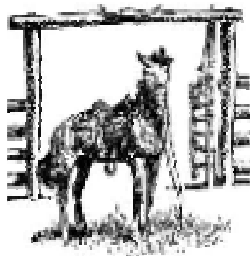
He gave us the opportunity to introduce some humor into the series. Also he is an archetypal character. (See Karl Jung)

How was the atmosphere on the set?

Generally good.

Fay - That's all the time I have right now. I'm happy to answer your questions and I'm delighted at your interest in the 'Lancer' series. Think I told you that I was in Sydney a couple of years ago and loved it. Much good luck to you - Alan

Send any comments for Fay to faymitch@hotmail.com or Kat to calamity0412@yahoo.com



Please continue to Part 3!