

# GHOST THOUGHTS

## BY BUTTERCUP



Teresa covered the dough with a cloth and wiped her hands on her apron before taking it off and draping it over the back of a chair. She should have gone straight to bed, but had been reluctant to, knowing that sleep would not easily come this night. Instead, she had gone down to the kitchen to tell Maria that she would take care of any cleaning up that was left to do, and prepare the dough for the morning's biscuits. When she had entered the kitchen she had been surprised to find both Maria and Cipriano, Maria's husband, in the kitchen.

It was easy to know what they had been discussing, even if the looks on their faces hadn't given them away. Everyone was talking about the same thing—Johnny and Scott leaving for Kansas in the morning.

Just the thought sent a shiver of apprehension up Teresa's spine, and she hugged herself, drawing in a deep, steady breath.

She had tried hard not to show her fear and concern, aware that Johnny and Scott had worries enough of their own. And Murdoch—

She shook her head, forced herself back to the tasks at hand, and crossed to the stove where she checked the coals. Satisfied that the fire was well banked, she set about extinguishing the four oil lamps.

Yes, Murdoch seemed to be handling the coming departure worst than any of them. For two weeks now he'd been short and curt with everyone, including herself. He'd thrown himself into a series of intense physical labors, which a man of his age and position had no business doing, as if the concentration required of the everyday paperwork wasn't enough to keep his thoughts from straying to the impending event.

And the most telling of all was the simple action of saying that he was sorry when he lost his temper or snapped at someone.

Murdoch never apologized.

It was something everyone who knew him came to realize—and you either learned to accept it or you didn't. It made no difference to him. And it wasn't because he was necessarily rude. It was just that he saw nothing to be gained from a verbal display of remorse. His position was simple. If you make a mistake, you learn from it and go on. He saw nothing useful, or practical, about looking back.

But now he had apologized at least four times that Teresa knew of in the last two weeks, one of which was to her. And that apology, more than anything, over a simple remark about supper not being ready on time, told her just how worried Murdoch really was.



With a last glance around the kitchen, she left, pausing in the hall to glance into the great room. All was dark and quiet.

She glanced up the stairs, the faint glow from the one hallway lamp flickering along the walls. Gathering her skirts, she walked up the steps, her thoughts turning to Scott.

That Scott would be harboring anxieties regarding the upcoming trip to Kansas was a surprise to no one. Though he had attempted from the first not to allow his anxiety to show, the drawn-out departure date (of necessity for both Johnny's health and the needs of the ranch) had worn away at his tenacity. And as the day approached, Teresa had caught the unguarded look of panic more often on his handsome face. And then he would notice her watching him and would flash her an awkward smile, one that acknowledged all their fears, yet was tempered with optimistic hope.

At the door to Scott's room, Teresa paused and listened, determined to go in if she heard any movement, as she doubted he was asleep. But there was no sound coming from within, and she resumed her way, pausing for just a moment outside Johnny's room.

Not that she expected to hear him up. If anything, while the impending trip wrought havoc with Murdoch, Scott and even her own emotions, the closer the date came, the more calmly determined Johnny seemed to become. And she didn't like it.

She hated watching the change come over him, subtle though it was. For it reminded her too much of the other Johnny—the hardened gunfighter who had first shown up at Lancer with deep resentments. Back then, he had often times retreated into the persona of the gunfighter, but over the course of two years, that need had seemed to abate.

But then, almost six months ago, he had become that person again. Or—no—she mentally corrected herself. Not the Johnny Madrid he had been, but the Johnny Madrid he would have become, as Scott had explained.

The memories of those two months, when Johnny had disappeared and Scott and Murdoch were at odds about what—if any—action to take, then the subsequent discovery of finding out Murdoch had been right and Johnny had returned to his former life, came back to her in the darkened hallway.

It had been very difficult for Teresa to hear the details of the events in Soledad. The knowledge of the horrifying abuse—mental and physical—that Johnny had been subjected to, had left Teresa unable to sleep for nights. And while it hurt to know that she hadn't been there to help, this feeling was tempered by the knowledge that Scott had been there for Johnny in his need.

When they had returned, there had been many changes. And the best by far, in Teresa's opinion, was Scott's newfound self-assurance regarding his role as Johnny's brother. An understanding had developed between them while they were in Soledad, an understanding born of experience and loyalty successfully defended. While this didn't lessen the anxiety of the coming trip to Kansas, it seemed to bestow on them a shared power.

Teresa continued down the hall to her room where she opened the door, letting the hall light spill in. She went to the table, struck a match, and lifted the chimney of the bureau lamp and lit it. Then after closing the door, she went to the window and drew the curtains closed. For a moment she bent her head, her fingers lingering to sorrowfully caress the lace in a silent remembrance of her father. Then she shook her head, sighed, and began to undress.

Moments later, she was crawling under the covers, drawing them up to her chin, her eyes staring wide in sleepless anticipation of the day to come.



Murdoch lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, his expression grimly set, his thoughts racing maddeningly over the last four hours. And no matter how hard he tried, he could not get them corralled and under control. This irritated him...*really* irritated him. A pure waste of time and energy, and he *hated* waste.

Clenching his fists, he took a deep breath, and mentally tried to force himself to relax.

Johnny and Scott were leaving in the morning, and it was doing no one any good for him to torture himself like this. He needed to remain dedicatedly firm to their mission, and not show any vacillation. Scott and Johnny were counting on him to be their anchor.

*But, God, what if Johnny couldn't prove his innocence?*

*Damn it! There you go again.*

*Get yourself under control!*

With a hiss of disgust, Murdoch determinedly closed his eyes.

He'd done everything possible. A lawyer was already hired and waiting for them, and he'd purchased first-class accommodations on the train from Sacramento.

But he was fighting feelings of guilt about not accompanying them to Kansas, even though Scott had promised to send a telegram the minute they reached Abilene, informing him of the exact situation. If need be, Murdoch knew he could be in Kansas in a week.

It hadn't helped that each time Murdoch brought up the possibility that he should accompany them, Johnny would quickly reject the idea and then begin to express doubts about even having Scott come along. And there was no way, in either heaven or hell, that Scott was going to stay behind. Which was just as well, because Scott had the knack for opening doors and gaining people's confidence. His good looks and manner put people at ease, while Murdoch acknowledged that he sometimes had the opposite effect.

It was still difficult, though. He could tell how deeply Scott was being affected by the upcoming trip, the anxiety behind his eyes had been increasing daily since the actual departure date had been set.

Murdoch hissed a teeth-clenched groan and drew his arm across his face.

Johnny just had to clear himself of that bounty. Their future as a family depended on it. And if he couldn't...

Murdoch abruptly sat up to glare across the shadowy room toward the far wall. He couldn't even finish the thought—because to even think it would acknowledge its possibility.



Cipriano looked up from the terracotta mug in his hands and inhaled the deep rich smell of the warm coffee.

“¿Dónde va a parar?” (Where will it all end?)

“A decir verdad, no sé.” (To tell the truth, I don't know.) Maria sighed unhappily as she returned the coffee pot to the back of the stove in the small kitchen.

“En el peor de los casos—” (If worse comes to worse—)

“¡Ojo con lo que dice!” (Watch what you're saying!)

“Maria, debemos considerer el asunto en grande.” (Maria, we must consider the matter as a whole.)

“Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho.” (It's easier said than done.)

Cipriano nodded, his own expression a mirror of his wife's. “I know, Maria. I know.”

“He is still my little Juanito,” Maria said, her voice heavy with sadness.

“He is still your little Juanito,” Cipriano agreed, smiling slightly. “He will always be your little Juanito.”

“I helped bring him into this world.”

Cipriano nodded. “Sí. I remember.”

“He was a good little boy,” she said wistfully. “You remember.”

Cipriano chuckled. “He was good. But he was also quick as lightning and sharp as a pin.”

Maria smiled back. “You do remember.” Then she sighed, her gaze wandering absently about the cozy kitchen. “I wish he didn't have to leave.”

Cipriano put a hand out, beckoning her to come sit beside him on the bench. “They will be together, Juanito and Señor Scott.”

Maria nodded. “It is good that they are going together. Juanito needs his brother.”

“And Señor Scott, he needs Juanito.”

Maria sighed. “They have been through hell together.”

Cipriano nodded, added his own sigh to hers. “You could see it in Scott’s eyes after they returned from Soledad.”

“He understands now,” Maria added.

“Sí. He understands now.”

Maria worried her bottom lip. “Scott has glimpsed the evil that Juanito has fought against since he was taken from us.”

“That he still fights,” Cipriano stressed.

“And must atone for,” Maria added with emphasis.

“Sí. And so he must begin by facing his ghosts in Kansas.”

“Sí. I know. But I wish—I wish that he didn’t have to go. But it will be okay. God sent his protection.”

Cipriano glanced down at the coffee cradled in his hands. “Have you ever seen the medallion?”

Maria shook her head. “No. Not since the accident. I saw him wearing it when he arrived here, and a few other times.”

Cipriano paused, took a quick sip of the coffee. “I saw it once.” He didn’t need to look up to know his wife was looking at him in wide-eyed amazement.

“Cipriano. When?”

“Scott carries it with him. He was looking at it when I came upon him a few days ago,” Cipriano said, looking up. “He—he at first seemed embarrassed that I’d seen him with it, but then—then he let me look at it.”

Maria leaned closer. “You held it?”

Cipriano shook his head. “No. No, he held it.”

“But you looked at it. You saw it closely.”

Cipriano nodded.

“What did it look like?”

Cipriano hesitated, his expression serious and foreboding. “There was nothing left of it, Maria. It was—” He shook his head. “There’s no way Juanito should be alive.”

Maria nodded soberly.

“And I said so to Scott.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said, ‘I know.’”

A faint look of surprise flashed across Maria’s face, to be replaced with a quiet look of affirmation. “He believes, too. I thought so. Sometimes, when Juanito doesn’t know it, I’ve seen Scott watching him. And the look on Scott’s face—it’s acceptance and belief—and the realization of his part in guiding his brother to his future.”

“But Juanito, he doesn’t believe.”

“He’s not ready to accept God’s help yet. But he’s learning. He’s accepting Scott’s help.”

“But I fear they will continue to need Saint Francis’ protection. He needs to have faith in that protection.”

“Scott has faith for both of them.”



A young man in the dark robes of a priest leaned back in the carved wood chair and sighed heavily as he tiredly rubbed his eyes. On the well-worn desk before him lay a scattered assortment of papers, books and two open Bibles, illuminated by two oil lamps placed at opposite ends of the desk. The faint glow from a dying fire in the hearth offered faint light and little warmth, while the four wall lamps remained unlit, attesting either to the frugality of the inhabitant or to the possibility that the priest had been so caught up in his work that he hadn’t been aware that night had long ago taken hold, as the one window in the room, which had probably earlier shed light onto the priest’s desk, now revealed nothing other than the reflected glow from the two desk lamps and the faint shadow of the slumped figure.

The priest closed his eyes, leaned his elbow on the arm of the chair and covered his face behind his eyes, as much from exhaustion as to hide the words scrawled on the papers before him. For a long moment he sat thus, unmoving, silent. Then slowly he drew his hand away from his face and gazed in wearied defeat at the scattered evidence of the hours spent.

With a sigh, he leaned forward, planted his elbow firmly on the desk, rested his chin in his palm, and drew one of the sheets to him. With a grim set to his jaw, he reread his notes, the index finger of his right hand stroking across specific lines, as if he wished he could rub the ink off the pages...the words out of existence....

*Proverbs 24:11, Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.*

Why was this sermon so difficult to write? It should have been easy—a topic on John the Baptist’s preaching.

*Psalms 82:4, Rescue the poor and needy from the grasp of evil men.*

Yet his mind kept wandering, the verses and references which usually came easily, now seemed elusive.

*James 4:17, Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.*

In irritation he gritted his teeth and shoved the paper away, grabbed up one of the two Bibles and randomly flipped the pages, his eyes coming to rest at the top of the page.

*Proverbs 29:16, When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall.*

With a loud groan, he snorted, “Maybe I ought to preach on the Apocalypse—And everyone died and they lived happily ever after.”

“What?”

Startled, and not a little sheepish, the priest glanced up to find another, older priest standing in the doorway. He was shorter and stockier, his tonsured hair almost completely gray, and the frown on his face made the younger priest want to bow his head like a wayward schoolboy. Yet he kept his gaze steady, returning the frown with a casual gesture. “I thought you were in bed, Father Sebastian.”

“I could say the same about you, Father Francisco,” the older priest replied, stepping into the room, his eyes taking in the disarray of notes and books. “You appear to be having some problems with your sermon. Would you like some help?”

Francisco shook his head and began to draw the papers into a pile. “No—no. I’m about done.”

“What’s the topic?”

“Topic?” Francisco echoed as he busied himself with arranging the desk. “Ah, the on-going battle between good and evil.”

“Ah-ha,” Father Sebastian said. “A good standard. Though I thought you had mentioned you were going to talk on John the Baptist’s preaching in the wilderness.”

“Yes, well, I believe the Lord’s leading me in a different direction,” Francisco replied with a wry glance at the notes piled in front of him.

“More than once has that happened to me,” said Father Sebastian. “Here,” he added, bending over to pick up a folded piece of paper from off of the floor, “I believe you’ve dropped this.”

Francisco quickly reached out, taking it. “Thank you. I must have knocked it off the desk. I’m afraid I let my research overtake the available space,” he explained as he laid the paper on the top of the pile, his hand resting on top.

“Isn’t that the letter you received yesterday?” Father Sebastian asked. “From someone up north, wasn’t it?”

Francisco nodded casually. “Yes. Just a letter from an old friend.”

Father Sebastian paused, seemed ready to ask something, then folded his hands and nodded. “It’s good to hear from old friends.” His eyes returned to Francisco’s hand positioned atop the pile of notes and the folded letter. At the look, Francisco forced himself to draw his hand away to clasp it in front of him in a more passive stance.

“Yes, it’s good to hear from old friends,” he agreed.

“Well, then—” Father Sebastian dragged his eyes from the desk to Francisco, his expression composed. “I guess I’ll leave you to your study. The hour is late and I obviously require more sleep than you do.”

Francisco dipped his head in acknowledgement. “I apologize if I kept you up. I hope not to be too much longer.”

Nodding, Father Sebastian turned and left.

Francisco waited until the older priest had closed the door before he looked back down at the folded letter. After a slight hesitation, he picked it up and opened it, rereading its contents in entirety, though he could have recited it verbatim.

*Cisco*

*Just thought you’d like to know that I received word from Scott the other day. He and Johnny are heading to Kansas next month, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I don’t know about you, but the whole thing has me nervous. Stanton’s gotta want Johnny’s head pretty damn bad if he’s raised the bounty that much. I just hope Johnny’ll get a chance to tell his side before they go building the gallows. Anyway, thought you ought to know.*

*Harley*

“Thought you ought to know,” Francisco murmured softly to himself. He sighed, raised his eyes to stare without any real interest across the room to the softly glowing embers. “Yeah, Harl. I’m



afraid the whole thing has me a bit worried, too,” he added in the same tone, sighed again, glanced down at the letter and refolded it. This time he slid the paper into the folds of his robe.

“Ah, Juanito,” he whispered. He glanced down at the desk, picked one of the Bibles up, patted its cover then drew it against his chest. “Where’s our answer?”

Closing his eyes, he stood silent and motionless, his tonsured head bent. Even with his eyes closed, he would have known which Bible he held. He knew the smell, the feel. And his thoughts returned to Padre Simon, the priest who had instinctively known there was a connection between Brother Francisco and Johnny Madrid, the gunfighter.

“Padre Simon,” Francisco murmured. “You would have known where my answers are.”

With a dismal shake of his head, Francisco opened his eyes and reverently set the Bible on the desk. “You knew how to guide without preaching. A gift, I fear, I lack.”

He glanced dismally at the stack of papers, shook his head, then bent over to put out one of the oil lamps. After banking the coals in the fireplace, he picked up the second lamp and the Bible and walked out of the room. In the hallway he started to turn left toward his sleeping quarters, then abruptly turned right, heading out a door to the outside.

In the darkness, he paused to let his eyes adjust. The faint sliver of a new moon offered little in the way of illumination, though the sky was clear, the stars forming a canopy of bright pin-points. He held the lamp up, and followed the path toward the church across the courtyard.

The church glowed softly, reflecting the light from the lamp with its freshly scrubbed stucco whitewash. Francisco smiled to himself, pleased with the visual sign of his parishioners’ eagerness to express their devotion and piety, a labor just recently completed. Though his flock was average in size, he liked to think they were above average in devoutness and dedication, something which had brought Father Sebastian as an observer to his parish two weeks earlier.

Francisco opened the door and stepped into the small vestibule. In the darkness, the smell of wood oils and incense seemed stronger. Without pausing to light any of the wall sconces, he made his way into the sanctuary, stopping only to dip his fingers in the font of holy water and cross himself before continuing down the aisle.

As he walked, the light from the lantern rocked the shadows like waves among the pews, flashing rhythmically against the walls, illuminating then plunging into darkness the tiled frescoes depicting the Stations of the Cross.

When he reached the last pew he stopped, bending to set the lantern on the floor to the side. Then with bowed head and Bible still clasped to his chest, he stepped up to the altar railing and knelt, crossing himself.

After a moment of silent prayer, he crossed himself again before lifting his eyes to the carved wood crucifix, its dark, polished wood gleaming in the lantern light.

“There will be no sleep for me this evening,” he murmured. “For you see, my friend is journeying toward his redemption. And while that brings me peace, it also brings me remorse for the responsibility I bear. Though I don’t believe he blames me, I still blame myself. I perpetrated his transgressions, allowed him to be lead astray. In fact, my guilt is more grave, because I fully understood the consequences, I knew we were playing with fire—playing with our very souls. And when I could bear it no longer, I found the strength to turn away—yet I left my friend to follow the path of death.” Francisco stopped, bowed his head as he swallowed with difficulty. “Padre Simon—he did more than I did, and he barely knew Juanito. Yet in some ways, Padre Simon knew him better—understood him better. He reached him when I couldn’t.” Francisco slowly looked up, sighed. “I am afraid for Juanito,” he whispered. “Afraid for his life and for his soul.” He reached into the folds of his robe and drew out the letter, holding it out in supplication as he closed his eyes, his expression intent. “Please send Saint Francis to protect and guide Juanito and Scott once again.”

After a long moment all was silent, then Francisco drew in a deep breath and opened his eyes. As he did so, he realized that while he had been absorbed in prayer, he had moved his arm just enough that the Bible had fallen open. Squinting in the faint light, he saw an underlined verse in the center of the page. Pivoting on his knees to enable the light from the lantern to fall more directly on the page, he silently read the verse.

*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*



# TEQUILA SUNRISE

BY AJ BURFIELD



"I can't believe I let you do that to me again!" Scott moaned, dragging his hand shakily through his hair. Even though he'd shaved and struggled into clean clothes, he still looked like something left behind after a cattle stampede.

Always sympathetic in a little brother sort of way, Johnny slapped his distressed sibling on the back, pointedly ignoring the way it made Scott stumble down the hall. "I didn't make ya do anything, brother. You were the one makin' the rules."

"They weren't rules, they were *guidelines*. We didn't have to follow them so closely. I even said so in the beginning. I think . . ." At the top of the stairs, it took the ailing blond two tries to find purchase on the railing. He hesitated, eyeing the steps like they would rise up and bite him.

"Aw Scott, don't be such a poor loser. It don't look good on ya." Johnny smiled perkily and slipped past Scott, headed for the breakfast. He took a big breath, paused mid-staircase, then turned and gave Scott an evil grin. "Mmmmm," he said, rubbing his stomach. "Don't that sausage smell good?"

Turning a pale shade of green, Scott's foot never hit the first step as he quickly whirled and dashed back to his room. Johnny chuckled and fairly hopped down the last of the stair. He swept into the kitchen like a barely controlled dust devil.

"Buenos dias, Juanito! My, you are certainly happy this morning!" Maria tilted her cheek to gladly accept the proffered kiss from her favorite Lancer as her hands continued to fly above the stove. Johnny snatched a tortilla from the skillet and she chastised him affectionately. Then he poured himself a cup of coffee and plopped into his chair at the scarred kitchen table as he attacked the warm tortilla.

"Can't you wait for the rest of us?" Teresa asked, appearing from the pantry with a bowl of spices. She paused and looked around the room. "Where's Scott?"

"Oh, he had to do something in his room," Johnny chuckled. "I don't suggest holding breakfast for him."

The young woman scowled as she handed off the spices to Maria, then she turned to her surrogate brother. "You are bad, you know that? What did you do to your poor brother last night?"

"Me?" Johnny protested, one hand flat on his chest. "I didn't do anything!"

"Oh, Johnny, you know Scott can't drink tequila. I heard from Frank what you did in town during that . . . that . . . 'game'. It's your job to take care of your brother!"



TEQUILA SUNRISE BY AJ BURFIELD

Putting on a properly insulted expression, Johnny accepted his plate, loaded to the edges, from Maria. "Scott's perfectly capable of taking care of himself. He don't need me bein' his mother hen."

"Couldn't wait for the rest of the family?" Murdoch Lancer's voice, even when spoken quietly, filled the kitchen.

Johnny paused before digging in, considering the statement, and then lay his silverware down with a defeated sigh. "Figured I needed a head start. Lots to do, as usual."

Murdoch nodded and sat, his plate appearing on the table instantaneously, and indicated with a wave for his younger son to start eating. Johnny dug in with gusto. "Where's your brother?"

Teresa snorted as she poured her guardian's cup of coffee, causing Murdoch's brows to rise and his focus to shift back to the son next to him. Johnny swallowed his mouthful taking time to consider before replying.

"Oh, he'll be down eventually." Johnny saw Murdoch still regarding him, expecting more. "He's . . . movin' a bit slow this mornin'." He quickly ducked his head to hide the grin, but Teresa didn't miss it.

"You are so mean. Scott's upstairs feeling sick because of you and you're laughing." With a 'harumph' she plopped in her own seat and shook out her napkin, slapping it onto her lap.

Johnny swallowed and looked indignant. "Why is it my fault? He's all grown up and can take care of himself." When Teresa didn't reply, he turned his attention back to his plate. True to Johnny form, he kept his eyes averted from his father until he could gage Murdoch's take on the situation.

He didn't see the sly wink and crafty half grin Murdoch gave his ward before the patriarch turned his attention to his own plate. Teresa ducked her own head to hide her instant smile, looking forward to what Murdoch obviously had up his sleeve.

Murdoch cleared his throat and cut off a bit of egg. "I guess I'm not surprised Scott's not down here, but I am surprised to see you here, Johnny." He forked the egg into his mouth.

Johnny's own fork-filled hand paused in its path to his mouth. After a moment, he ticked his head sideways, looking puzzled. "Why?" he finally asked in a careful tone.

It was Murdoch's turn to pause, his fork hovering over the remains of the egg. "You don't remember last night?"

Puzzlement turned to wariness on Johnny's face. "Last night?" he repeated, hand still frozen in the air. Expressive blue eyes showed he was thinking hard.

"Yes, last night," Teresa said as she rolled her eyes. Maria slipped a plate in front of her and moved back to the crowded stove, obviously oblivious to the deception in progress.

Murdoch gently placed his fork on his plate and picked up his coffee cup. "You do remember what happened last night when you came home, don't you, son? You promised me you'd do something about it."

Johnny's face took on a worried look, and his zesty attack on his plate came to a stop. "Oh," he said eventually, the flash of panic in his eyes quickly doused. He straightened his shoulders and sat up straighter. "That. I can handle it," he finally said with hesitant conviction.

Murdoch nodded sagely and continued to eat. Teresa focused on her plate as if it were the most interesting thing in the room while she got her expression under control. It was very clear that Johnny had no idea what they were talking about – just as Murdoch had planned. Teresa picked up her fork and spoke brightly to keep from laughing.

"Oh, I'm sure you can . . ." She dropped her voice and glanced back to where Maria had just disappeared in the pantry before leaning forward toward Johnny and whispered in a conspiratorial way, ". . . eventually. I'm pretty sure no one's told Maria yet."

Johnny froze a pair of seconds then abandoned eating to toy with his food. His fingers were suddenly clumsy with the silverware.

Glancing surreptitiously at both Murdoch and Teresa, no clues could be found as the pair continued to eat. Clearly ready to bolt, Johnny rose to his feet. Murdoch stopped him with a raised hand.

"And I'd advise keeping away from Cipriano today, son. Just until it blows over." The patriarch calmly returned to his food.

Johnny carefully gathered his plate and handed it off to Maria with a big, but somewhat tentative, smile. The small woman gave the young man a puzzled look as she took the plate. Johnny backed slowly away, escaping to the hall. "Tell Scott there's no hurry! I can handle his work today!" The youngest Lancer's voice faded as he moved down the hall, the sound of him putting on his gun belt clear in the back ground.

"All right," Murdoch called, his eyes sparkling at his ward. He smiled hugely and delivered the coup de gras. "That's probably a good idea. It'll keep you away from Jelly, too."

Teresa slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle her laugh. There was a long moment of silence before the front door opened and closed then Murdoch and Teresa burst out laughing.

"He has no idea that nothing really happened, does he?" she giggled, wiping her tearing eyes.

"No, he doesn't. And that's the beauty . . . or I should say, curse . . . of too much tequila," Murdoch mused sagely. "You can never be too sure what you're going to do or what you did. That's why I stick to scotch."

"Do you think we'll see him for lunch?" Teresa nodded at the stove. "He didn't finish his breakfast."

"I'd be surprised if he was home before dark," Murdoch said airily as he stabbed at the small steak on his plate and prepared to cut it.

"Maybe that wasn't a very nice joke," Teresa said around another giggle.

"Well, we'll ask Scott what he thinks when he comes down, which may not be until this afternoon if I read my drunks right."

Teresa's giggles started all over again as she, too, returned to her food. "I'm sure Scott will appreciate someone looking out for him. Really, Murdoch, when are they going to grow up?"

Murdoch shook his head. "I'm beginning to wonder that myself," he sighed



# I KNOW YOU'LL ALWAYS BE THERE

BY LORRAINE VAN ETTEN



I know you'll always be there  
Whenever I should call. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
To catch me when I fall. . .

I know you'll always be there  
When I need a steady shoulder. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
When my thoughts are turning colder. . .

I know you'll always be there  
When I'm happy and I'm strong. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
When I feel I can't go on. . .

I know you'll always be there  
With your strength, your laugh, your smile. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
To go that extra mile. . .

I know you'll always be there  
To teach me how to live. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
With the courage that you give. . .

I know you'll always be there  
To teach me how to love. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
Like a hand is for a glove. . .

I know you'll always be there  
And if the truth be told. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
Even when we're very old. . .

I know you'll always be there  
For you are my Big Brother. . .  
I know you'll always be there  
For I do not want another. . .

I know you'll always be there  
With your undying love. . .  
And I know you'll always be there  
When Heaven calls me from above



AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT . . .

## ONE NIGHT ONLY

BY JENNIFER KRINKE



*Our author, overcome with complete exhaustion and stress, and frazzled to the ends of her fingertips, due, no doubt, to the uncompromising deadline schedule of a no-nonsense editor and the severe correction of every line of story by a demanding and perfectionist beta-reader, fell asleep atop her keyboard in the wee hours of the morning and had a most curious dream . . .*



It was the first ever Ladies' Night at the one and only saloon in Morro Coyo. Closed to the general public, tonight's event was only for those members of the fairer sex, and it had been gossiped about, discussed, and debated in low whispers and giggles among the ladies of the area for days. Women from Morro Coyo, Green River, Spanish Wells, and farms and ranches for miles around crowded into a space far too small for such a gathering.

Women who normally wouldn't have had a word to say to each other passing on the street chatted and laughed together in a mixture of Spanish and English in easy companionship. Ranchers' wives and farmers' daughters (but none under the age of twenty-one, no matter how much certain young ladies may have pleaded) stood or sat drinking – shockingly, *scandalously* – with over-painted and under-dressed saloon girls. There were schoolteachers, shopkeepers, a host of others, married or single, and one white-haired grandmother who proudly admitted to the age of seventy-four. (“I may be old, but I'm not dead, dearie,” she had said when her blushing daughter-in-law gasped in shock at seeing her there.) But it hardly mattered. Each and every one of them was there for just one reason.

Amid much rustling of skirts, animated conversation, bursts of laughter, and the soft sound of a piano playing in the background, the clock over the bar struck ten, and a door must have opened somewhere for a waft of cooler air cut through the slight haze of cigarette smoke. The noise level rose a little higher, growing louder, quicker, and every face in the room was lit with anticipation.

Sixty-seven sets of female eyes swiveled to the entrance at the back of the saloon and the various conversations just as swiftly died as the evening's main attraction sauntered his way fully into the room. A wave of sighs spread like ripples in a pond as more eyes were able to catch sight of him. Corsets were surreptitiously and hastily adjusted to compensate for deeper breathing, and several women found themselves needing their fans. Then he smiled, that slow as syrup smile, the one that started at one end of his mouth and curled up the other, and more fans came out and a dozen shawls dropped unheeded to the floor in the suddenly too hot room.

Johnny Madrid had arrived.



ONE NIGHT ONLY BY JENNIFER KRINKE



Yes, definitely Madrid. Not Johnny Lancer, the hard-working young rancher, oh no. This was the bad boy gunfighter himself. Sleek and lean. In black leather. Mister Dangerous. Mister Dark and Handsome. And if he wasn't overly tall, well, who was complaining?

"Oh, good gracious," someone breathed. Or maybe moaned. "He's wearing the pink shirt."

The women standing near her nodded enthusiastically. And sighed.

"I've always thought of it as Dusty Rose, myself," one added in a dreamy voice.

"Blush," said another.

"Coral."

"Caribbean Sunset."

"I don't care what color it is," said the first one. "Just as long as he takes it off."

Another round of fervent and enthusiastic nods greeted that remark, and they all craned their heads to get a better look.

The gunhawk continued to ease his graceful way through the crowd, spurs ringing softly, the perfect white grin flashing as he caught the gazes of his admirers. He tipped his hat and murmured, "Ladies," and slowly made a circuit of the entire room. Those women not sitting down felt their knees give way as that devastating smile was aimed in their direction.

"He's not armed, Rachel," the seventy-four-year-old grandmother whispered. "We've got him outnumbered. We could take him."

Her daughter-in-law's eyes got wider. "Mother!" She shushed the older woman hurriedly.

"There, there, dear," she patted Rachel's hand in return. "I was only teasing." Then she added under her breath, "Maybe."

In another corner, a rather short young woman was having trouble seeing over the crowd, and had resorted to standing on a chair. "Up here, Mabel," she urged breathlessly to her friend, "there's room if you don't squirm. I can see *lots* better."

Mabel grabbed her skirts in one hand and stepped awkwardly up on the chair next to her friend, swaying a moment before she found her balance. "Oh, my," she sighed, eyes glazed. "He's . . . he's *smiling*."

"I know. Oh, Lord," she gasped, "he just looked at me, I swear, Mabel, he looked right at me." She put a hand to her forehead in a dramatically appropriate manner. "I think I'm going to faint." The chair wobbled slightly.

Mabel got a grip around her friend's waist. "Oh no you don't, Maude. Besides, he was looking at

me.”

The object of their combined interest, or perhaps rather, raw lust, had by this time finished his slow turn about the saloon, and needless to say, every glance was utterly riveted. Johnny Madrid's dark good looks and sensuous grace had caused many a woman's heart to flutter over the years, but probably never quite so many all at the same time.

“Ladies,” he said again. “What a pleasure it is to be here tonight.” That soft voice rolled over them, a couple more shawls hit the floor, and Maude wasn't the only one who felt like fainting. The Madrid charm was in full force this evening, and it would be a miracle if anyone survived unscathed. “Shall we get started?”

And without further ado, he took his rakishly angled cowboy hat from off his dark hair. Without even bothering to look, he sent it skimming across the room where it came to rest neatly atop the bar.

“This is the, ah, most *successful* fund-raiser for the orphanage I've ever attended,” murmured one especially well-dressed matron, discreetly sipping a glass of whiskey. (She was the mayor's wife, and had come out of what she considered her civic duty. At least, that's what she told the mayor.)

“It certainly beats baking pies,” another woman agreed. “Do you think he'd let me run my fingers through his hair?” she added thoughtfully, eyeing Johnny's dark silky locks. “For the orphans, I mean. If I donated fifty dollars?”

“There was a rumor he might auction off his clothes,” the mayor's wife said. “Of course, I can't swear to that at all. But, oh, I *do* so . . . appreciate . . . those, ah . . . pants.”

The women standing within hearing distance of that pronouncement either gasped or started fanning themselves a just a tad faster or checked their beaded, silken reticules for ready cash.

The piano music, by this time, had gotten a little louder, a little faster, playing something with a Spanish flavor. Johnny had never stopped moving since walking into the room, and now he almost appeared to be swaying, hips and shoulders rolling in time with the music.

The white smile flashed and the blue eyes sparkled. And then with a quick twist and flourish the close-fitting black bolero jacket came off. One minute he was teasingly tugging at the sleeves, and then it was flying across the room to join the hat on the bar.

The first screams were heard at that. Whistles came from the saloon girls. Shouts of “Johnny, Johnny, Johnny!” echoed in the room. Johnny obliged. He started on the top button of the pink (Dusty Rose, Coral, Blush, or Caribbean Sunset) shirt. By the time he was at the third button, somewhere halfway, the chanting had grown louder and the saloon girls were not the only ones whistling. The mood could, quite possibly, be described as “delirious.”

“Oh, good gracious Lord Almighty,” the pink shirt connoisseur breathed. Or maybe moaned. “He really is taking it off. I can't breathe. Oh my.”

Off indeed. Three buttons later, and the pink shirt sailed with unerring aim over the heads of the crowd to land on top of the bar near the jacket and hat. Amazingly enough, no one made a grab for it. They were too busy watching. All that Johnny wore now on his smooth bronze chest was the thin chain with its small gold medallion, glinting and flashing as it caught the light.

The evening's first fainting incident occurred. A prim young schoolteacher, fresh from the East, simply sighed and slid to the floor. Her friends shook their heads sadly over her obviously delicate constitution, then very considerably pulled her out of the way, propped her up against the wall—and surged forward, jostling to take her spot and get a better view.

The sight of that fine set of shoulders, broad . . . muscled . . . shoulders . . . and that smooth chest, by this time covered in a light sheen of sweat, was proving terribly distracting to the average woman's sensibilities. Sixty-one sets of glazed eyes (the faintings continued to take their toll) were completely entranced by the vision of Johnny Madrid's naked torso. The only women not too hot were the under-dressed saloon girls, but even they were looking more than a little flushed.

He may not have been wearing that low-slung gunbelt, but the belt with the silver and turquoise links still circled his slim waist and only served to emphasize his flat stomach and narrow hips. Despite the rising hysteria, the crowd had not failed to observe how perfectly Mr. Madrid's beautiful torso tapered neatly into his waist and slim hips. Nor how exceedingly well his pants fit.

Somewhere along the line, a guitar had joined the piano; the jangle and beat of a tambourine added a wilder flair to the music. Hands clapped along in rhythm, and the chanting was a steady throb.

Still grinning, Johnny flung his head back to shake his hair out of his eyes, and in one swift, graceful movement he vaulted to the top of the long bar that ran the length of the saloon. A mass of bodies pressed forward, closer and closer. He took advantage of the space, moving up and down his chosen stage, while those women fortunate enough to still be conscious drank in the view.

When his hands went to the silver belt, screams went up.

Maude and Mabel fell off their chair, clutching each other's arms. "Get up!" cried Mabel from the floor. "Get up off my dress! I can't see!"

"I'm trying!" shrieked Maude. Amid much entanglement of skirts and limbs, each managed to pull the other to her feet. Maude's jaw dropped. "I've died and gone to heaven, Mabel."

"Oh, Lord," Mabel agreed, eyes wide in her flushed face.

The belt had come off during their brief mishap. Johnny was now swaying suggestively from side to side, hands on hips, as he strutted atop the bar. He made them wait for the next round, waited for the screams to grow almost deafening.

"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny!"

He stopped dead. The long fingers of one hand reached for the top silver stud on his black pants.

“Johnny, Johnny, Johnny!”

“Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeasssssseeeeeee!”

“Don’t stop now!”

“Johnny!”

The first stud was history. There was a teasing glimpse of flesh below the waistline. The second stud followed, every movement exquisitely and agonizingly slow. There didn’t seem to be any air left in the room as the screaming continued unabated. More bronze skin, he turned, a view of his . . . back. Lower. The pants slid just a little lower. He turned again. Nothing but skin beneath those pants. Another stud . . .



*And then, dear reader, the unthinkable happened. The telephone rang. At 3:08 a.m. It awoke our author from her slumber and rapturous dreams. Before she could even reach the source of the interruption, the ringing stopped. We suspect it was that most annoying and untimely visitor from Porlock. We refer you to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his preface to the poem “Kubla Khan,” if you have any doubts. Alas, the dream was over, our author wept tears of rage and loss, and has submitted only this fragment for your reading pleasure . . .*



AUTHOR’S NOTE: Thanks to Moe and AJ, for beta reading and plot (there was a plot?) bunny inspiration. They bear absolutely no resemblance to the aforementioned editor and beta reader in the intro . . . (Inspiration also came in the form of that shirtless scene in “Chase a Wild Horse.” Oh my yes.)



# LANCER QUEST STAR FILL IN SOLUTION

BY JANET BRAYDEN



For the puzzle on page 51

P	A	U	L	F	I	E	R	O			J	O	H	N	M	C	L	I	A	M
I				R																I
P				A							J									C
P				N				D	A	N	T	R	A	V	A	V	N	T	I	H
A				K															S	A
S		J	A	M	E	S	O	L	S	O	N		K	E	N	L	Y	N	C	H
C		A		A									S						A	L
O		M		R	G	A	R	M	S	T	R	O	N	G					R	A
T		E		T									R						O	N
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D							Y					L	I	S	A	J	A	K		C
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# LANCER WORD SEARCH SOLUTION

BY JANET BRAYDEN



For the puzzle on page 88  
Answers in bold italic

S	P	A	N	I	G	R	E	E	N	M	O	R	S	P	A	N	I	S	H	W	E	L	L	S	A
P	A	T	E	S	<i>S</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>N</i>
A	Q	U	I	Z	I	L	A	G	<i>E</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>
N	A	<i>H</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>
I	E	<i>J</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>E</i>
L	<i>L</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>W</i>
U	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>D</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>U</i>
A	<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>G</i>
A	<i>N</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>G</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>
A	<i>E</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Q</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>R</i>
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# GHOSTS IN KANSAS

A PEEK AT A SEQUEL TO THE 'GHOST OF JOHNNY MADRID' SERIES

BY BUTTERCUP



*Johnny gently pulled back on the reins, bringing his horse to a stop at the crest of the small rise. Though he had the use of most any horse on the Double S Ranch, he still preferred his own. The pinto and he had been together for over a year now and had developed a rare and valuable understanding, one of those rare rapports when horse and rider seemed to be able to communicate instantaneously. And in Johnny's business, that could mean the difference between life and death.*

*He slid his feet from the stirrups and stretched out his legs while alternately shrugging and flexing his shoulders. Off in the distance, across the flat, snow-dusted plains, the sun was sinking feebly, having given up its fight against the heavy, gray clouds.*

*It had been a long day, but a productive one. Johnny was well pleased with the way things were going, the changes he and his friends had initiated when they had been hired to work for the Double S Ranch over a month ago.*

*He slid the reins absently through his fingers, vaguely reminding himself that they were getting worn and he needed to braid a new pair. After scanning the horizon once more, he urged the pinto to a slow lope toward the ranch with a murmured, "Pues bien, ¿qué hacemos?" (Well then, what should we do?)*

*Mr. Stanton, the owner of the Double S, had turned out to be a fair and decent man to work for, something which had surprised Johnny. Most of the men in need of the services he and his friends could provide generally lacked scruples. Add to that the fact that their new boss was a fairly wealthy man who was still building his empire made him even less likely to be the type of man Johnny would chose to work for. Mr. Stanton had come to the Kansas territory in the early fifties. Later, when the war broke out, he found himself a widower, raising three children, as his wife had passed away a few years after his youngest was born. The responsibilities of a family and his age of forty-one had made the decision to pay for a substitute an easy one. Still wishing to do his part, however, he concentrated on providing the army with beef.*

*Though the area escaped any outright destruction from the war, it did not escape unscathed. Many area ranches were showing the signs of neglect, as many of the men had gone off to fight. Stanton had taken it on as a personal responsibility to help out where he was able. Two neighboring ranches had been left under the sole care of the wife and children, and he had taken to sending over his men whenever possible to help out. He had also taken over the day-to-day care of a third ranch, which was owned by two brothers by the name of Pierson. They had both enlisted, but before doing so, had entered into a verbal agreement to have Stanton oversee their herds. It had been a natural arrangement, as the ranches bordered*



GHOSTS IN KANSAS BY BUTTERCUP

each other. And Stanton, true to his word, had looked over their interests as he would his own.

Then, about a year before the war ended, he received word that one of the Pierson brothers had been killed and the other captured in a battle at Rocky Face Ridge, Georgia. Still he continued to look after the ranch with the hope that, once the war ended, the surviving brother would return.

And eventually the war did end. While the men folk began to trickle back into the area, bringing their tales of destruction and depravation, Stanton learned that one of the families he had been helping out had lost their father in the last days of the war. Then two weeks later, he was surprised to have one of his ranchhand's return, seething and agitated, from a routine visit to the Pierson ranch. After getting the man to calm down enough to relate what had happened, Stanton had been dismayed to hear that the man had been the recipient of a volley of well-placed warning shots.

According to what his man could tell, close to a dozen men had moved on to the Pierson ranch, and just before laying out their warning shots, they had announced their claim to the land and all livestock running within its boundaries. Unfortunately, a good share of the stock was Stanton's own cattle, as he had freely allowed the two herds to mix, branding the appropriate calves during the spring and fall round-ups.

Having no desire to start a feud, but concerned not only for his own property but also for that which he felt he had been entrusted to oversee, Stanton had gone up to Abilene for the sheriff.

A week later, he and the sheriff rode up to the ranch where they were immediately met by a group of armed men, one of whom introduced himself as Wade Mitchell.

Mitchell produced a title to the land, and in no uncertain terms made it clear that Stanton was not welcome. Over the next few months, Stanton checked into the validity of the claim, but found no way to dispute Mitchell's ownership. However, he did learn that Mitchell had been a guard at the prison where Hank Pierson had been held. He also found out most of the men who worked for Mitchell had been under his command at that same prison.

The bad news did not stop there. Within a couple of months, Mitchell had purchased the small ranch from one of the neighboring widows. And once he had secured and moved onto that land, the hostilities escalated. By the middle of '66, it became clear that Mitchell hoped to someday own the entire area. Over the next year he took over more and more ranches, increasing his herds and holdings, making it clear to anyone who stood in his way that he was not to be deterred. At first, Stanton received the same treatment as any area rancher, but when he realized that the preservation of his ranch would depend on his being able to hold his own against Mitchell, he actively purchased a couple of neighboring ranches. Suddenly he became more than an annoyance.

Over night he became the recipient of nightly raids, poisoned wells and destroyed fences, while his ranch hands found themselves having to check over their shoulders any time they



rode out. Soon it became unsafe to be attached to the Double S Ranch, and Stanton found himself shorthanded.

*It was in the midst of this situation that Edward Stanton began deliberating something he would never have earlier considered—the idea of hiring on guns. But the atmosphere in the community had become so tense, the situation so dire, that drastic measures were needed.*

*It was to this call for guns that Johnny Madrid convinced the others to join him, which in itself was odd, as Cisco was usually the one to recommend their jobs. And while everyone had a vote in the matter, it was rare when they didn't accept Cisco's first recommendation. But after their ill-fated trip to Sierra Blanca where Cisco had been forced to shoot Roberto, who had once been a friend of his, in order to save Johnny, he had not been his old self. While the others had hoped he just needed a bit of time, Johnny feared that something had changed for Cisco that afternoon.*

*Dusk was preparing to relinquish its tentative hold over to night when Johnny trotted into the yard. A few scattered lanterns hung from the porch and outside of the barn, while a warm pool of light spilled out from the barn's interior. Johnny slid off Charco as he reined the horse up.*

*"You're in late."*

*Johnny would have known without even hearing the voice who it was just by the shadow that had moved across the doorway. He turned. Harley, his large frame blocking out most of the light, his hands resting on his hips, was regarding him with a hint of reproach.*

*"Harl," Johnny greeted as he walked forward, shifting the reins from hand to hand as he pulled off his gloves. "You been back long?"*

*"At least an hour," Harley answered, a frown working its way in among his beard as he continued, "See you went out alone—again."*

*When Johnny pointedly ignored the reference, Harley sighed loudly, then nodded toward the house. "Cisco's in with Stanton. Guess the boss is gonna be gone for a coupla days."*

*"Oh?" Johnny replied. "And Wes?"*

*"Over in the bunkhouse. Already had supper."*

*Johnny paused in the doorway where he could now make out Harley's face. "Don't tell me you skipped supper."*

*"Course not!" Harley chuckled. "I just thought I'd come over here and wait for you. They're gettin' set to play cards, and I'm not of the mind to lose any money."*

*"Determined to save it up this time, huh?" Johnny grinned as he led his horse into the barn.*

*“That I am,” Harley agreed. “I’m gonna save my earnings up, get me a spread and a wife, have a whole passel of kids—”*

*“Oh-ho!” Johnny interrupted, taking a swipe at Harley with his gloves as he passed him. “You’re thinkin’ on that Martha gal again, aren’t ya?”*

*“Mary,” Harley corrected as he followed Johnny into the barn.*

*“Mary,” Johnny echoed. “Yeah, she looked like she was tryin’ pretty hard to get that wedding noose around your neck.”*

*“Juanito,” Harley grumbled, “that’s not fair. She’s a really nice gal.”*

*“I’m sure she is,” Johnny conceded as he began to uncinch the saddle. “But I think a better idea would be to have you go along with Wes next time he heads into town, and he can find you someone to take care of those weddin’ urges real quick.”*

*“Juanito,” Harley shook his head, his face going crimson under the rough beard. “You know I ain’t gonna do that.”*

*“Yeah, well,” Johnny paused to grunt as he removed the saddle, “if you did, maybe we wouldn’t have to keep talkin’ you out of getting married.”*

*“It’s not just gettin’ married, Juanito. It’s all of this,” Harley said. “I’m startin’ to think maybe Cisco’s right.”*

*Johnny stopped, turning to look at Harley. “Right about what?”*

*“That maybe it’s time to call it quits. I mean, I’m not really cut out for all of this. I’m thinkin’ more ‘n more that I’d like to do something else—anything else—where you don’t have to worry about somebody takin’ a shot at ya.” Glancing down at the floor, Harley self-consciously ran a finger along the scar on his face, still visible under the rough beard. “I ain’t like you, Juanito. I ain’t fast, I ain’t even that good. And maybe all this shootin’ don’t bother you none. But me,” he looked back up, “I find myself thinkin’ more ‘n more that I’d like to get out of this while I can, while I’m still alive and there’s a chance I can have a normal future, with a wife and kids and a real job. Hell, I’m gettin’ so I don’t care **what** I do, as long as it don’t involve guns.”*

*“Like what?” Johnny scoffed. “A barber? Or how about a bartender?”*

*“Barber, bartender. Makes no nevermind to me,” Harley replied. “Hell, I’d even try my hand as a blacksmith!”*

*“A blacksmith?” Johnny chuckled as he went back to removing the tack. “I can’t see you standing over a hot forge all day, Harl. You hate the heat.”*

*“Yeah, well, I’m hatin’ being shot at even more,” Harley said, shaking his head. “And now there’s that bounty on me in Texas—”*

*“Fifty dollars, Harl,” Johnny interrupted with a snort.*

*“May not be much to you,” Harley retorted in indignation. “But it still makes my blood run cold just knowing Forbes has it out for me enough to be willin’ to pay to have me dead.”*

*Johnny shook his head as he grabbed a hand-full of straw and began to rub Charco. “Don’t go losing any sleep over it, Harl.”*

*Harley watched his friend quietly for a moment. “Don’t it bother you, Juanito? Don’t it make you nervous knowing Forbes is willing to pay a lot of money to see you dead?”*

*“Nope,” Johnny replied without emotion.*

*“It don’t bother you none at all?”*

*“Nope.”*

*“Five hundred dollars is a hell of a lot of money.”*

*“Yup.”*

*“And you still ain’t worried?”*

*Johnny turned around, sighed. “Harl, after all the problems we caused Forbes, I’d be more worried if he **didn’t** have a bounty out on me. And it’s **not** state issued. You know that. And we’re a hell of a long way from Forbes’ territory anyway. So let’s concentrate on the job we got here, okay? Then if you’re still that fired up about seeing that Mary again, we’ll see if we can’t find a job in California.”*

*“California? You’d be willing to go there?”*

*Johnny gave a shrug. “Harl, if you’d quit carryin’ on so, I’d go to the moon.”*

*“Now, that I’d like to see,” a voice interrupted.*

*Harley and Johnny both turned to find Cisco standing in the doorway, a grin on his face. “You’re back late,” he said as he walked forward. “Didn’t have any problems, did you?”*

*Johnny shook his head. “Nope. Very quiet.”*

*Cisco nodded his head. “That’s what I told Stanton.” He paused, watched as Johnny moved around to the other side of the pinto. “In fact, that’s what he wanted to see me about. Wondered if things might be quieting down with Mitchell.”*

Johnny straightened up to glance over Charco's back. "And what'd you say?"

Cisco shrugged. "I said it could be."

Johnny frowned as he stepped around the pinto, one hand resting on its rump. "You said **what?**"

Cisco glanced down. "Well, it **has** been quiet the last few weeks."

"Ah, c'mon, Cisco. You know as well as I do, when dealing with someone like Mitchell, that it won't really be over 'til it's over. He's gonna push and push, 'til either he gets everything he wants, or he's dead. There's gonna be no compromising."

"It always has to be death with you, doesn't it, Juanito?" Cisco shot back, his tone suddenly short and clipped.

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Cuz that's what we do, Cisco. We're **gunfighters**, not bookkeepers or wranglers or cooks. But **gunfighters**. It's why we're hired; why we're **here!**"

"I know that," Cisco retorted strongly.

"Then what's the problem?"

Cisco sighed heavily, all anger suddenly gone. "Maybe I'm just growing tired of it all."

"What?" Johnny managed a grin along with what he hoped wasn't too obviously a forced chuckle. "You getting bored with me?"

"Bored?" Cisco chuckled, though it had the same hollow ring to it. "Boredom is not a word I'd use to describe the time we've been together."

"Well, that's a relief," Johnny quipped, but instead of responding, Cisco turned to Harley.

"What's your opinion on Mitchell?"

Harley glanced uncomfortably from Cisco to Johnny and back. "Well," he hesitated, shuffling his feet. "Maybe after Johnny took care of Mitchell's gun last month, he's realized Stanton's damn serious about hanging on to his ranch, and he really has turned his attention elsewhere."

"Oh, I'm not disputing that," Johnny said as he slipped Charco's bridle off. "But that don't mean once our backs turned, he won't come sneaking up from behind."

Cisco closed his eyes, his head bowed. "Yeah, yeah. I know."

*“So, did Stanton tell you why he’s gonna be gone?” Harl asked, hoping to divert the conversation.*

*Cisco shook off the tension and nodded. “He’s going up to Abilene.”*

*“What for?” Johnny asked..*

*“He didn’t say,” Cisco replied. “We started talking about Mitchell instead.”*

*“So, he didn’t ask for anybody to come along?”*

*Cisco shook his head.*

*Johnny frowned thoughtfully as he hung the bridle up on a peg. “Well, I should probably head on over to the house and talk to him,” he said. “Find out if there’s any other orders.” He rubbed his face, gave a tired sigh, a faint smile of reconciliation on his face. “I think I’ll be glad when Mitchell finally makes his move. This waiting is getting old. I feel like we’ve gone to a lot of trouble to set up a really nice party, only the guest of honor’s not showin’ up.”*

*With a wry nod of agreement, Cisco glanced at the other two men. “Yeah, I guess that’s how I’m feeling.” He let out a faint chuckle as he shook his head. “Must be the dang cold weather.”*

*Johnny laughed. “Whose idea was it anyway, comin’ way up north here?”*

*“Yours,” Harley and Cisco intoned together.*

*“S’pose it’ll be the last time you ever listen to me.”*

*“Yeah, better if you stick to shootin’ and leave the plannin’ to Cisco,” Harley replied.*

*“Nice of you to put me in my place, Harl,” Johnny deadpanned.*

*“Oh, go on over and talk to Stanton,” Harley said, indicating the door with his thumb. “I’ll finish up with Charco here and see you back at the bunkhouse.”*

*“Thanks.” Johnny gave Charco a quick pat and started for the door.*

*“And I’ll have a shot of tequila waiting for you,” Cisco said.*

*Johnny turned and grinned. “That sounds good.”*

*With an offhanded thumbs-up, he headed out into the darkness, glancing casually about the yard as he headed toward the Stanton home.*

*Though his first home had been a small sod hut, time and resources had allowed Mr. Stanton to build a two-story home made of both native stone and wood and plenty large enough to*

accommodate him and his children, along with giving an air of respectability to an up and coming cattleman.

Johnny was just stepping up on the porch to the Stanton home when the front door was yanked open by a young girl of about eleven, her mousy-brown hair escaping from the confines of two braids, only one of which still sported the yellow ribbon which had secured it that morning.

“Johnny!” she squealed in obvious delight, her hazel eyes bright with excitement. “I saw you coming up. I’ve been waiting for you! Did you hear? Isn’t it just great?!”

“Hold on!” Johnny pleaded with a chuckle as he came to a stop. “You’re going too fast. Give me a chance to catch up, would you, Chica-lyn. Now what are you talking about?”

The young girl laughed at the name, tossing one braid back behind her shoulder. “Oh, Johnny! It’s so wonderful!” She put a hand out and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him into the warmth of the house. “It’s Laura! She’s coming home for a visit.”

“Laura?” Johnny questioned. “Who’s Laura?”

“My other daughter,” came the reply.

Johnny looked up to see Mr. Stanton approaching. Although in his late forties, Stanton was still well fit, attesting to the fact that he worked as hard as any of his hired hands. He was of average height and build, with weather-worn, classic features, and eyes that matched his younger daughter—the daughter who was the cause of the indulgent smile now on his face.

“Now Carolyn, why don’t you go get your homework finished. Mr. Madrid and I have some things to discuss.”

Carolyn shot Johnny a look of resignation and sighed. “I’ll see you tomorrow after school, okay, Johnny? You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

Johnny nodded. “Of course not.”

“Promise?”

“Carolyn,” Mr. Stanton interrupted, his tone firm, but not sharp. “Will you leave Mr. Madrid alone? He has important work to do.”

“No, no. It’s okay,” Johnny interrupted with a quick wave of his hand and a grin. “I don’t mind, really. And I did, after all, promise.”

Carolyn grinned at her father, who rolled his eyes with a sigh. “Go on,” he urged with a nod of his head toward the stairs. “And you’d better not come home with any more notes about not knowing your math lesson, or I won’t let you play with Mr. Madrid.”

*“Pa!” Carolyn groaned.*

*“I’ll see you tomorrow, Chica-lyn,” Johnny said then added with a waggle of his finger, “And I expect to see a perfect report now, okay?”*

*With a giggle, Carolyn ascended the steps.*

*“Better not laugh. I’m serious,” Johnny called to the retreating steps, another round of giggles her response.*

*“Oh, you spoil her,” Mr. Stanton admonished, but there was a smile on his face as he turned and walked though the door leading to his study.*

*“I really don’t mind,” Johnny assured as he followed.*

*“No, I know you don’t,” Mr. Stanton nodded before turning to lean back against his desk, his arms crossed. “But I just worry that—well,” he glanced down quickly before continuing, “she’s become quite attached to you. We both have,” he added carefully. “I just worry that it’ll be hard when you have to leave, when...when this situation with Mitchell is resolved.”*

*Though Johnny’s expression remained neutral, he hesitated before answering. When he did, his voice was carefully even. “You’ve been a fair employer, Mr. Stanton. There aren’t many men I can say that about.”*

*Stanton cocked his head to the side. “You know, Johnny. You aren’t at all what I thought I was getting when I hired you.” When it appeared that Johnny was going to interrupt, Stanton put up a hand. “I don’t mean that as any disrespect to your abilities or profession. I just wasn’t prepared to actually like the man I hired to oversee this problem with Mitchell. I figured, in the long run, you were the lesser of two evils.” He stopped to smile in warm amusement. “Instead, I find myself...well, I find myself wondering if I couldn’t persuade you to consider staying on, even after this business with Mitchell is resolved.”*

*Johnny raised an eyebrow. “You’re asking me to stay? After the job is done?”*

*“Well, I know,” Stanton said as he crossed his legs at the ankles and dipped his head, “that just watching over a ranch is probably no where near as interesting as what you’re used to doing. I mean, except for this recent problem, it can be down-right boring.” He smiled wryly before continuing, “But, I mean, I could offer you the foreman job. You’re basically doing it now, anyway.”*

*Johnny hesitated, pursed his lips. He knew Stanton was watching him for some reaction, but he was at a loss for words, the offer had so completely taken him by surprise.*

*“You’re offering me a permanent position here?” he asked, his tone conveying a certain amount of stunned disbelief.*

*“Yes,” Stanton nodded. “And your friends, too, if they’d like,” he quickly added.*

For another moment, Johnny didn't react. Then slowly a faint smile replaced the look of incredulity. "Well, I'll certainly discuss it with them."

"How do you feel about it?"

The smile widened. "Let me think on it."

Stanton nodded, smiling in satisfaction as he let his hands drop to his waist and straightened up. "In the meantime," he said, turning and walking to the chair behind his desk. "I better find out your opinion on how things are going with Mitchell. I talked to Cisco earlier, and he said it's a possibility that he's given up. However, I'd like to know what you think?"

Johnny sighed grimly, crossed his arms. "I know Cisco would like to think it's all over, but—"

"But?"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't think it is."

"Why not?" Stanton asked as he sat down. "The man he'd originally hired to stir things up, that gunfighter of his, is dead. There hasn't been anything from Mitchell for weeks now."

Johnny nodded. "Mitchell's put too much time and effort into his plans to be easily swayed. I think it's just a matter of time before he'll start pushing again."

Stanton seemed to consider the information, nodded thoughtfully. "I was rather afraid of that myself. I, too, would like to see it over with," he sighed, "but I doubt it's going to be so easy." He was quiet a moment, shook his head sadly. "In the meantime, you heard Carolyn say that Laura is coming to visit."

"I'd say she sounds rather excited about it."

Stanton smiled. "Yes. It's been quite awhile—a year and a half now. Laura's been living back East with my sister and going to school, but she wanted to come home for the holidays this year. She's taking the train into Abilene, so I'll be leaving tomorrow morning to pick her up. I don't expect to be back until the following evening, perhaps even the next day if the train is running late."

"Want me to come along?"

Stanton shook his head. "No. I don't expect any trouble."

"Just because you don't expect any, doesn't mean it can't happen."

"I'd just as soon go up alone."

"And I'd just as soon you took someone with you," Johnny argued, confused by Stanton's reluctance.



*“Okay,” Stanton consented. “I’ll take Harry.”*

*“Harry? Harry couldn’t hit the side of a barn if it was within arm’s reach.”*

*“No, but he’s been with me a long time and Laura’s familiar with him.”*

*“Laura? What’s she—”*

*“I’d just as soon not have her—” Stanton shrugged off the rest of the statement. “She’s going to be upset enough, with all this going on.”*

*Johnny frowned. “I think maybe I should go along.”*

*Stanton shook his head. “No, I’ll be more at ease knowing you’re here incase Mitchell does suddenly make a move. I really don’t want anyone else in charge.”*

*“Okay, then, take Wes.”*

*Stanton sighed, slowly nodded. “Okay. I’ll take Wes. But I really don’t expect there to be any problems.”*

*“Neither do I,” Johnny agreed. “But I still think it’s wise.” He paused as he quickly adjusted his thoughts. “Anything I should be aware of while you’re gone?”*

*Stanton shook his head. “Nothing more than the usual. Though I’d like to get that corral by the north-east entrance fixed as soon as possible.”*

*Johnny nodded. “I’ll see to it.”*

*“Oh, and if you don’t have the men busy with that or patrolling, you could have them cleaning up around here.”*

*Johnny looked confused. “Cleaning up?”*

*“I’m having a welcome home party for Laura on Saturday, and the place could use a bit of sprucing up.”*

*Johnny chuckled. “I hadn’t noticed it needed any sprucing.”*

*Stanton joined in. “Neither had I. But Laura would notice those sorts of things.” He chuckled again. “Now, you make sure you keep Saturday night free.”*

*A flash of discomfort crossed Johnny’s face and he winced. “I’m really not one for parties, Sir.”*

*Stanton smiled. “So I’ve noticed. But don’t you think,” he paused to put his hand on Johnny’s shoulder as his smile broadened, “that my new foreman could make an exception?”*

*“I’ll think about it,” Johnny replied.*

*“You do that,” Stanton nodded firmly.*

*With an amused shake of his head, Johnny shot Stanton a half-smile before turning and heading out the door.*

*Outside, Johnny paused on the porch for a few moments. Darkness had won its fleeting battle against the day, and the sounds of the evening hummed with warm familiarity as he headed toward the raucous voices emanating from the larger of the two low, sandstone buildings used as bunkhouses. He was within a few steps of the door when he heard Harley’s unmistakable bark of delight followed by a mixture of hoots of good-natured objection and amused disbelief. Johnny stopped and smiled. Harley had been lured into the game after all. But at least, for the moment, it sounded as if he was coming out ahead.*

*Chuckling, Johnny shook his head and stepped closer to the building. Instead of walking in, though, he positioned himself near the window so that he could view the men gathered about the large, common table. Harley was sweeping a small stash of coins to join his pile, while Wes, grinning widely, was seated off to the side, a drink tipping precariously in one hand as he leaned forward to give Harley a congratulatory pat on the back. With a grin, Harley flipped a coin to Wes in mock deference.*

*Johnny smiled at the sight of the easy-going camaraderie, the warmth of the atmosphere, the familiarity. Perhaps what Mr. Stanton proposed was possible. Maybe they could have a future here. Maybe there was no more need to wander from job to job. Maybe there was something to what Harley said, that it was time to do something that promised more than the exchange of bullets and bloodshed.*

*Then a movement caught his eye, and he saw Cisco moving toward the table, a well-worn book in one hand. As his friend paused to view the progress of the game, Johnny could plainly see his expression and the earlier sense of satisfaction disappeared. At first look, Cisco seemed to be enjoying the diversion as much as anyone else, but Johnny knew him well and could see a heaviness in his eyes, an anxiety uncharacteristic in his otherwise composed and self-assured friend.*

*Johnny took a deep breath, stepped away from the window and turned to walk back to the middle of the yard. There he took another deep breath and tilted his head to look up at the clear night sky, his expression leaden.*

*It was all going to change. It was all going to change, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. His desire to bring everyone up to Kansas for a change of scenery had really been a hope to escape the inevitable. The end was coming; he just didn’t want to admit it, had hoped to stave it off, if for just a little while longer.*

*But it was here.*

Things had changed with Cisco down in Texas. The cool sureness, the incisiveness they had come to expect, was gone. Oh, he put on a good act, talked a good game, but there was a panic in the eyes that had never been there before. And Johnny knew, without a doubt, that if Cisco didn't get rid of his demon, or get out of the business, he'd be dead before too long. Because the next time the ultimate decision of self-preservation showed up, he was going to freeze, and the corpse at the end would be his own.

He'd known—heck, they'd all known for quite awhile—that Harley wasn't cut out for the business. His talk of a normal life, a wife and family and a small ranch of his own, had grown more and more frequent ever since they had spent those few weeks back in California, where he'd become reacquainted with a young gal he had known since childhood. The childhood friend had quite fully blossomed into a beautiful young lady, one who had won the large man's heart. It was just a matter of time, a few months at most, before Harley followed his heart back to California.

And Wes, well, Wes. Johnny snorted, looked back down. Heck, he would be the first to move on. Yeah, while Wes was by far the easiest to please, he was the first to get bored. They'd already stayed longer than usual, and they were just lucky the saloons were varied and the girls even more so. But, before too much longer, even the wiles of the red-heads would lose their flavor, and Wes would be urging for a change of scenery.

Johnny shook his head, let his eyes travel along the ghostly shapes of the buildings huddled tightly against the unrelenting winds of the Plains. He could have found a way to fit in. He could have done a good job here. But it wasn't meant to be. He would go on when they wanted to, after the job was done. Even though he knew the path led to an inevitable end, they were all the future he had. When he no longer had them, he didn't know what he would do, and it wasn't something he even wanted to think about.

“Juanito.”

Startled, Johnny turned, his hand immediately at his hip. Seeing Cisco, his face faintly lit by the moonlight, walking toward him, he shook off the movement with a wry grin. “Didn't hear you come out,” he said.

Cisco chuckled. “No need to worry. You haven't lost your touch. I had just stepped out back, then decided to come look for you.” He stopped near Johnny, his tall, slight build a contrast to Johnny's shorter one. “I thought maybe I ought to apologize.”

“Oh,” Johnny said then gave a quick, dismissive shrug. “No need. It'd been a long day. And, what with this long waiting game with Mitchell, well...”

“Everyone gets edgy,” Cisco finished.

Johnny nodded, glanced toward the bunkhouse. “Sounds like Harley's winning.”

Cisco shot a glance over his shoulder. “Yeah. As long as he doesn't let Wes talk him into a few drinks, he'll do fine. But as soon as he has a few, he always starts losing.”

*“Yeah,” Johnny agreed. “He’s gotta learn when to stop.”*

*“He will,” Cisco stated, pausing before adding, “Stopping can sometimes be difficult, though. Even when you know it’s good for you.”*

*Johnny managed to keep his gaze steady, nodded.*

*“So, you talked to Stanton?” Cisco asked.*

*“Yeah.”*

*“Find out why he’s going up to Abilene?”*

*Johnny shrugged, dragged his fingers through his hair then rubbed the back of his neck. “His older daughter’s coming home from out east somewhere. Guess she’ll be around for the holidays.”*

*“Ah,” Cisco nodded. “Are you going up with him?”*

*Johnny shook his head. “No, he’s gonna take Wes.”*

*Cisco sighed, glanced without interest about the darkened yard. “Too bad this isn’t all over with Mitchell.”*

*“I know.” Johnny hesitated, cautiously ventured, “We’ve been here quite awhile. Everyone’s getting ready for a change, I think.”*

*Cisco nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I heard you tell Harl you’d even go to California. That surprised me.”*

*“Well, if that’s what it takes to make Harley happy.”*

*“Yeah, California would be a nice change.”*

*“Maybe we could even pick up a coupla jobs on the way,” Johnny said.*

*“Sure.” Though Cisco nodded, Johnny noticed it lack conviction.*



*Johnny squinted off into the distance, watching the slow approach of a wagon. As it drew into the yard, Johnny stepped off the porch, calling out with a welcoming wave, “Hey, Chica-lyn!”*

*Seated in the wagon seat next to Mark, her brother, Carolyn waved back enthusiastically.*

*“Hey, Johnny!” she yelled exuberantly, barely waiting until the buggy came to a halt before jumping out. “I’m all ready! Let’s go!”*

*“Oh-ho! Just wait a minute, little Chica-lyn!” Johnny countered as he crossed his arms and studied her sternly. “Let’s see your school report for the day.”*

*“Oh, Johnny,” Carolyn grumbled.*

*“Come on, turn it over,” Mark coaxed as he hopped out of the wagon, his green eyes twinkling mischievously.*

*With a deep sigh of resignation, Carolyn reached dismally into the fold of her wrap to produce a paper which she reluctantly handed over.*

*Johnny grimly accepted it, turning it over to read the remarks. As his eyes reached the end, a smile crept onto his face and he shot Carolyn a look of playful amusement.*

*“Gotcha!” she crowed, pointing her finger.*

*“That’s what you think,” Johnny said as he playfully flicked one of her braids.*

*“You thought I’d gotten bad marks,” Carolyn taunted with a smirk.*

*“On the contrary,” Johnny contradicted. “I had no doubt that you could be the perfect student. And now I have the proof.”*

*“Johnny!”*

*“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah!” Johnny laughed, holding the paper over his head as he carefully folded it. “This is important information.”*

*Carolyn took a couple of futile jumps, then put her hands on her hips. “Johnny Madrid. You’re not playing fair.”*

*“Maybe not,” Johnny agreed as he slipped the paper into his jacket pocket. “Now you run on in quick and change, and I’ll meet you in the barn.”*

*Carolyn’s face broke into a wide grin. “I’ll just be a minute!” She turned and dashed into the house.*

*“I still can’t believe how she’s changed,” Mark said as began to unharness the horses.*

*“It just takes time and patience,” Johnny said, watching the tall, lanky young man.*

*“Yeah, well, we all tried for years and got nowhere,” Mark remarked. He stopped what he was doing and looked toward the house. “Getting thrown like that, when she was only six, and breaking both legs, really scared her away from horses. She wouldn’t even go near*

them. And now," he turned and shook his head in wonder at Johnny, "you have her leading that paint of yours around, even helping groom him."

"Charco's a good horse."

"Maybe," Mark agreed, turning back to his work. "But I think it has just as much to do with you as with that horse of yours. I don't know. It just seems like she trusts you more."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Johnny replied. "I think maybe she was too used to all of you trying to coax her onto a horse, trick her into liking them again. I didn't do a thing. I just let her do it."

Mark cocked his head. "So, when do you think you'll get her up on one?"

"When she does," Johnny answered simply as he started toward the barn

"Hey, Johnny!"

Johnny turned back. "Would you be free to help me with my shooting after you're done with Carolyn? I've been working on it."

"I'll see. If it hasn't gotten too dark."

With a grin of satisfaction, Mark turned back to the horses.

A short while later, Johnny was checking Charco's hooves while Carolyn was sweeping out the stall.

"Laura can ride really well," Carolyn said, a hint of envy in the statement. "Papa says she was born on a horse."

"Oh, I got some doubts about that," Johnny laughed as he lowered the last hoof to the floor and stood up.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Carolyn giggled as she walked out of the stall. "But I sure do wish I could ride like she does."

"Maybe someday you will," Johnny replied as he led Charco a few paces down the length of the barn.

"I don't think so."

"Hmmm," Johnny muttered to himself as he cocked his head, his attention on Charco's legs.

"What's wrong?"

*"I'm not sure. Seemed to me earlier that something was wrong with Charco's gait. But it's hard to tell. The hooves looked fine. Here, do you notice anything?" he said as he began leading the horse down the aisle again.*

*"I really don't think so," Carolyn said, her face screwed up in concentration as she scrutinized Charco's walk. She looked up. "Maybe it'd be better if I lead him and you look."*

*Johnny nodded. "Good idea." He turned and walked back, holding out the reins to Carolyn. "Just walk him down that way, so I can get a good look."*

*As Carolyn led Charco down the aisle, Johnny studied the gait with intense interest. He then had her make a couple more passes before announcing his satisfaction. "I think it must have just needed a good cleaning. Everything looks just fine," he said. "Thanks for the help, Chica-lyn."*

*Carolyn smiled. "Charco's such a nice pony," she said as she reached up to rub his nose. "I wish all the horses were like him. Most of the horses around here are kind of wild."*

*"Well, they're cowponies," Johnny explained as he hauled Charco's saddle off the railing near the stall. "They have to be a bit high-strung for the type of job they do."*

*"Yeah, I suppose," she said, her tone clearly conveying her dissatisfaction with cowponies as a whole. "Laura wouldn't be afraid of any horse," she stated softly after a long pause.*

*Johnny raised an eyebrow as he adjusted the positioning of the saddle, then bent over to grab the cinch. "Laura's pretty great, huh?"*

*"Oh, yes," Carolyn nodded. "I wish I were more like her."*

*"What? Less perfect?"*

*"Oh, Johnny," Carolyn laughed. "You'll see. She's much more beautiful, and she's really smart and...and, well, she isn't afraid of horses."*

*Johnny turned and regarded Carolyn with a doubtful look as he crossed his arms. "More beautiful than you?" He shook his head. "I highly doubt that. And who got the perfect grade in school today? Hmm?"*

*Carolyn laughed. "But she can ride."*

*"And you can, too, once you've decided to."*

*Carolyn expression grew somber. "What if I never decide to?"*

*Johnny shrugged as he went back to tightening the cinch. "Just means you decided not to. Not that you can't."*

Carolyn was quiet a moment. “Johnny?”

“Huh?”

“Have you ever been afraid of anything?”

Johnny cocked his head, regarded Carolyn out of the corner of his eyes a moment before straightening up to give her his full attention. “Well, I guess I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Well, Chica-lyn, that’s kinda hard to explain.”

“You’re not gonna tell me, are you?”

“Nope,” Johnny replied, firmly and dryly.

“Why not?”

“Cuz it’s like I said, it’s kind of hard to explain.”

“That’s hardly fair. You know what I’m afraid of.”

“No, it isn’t fair,” Johnny agreed simply. “But then, a lot of things aren’t.”

“You’re always saying that.”

“I say it, ‘cuz it’s true.”

Johnny turned back to finish with Charco, while Carolyn regarded him thoughtfully, watching as he gently stroked the animal’s nose.

“You know, Johnny. It’d be really fine if I could show Laura that I can ride again.”

“Yup. That would be something,” Johnny agreed with a simple nod.

There was a pause. “I—I think I’d like to try it.”

“Nope.”

“What?”

“I said, nope.”

Carolyn hesitated, perplexed. “Why?”



“Well,” Johnny turned and regarded Carolyn seriously. “For one thing, you’re doing it for the wrong reason. You’re doing it for your sister, not for yourself. Second, you just **think** you want to try it. When you **know** you want to do it, then you’re ready.”

Carolyn was silent a moment. Then a slow smile spread across her face. “Johnny. I **know** I want to do it.”

Johnny smiled back. “What say we compromise, then. You just sit up on Charco for a few minutes while I lead you around. It’d give me an extra chance to check his gait.”

“I like that idea, Johnny.”

The next day, Johnny leisurely guided Charco along the western edge of the property. He wasn’t really sure why he continued to ride out alone, especially after all his rules to the rest of the crew about the necessity of riding in pairs. While Cisco gave him a difficult time about his independent attitude and Harley stewed about the danger, Wes had come closest to the truth. He accused Johnny of trying to hog all the fun by drawing Mitchell out into a fight he couldn’t resist. And while he wasn’t actually trying to start trouble, there was something about knowing he was out by himself, without anyone to back him up, which brought an intensity to his rides, a tangible feeling of danger which energized him. He thrived on it—needed it. So often he went through the motions of his job with no real connection to the reality of the risk involved, but these excursions by himself, with the exposure he allowed—he, in fact, purposely tempted—made him feel more alive than anything.

As he rode, his eyes scanning the countryside, he thought back on the previous evening’s events. He’d been quite pleased with the progress Carolyn had suddenly made. He hadn’t let her ride for long, hoping that by keeping it a short, positive experience, she would be eager to continue. And she had been quite pleased with herself, too. Even asking him to keep the whole thing a secret, so that she could eventually surprise Laura.

But the thing that his thoughts kept returning to was Carolyn’s innocent question to him, her desire to know what he was afraid of.

She would have been surprised to hear the reason he hadn’t told her.

He hadn’t told her, because he didn’t know.

He knew he was afraid of something; he could feel it, deep down in his chest. There was a tight panic that showed up at the most random times: in the middle of the night, just walking down a street, in the middle of a meal or a conversation—never at the predictable moments. Not before a gunfight, or while riding into a strange town, or even while riding out in the open like this when he was quite literally goading Mitchell’s men into taking a shot at him. That’s not when the feeling would hit. But it was real, and it was a fear. Only he couldn’t seem to discover what the source of that fear was.

As he drew Charco up, he swiveled in his saddle to make a full sweep of the area, planning to turn back toward the ranch, when he spied a rider approaching. At first he took it to be

Cisco, from the tall, lean figure in the saddle, but within seconds he could tell that it wasn't Cisco, but Mark. He clicked Charco around and started toward the approaching figure, unconcerned as Mark's pace didn't indicate any urgency.

"Johnny!" Mark greeted when he was within distance.

"You're out alone," Johnny observed curtly.

Mark raised an eyebrow, opened his mouth to protest that he wasn't the only one, when he seemed to think better of it and gave a shake of his head. "Benj is waiting for me. Saw you from the rise back there."

"So, what do you want?" Johnny asked.

"I was wondering, after you're done, if you'd help me with my shooting like you promised. It got too dark last night, remember?"

Johnny nodded, crossed his arms to rest against the pommel. "So, you think you're getting good?"

"I sure do. Not as good as you, of course, but I've done everything you told me."

"Everything, huh?"

Mark nodded. "I'd like to show you. I've been practicing dang near two weeks now."

Johnny suppressed a smile. "Two weeks, huh? Okay. I tell you what. I wanted to go check on that fence line your father asked me to check before he left, then I'll meet you at the target range after lunch."

Mark smiled. "That'd be great, Johnny. You'll be surprised how much I've improved."

"That remains to be seen," Johnny replied without humor. "I don't surprise easy. Now you get on back to the ranch. And next time you decide to go wandering about, you'd better have a playmate."

Mark nodded grimly, adding as he turned his horse. "I'll see you in a little while, though, right, Johnny?"

"I said I'll be there," Johnny said, adding with a flicker of a smile. "Now, go on."

Mark caught the faint smile, returned it in force, and urged his horse into a gallop.

Later in the afternoon, Johnny and Mark were standing in a shooting range which had been constructed for use in teaching Stanton's men better marksmanship. It had been used quite often in the first few weeks after Johnny had been hired, but since then, other than an occasional cowboy having a bit of target practice, it rarely saw any use, both because the

*weather was turning colder and also because hostilities had cooled between Mitchell's men and the Double S ever since Johnny had taken down Mitchell's hired gun.*

*The range was situated near enough to the main buildings to be of practical use, but far enough away not to be an audible or dangerous nuisance. Bales of hay formed a tall backdrop for stray bullets, while assorted cans, posts, logs and even one crude scarecrow made up the varied targets.*

*Mark, anxious to prove his claim of progress, eyed the line of cans he'd already positioned along the top of a wooden railing. Then while Johnny watched him wordlessly, Mark nervously adjusted his stance, scrutinizing the cans a moment more, before suddenly drawing and firing off six rounds, every single one missing its target, though the last one wobbled for a second.*

*"See! I'm getting fast!" Mark turned around, a grin on his face, which immediately fell at the sight of Johnny's unconcealed amusement.*

*"What the hell was that?" Johnny demanded, his hands settling on his hips while he sourly eyed the targets.*

*"What do you mean?" Mark asked, the question quickly losing its faint, optimistic tone at the sight of Johnny's unimpressed expression.*

*"What's with the fast-draw?"*

*"The fast-draw?"*

*"The fast-draw," Johnny repeated with a gesture toward the gun in Mark's hand. "What are you doin' that for?"*

*"Well," Mark glanced over his shoulder at the line of cans, "I was practicing like you told me."*

*"Like I **told** you?" Johnny echoed with a snort. "When'd I ever tell you to practice a fast-draw?"*

*"Well, that's how you shoot," Mark countered.*

*"Yeah, that's how **I** shoot. But I got people drawing on me. You're shootin' at cans! And unless I'm mistaken, not a one of them is shootin' back."*

*Mark frowned. "Well, I want to be fast, too."*

*Johnny hissed and shook his head. "You can worry about that later. For now, I want you to just practice hitting the target. It's not gonna do you a damn bit of good to be able to outdraw someone if you can't hit them. Now, just do like I said and practice shooting the cans. No fast-drawin'."*

Mark sighed. “Well, I **can** do better if I just aim.”

“Then show me.”

Mark quickly refilled the chamber with bullets. Then with a deep breath he took careful aim and fired off the six rounds. This time one can flipped through the air to land in the dirt.

Johnny pointed toward the fallen can. “Now **that’s** what I need you doing. And when you can get all six, you let me know, and I’ll show you what to work on next.”

“All—six?” Mark faltered as he sent a crestfallen look toward the remaining cans.

“At least five of the six, okay?”

Mark nodded dismally as he studied the gun in his hand. “Do you think I’ll ever be good?”

“Well, you’re already better than you were,” Johnny said, a smile of encouragement softening the harshness of his words. “The only way you’d have been able to knock over a can when I first met you was with a stick.”

Mark laughed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Chuckling, he slid the gun back into its holster. “But can I ever be really good. Good like you are?”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t you just worry about being able to shoot all six cans. That’s good enough.”

Mark gave a lop-sided grin. “Did it take you very long before you were really good?”

Johnny glanced toward the shooting range. “It took me longer than a couple weeks.”

“So, you weren’t perfect right away, huh?” Mark asked.

Johnny shook his head. “No, I had to learn.”

“People say you’re a natural-born gunfighter.”

Johnny turned to regard Mark with amusement. “Natural-born?” He shook his head, laughing grimly. “Being a gunfighter ain’t natural. Breathing, now that’s natural. No,” he shook his head again. “You learn to become a gunfighter. You gotta learn and you better have a damn good reason. And if you don’t than you better get outta the business, ‘cuz the only name you’re gonna make for yourself’ll be scrawled on a tombstone.”

Mark nodded slowly, his expression subdued despite Johnny’s abrupt grin.

“Now, you don’t have to worry about none of that. You’re a rancher’s son. All you need to worry about is protecting yourself and your property. There’s more than rattlesnakes hiding

*in those plains out there, and you need to be ready for them. You just gotta be able to hold your own, you don't need to worry about fast-drawing. That's why your father hired us."*

*Mark looked down at the gun, sighed. "Guess I'd better get practicing, huh?"*

*Johnny chuckled. "And don't try to outdraw the cans anymore, okay?"*

*"Okay, Johnny."*



*L*ate afternoon of the following day found Johnny in the yard listening to the reports from three different groups of men he had sent out earlier— Harley, Cisco and Chet each having supervised one of the three groups. Reports had come in late on the previous day about downed fence lines on the western border, where the Double S and the Circle M met. Johnny had taken out one group to the site closest to Mitchell's main ranch, but they had seen nothing, other than the reported downed fence. While he had the men fix it, Johnny had pondered why Mitchell had resorted to the same old tactics he'd been using when Johnny had first been hired. With the assumption that it was probably meant as a diversion, Johnny listened intently to all the other three groups reported. However they, too, had seen nothing else out of the ordinary.

*He had just dismissed the men when he heard the sound of an approaching buggy. Glancing toward the entrance gate to the north, he recognized Stanton guiding his surrey and another figure who could only be the mysterious and enigmatic Laura, sitting beside him, cloaked in a warm buffalo hide fur. Wes, with a nonchalant tip of his hat, rode ahead through the yard toward Johnny. As he drew close, he leaned over and muttered dryly, "Oh, that was a lot of fun."*

*Perplexed, Johnny watched Wes continue on toward the barn before walking toward the buggy pulling up in front of the house.*

*"Johnny!" Stanton called with a wave as he reined up. "Come over here, my boy. I want you to meet my daughter, Laura." He turned and gestured. "Laura, Mr. Madrid. Mr. Madrid, Laura," he introduced.*

*With an expression of appropriate welcome on his face, Johnny approached the side of the buggy. "Miss Stanton," he greeted with a nod, his gaze rising to meet eyes of such a deep green that he was reminded of coastal waters. He allowed a half-grin to form on his face. "Welcome home. I've heard a lot about you."*

*The smile, however, was not returned as the dark green eyes narrowed frostily. "And I, you," she returned, her chin rising in an attitude of defiance. "So, you're the hired killer my father felt it was necessary to engage."*

*"Laura!" Mr. Stanton reproached. "That was uncalled for."*



*“Uncalled for? Maybe,” Laura shot back as she pushed the fur off her lap in irritation. “But hardly untrue, is it?”*

*“Laura—”*

*“It’s okay, Mr. Stanton,” Johnny assured, his expression now carefully neutral as he gave a nod of assent. “It **is** why I’m here.”*

*Laura shot him a sharp look, which wavered distractedly for a second. Then she rose, pointedly ignoring the outstretched hand Johnny offered.*

*With a wry smile, Johnny stepped back allowing Mr. Stanton to come around to help his daughter down from the buggy. Once on the ground, she automatically smoothed her skirt, turning once more to regard Johnny with tense derision. “Madrid,” she scoffed. “A name, I suppose, chosen for the impact it makes, a name worthy of a hired killer, isn’t that so, Mr. Madrid?”*

*“Laura,” Stanton said firmly as he attempted to draw her toward the house.*

*“It was the name of my step-father,” Johnny replied coolly. “A man murdered in his own house while trying to protect me and my mother.”*

*For a moment that seemed unnaturally long, Laura and Johnny regarded each other without emotion. Then lifting her chin, Laura brushed wordlessly past Johnny and up the steps to the house.*

*After the door closed, Stanton shook his head and turned to face Johnny. “I’m sorry. Really,” he sighed. “It’s actually my fault. I was trying to explain to her what’s been happening as we drove up.”*

*“So she had no idea about what’s been going on with Mitchell?”*

*Stanton shook his head. “The real problems started right after she left. I didn’t tell her about it, as I knew she’d be worried and would probably insist on returning. And I also,” he shrugged apologetically, “thought it wouldn’t go on this long or become this involved. It just became easier not to say anything. I’m afraid she took her irritation with me out on you.”*

*Crossing his arms, Johnny glanced wryly at the house. “Irritation? I hate to see what she’s like when she gets in a real fury.”*

*Stanton suddenly laughed, put a hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Just like her mother.” The laugh became a chuckle, and he shook his head. “I do apologize, though.”*

*“No need,” Johnny grinned. “I figure you’ll still get an earful about it later on. If you need, you can always sleep in the bunkhouse with us.”*

*Stanton returned the grin. "I just may have to do that." Then his expression sobered. "Hey, Johnny?"*

*"Hmmm?"*

*"What you said about your step-father. Was that true?"*

*Johnny slowly nodded. "Yeah, it was true."*

*"I'm sorry to hear it."*

*Johnny shrugged. "It was a long time ago."*

*Stanton hesitated, seemed ready to add something, when Johnny gave a dismissive shake of his head and continued, "I've got some things to take care of. I'll stop in this evening and get you updated."*

*Stanton nodded his head, realized the subject was closed, and watched as Johnny turned toward the corrals.*



Abruptly Johnny stopped. For a long moment Scott waited patiently for his brother to continue. But the droning clatter of the dining car as it rumbled along and an occasional fragment of a conversation from one of the other two occupied tables were all that filled the silence. For a full minute Scott waited, unsure what had precipitated his brother's sudden termination of his narrative. That Johnny had even begun to relate the events that had taken place in Kansas had come as an unexpected surprise.

They had just left Sacramento that morning on the train bound east. It had been a strained parting at best, Teresa and Murdoch both coming to see them off. It was no secret that Murdoch was still harboring doubts about the wisdom of Johnny returning to the source of his bounty, and had almost decided at the last minute to come along. Johnny, however, would have none of it, insisting that with Scott along, there was really little else Murdoch could do to help the situation that he hadn't already done. A lawyer had been contacted, details and documents tracked down. Now it was a matter of returning and clearing his name.

Teresa, for her part, had managed to hold up well. That is until it was time for Johnny and Scott to board. Then she succumbed to her apprehensions and broke out in tears.

Once aboard, it hadn't taken long for Scott to see that travel by train was not his brother's favorite mode of transportation. After the initial excitement of speed and novelty wore off, Johnny had begun pacing. The only problem was, in a train there's only so much pacing which can take place before the pacer begins to be an irritation to the other passengers.

Scott, however, enjoyed train travel, and had brought an assortment of books and newspapers to read along with plenty of paperwork to keep him busy. He had tried to interest his brother in settling down with some of the reading materials he had brought, but Johnny merely flipped through them without any real interest.

It was at lunch time, while the train chugged slowly up the western side of the Sierras, and Scott had dragged Johnny to the dining car despite his brother's protestation that he wasn't hungry, when the dam broke.

It happened unexpectedly as they were waiting for their food to be brought. Scott had been idly watching the scenery pass by when he heard a barely audible, murmured hiss. Turning his head, his brows drawn into a frown of concern, he saw Johnny glaring down at his tightly folded hands while gnawing uncharacteristically on his bottom lip.

And he knew. He knew what was coming.

And he waited, afraid to make either a move or a sound, lest the interruption kill the long-awaited narrative. And as it unfolded, in tentative, faltering phrases, Scott found himself holding his breath, afraid even the action of breathing would bring the story to a premature end. He never uttered a sound, not a word or a question of clarification; instead he let his brother's terminology, expressions, tone and gestures tell the story, willing himself to absorb every detail in even the merest flicker of eye contact.

And then just as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped—the waiter had shown up with their food, leaving Scott with an overwhelming desire to send the clueless man headlong out the window.

After all the attempts in the past few months that Scott had made to broach the subject of the reason for the Kansas trip, to now have it thwarted by a ham sandwich and pickle, was just too much.

Teeth on edge, he fought to keep his expression genial while he thanked the server and assured him they desired nothing else—*other than your disappearance, thank you!*—then glanced across the table to see his brother smiling with amusement. At that point he knew Johnny had read his thoughts. With a shake of his head and a chuckle, he sighed, “Well, I didn't deck him.”

The corners of Johnny's mouth twitched. “I really thought you were going to.”

“But I didn't.”

“True,” Johnny acceded with a nod. “But it was close.”

Scott chuckled again. “I don't suppose you care to continue the story.”

“While eating?” Johnny scoffed, picking up the pickle and biting into it with a loud crunch. “You know how Teresa carries on about talking with a mouth full of food.”

“I won't complain.”



“Ah, you say that now,” Johnny said and with the half-eaten pickle in his hand, he motioned toward Scott’s plate. “Gonna eat yours?”

“Yes, I’m going to eat mine,” Scott replied. “Unless it’ll buy me more of the story.”

Johnny shook his head, took another bite, his expression losing some of its playfulness. “No. Later. I’m not in a party mood.”

“Party mood?” Scott asked.

“Later,” Johnny reiterated, picking up his sandwich.

And so it was. After avoiding the subject for the rest of the afternoon, it wasn’t until later in the evening, after they had finished their meal and were just sitting back, relaxing in the dining car, while the view of the Sierras sped past, still snow-covered, their shadows lengthening in the spring sunset, that Johnny resumed the story.



*Johnny walked up to the porch, the sounds of the social already spilling out into the late afternoon. He had tried to avoid attending, but his intentions were quickly thwarted once his friends learned of Johnny’s special invitation. Cisco, especially, had taken quite an interest in getting his friend to attend, even to the point of producing a new vest and string tie for him to wear to the event.*

*Over the two days since Stanton had returned with his daughter, Johnny had stayed busy with overseeing the border between the Double S and the Circle M, however nothing more had developed. Thankfully his chores had kept him from running across his boss’s daughter again, though he had still heard full reports about her from Carolyn, as the younger sister still met him to practice her riding skills.*

*At the door, Johnny hesitated as he contemplated the possibility of making a quick and inconspicuous retreat. But before any such plan could be put into action, the door swung open, and he found himself face to face with Mr. Stanton.*

*With a welcoming smile, Mr. Stanton motioned for Johnny to enter. “Come on in! Come on in! I was starting to think I was going to have to go drag you out of the bunkhouse myself, when I noticed you walking over.”*

*Johnny’s expression turned wry. “Well, to be honest, I was practically pushed over here.”*

*“Couldn’t stand up against Harley, huh?” Stanton laughed.*

*Johnny chuckled. “Not hardly.” He paused in the entry while Stanton closed the door, making note that while the door to Stanton’s office was closed, the large double doors on the*

left, that were usually closed, were now open, revealing well-dressed men and women circulating and chatting as they made their way among a group of tables laden with food.

“Come on in and have something to eat,” Stanton urged, motioning Johnny into the room.

Stepping in, Johnny paused to survey the surroundings. The room was spacious, long and open. A lady was playing a piano at the far end where the room turned to form an ‘L’. And it was there, that he could see younger people, most probably Laura’s friends, dancing and laughing.

“Here, have some punch,” Stanton said as he offered up a crystal punch glass filled with a dark pink liquid.

Johnny smiled amiably as he accepted the proffered drink, glancing about the milling crowd as he took a quick sip. “Looks like everyone’s having a good time.”

Stanton chuckled as he did his own survey of the crowd. “Yes. Laura’s pleased to see so many of her friends after so long.”

At that moment a gentleman approached, smiling affably, a cup of punch in his hands. “Nice turn-out, Stanton,” he said, his gaze settling on the far end of the room. “Looks like the East agrees with Laura. She’s turning into a fine young lady.”

“Quite true. Though I dare say, I miss her, and so does Carolyn. But it’s good for her, I think, to get out and see more than cattle and the unending fields of Kansas.”

“Oh, I couldn’t agree more, couldn’t agree more.” The man turned toward Johnny. “And who is this young man?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Stanton apologized, raising a hand in introduction. “Mr. Garson, this is Mr. Madrid.”

“Madrid?” the man echoed, turning toward Stanton. “Your gun—” He stopped, his discomfort apparent.

“Yes,” Stanton replied with a calm nod. “I invited him to stop by.”

“Of course,” the man agreed quickly, turning to Johnny to incline his head politely. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Madrid. I heard about you when I was in town last week.”

Johnny favored the man with a slow smile. “Can’t imagine why.”

“Mr. Garson owns the ranch just north of Lost Springs,” Stanton explained.

“Must say, I’m glad you’re here, Mr. Madrid,” Mr. Garson said, his expression carefully courteous.

*Johnny kept his smile cool, aware that he was being appraised. “Is that a fact?”*

*Mr. Garson nodded. “It is. This business with Mitchell has quite a few people worried. He used to be just a nuisance, but he’s becoming downright bold in the trouble he’s been causing, giving the area around here a rough reputation. So far I’ve been lucky, as he hasn’t shown any interest in bothering me, but then I’m quite a distance from him.” He paused to put a conversational smile on his face, yet the eyes still flickered nervously, never stopping to meet Johnny’s own gaze. “So, what do you make of him, Mr. Madrid?”*

*Johnny gave a studied shrug of indifference. “I figure he’s like most bullies. When the prey starts fighting back, the fun kind of goes out of it. But I don’t think he’s going to back down, if that’s what you’re wondering.”*

*“Yeah, damned law’s been useless,” another man suddenly interjected as he stepped up between Stanton and Garson. He turned his attention on Johnny. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Madrid,” he said as he offered his hand. “Saw you take care of that gunhawk of Mitchell’s a few weeks ago. Got what he had comin’ to him, I said. Name’s Ballin. William Ballin. Own the mercantile in Lost Springs.”*

*Johnny clasped the hand, but kept his expression professionally detached.*

*Ballin continued, “Yes, there’s been nothing but trouble since Mitchell showed up. Making people nervous these hired guns around here,” he paused momentarily to grin at Johnny. “Yourself excluded.”*

*Johnny returned the smile with a faint nod, well aware that he was indeed included.*

*Ballin continued with a genial gesture toward the crowd. “My, Stanton, looks like most everyone from the Lost Springs and Diamond City area are here. In fact, isn’t that Mr. Moore?” he asked, indicating a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman.”*

*“Haven’t seen him in almost a year,” Garson added. “Doesn’t get out much, ever since his oldest was killed in the Shenendoah.”*

*“Mr. Garson, Mr. Stanton, Mr. Ballin,” a young man, of no more than twenty, greeted. Handsome and well-built, he included Johnny with a faint nod before turning to Stanton. “A fine party, Sir,” he said, sweeping a strand of pale hair out of his eyes with his free hand, the other occupied with a glass of punch.*

*“Why, thank you, Peter.” Stanton smiled. “It’s wonderful to see you here. I know Laura’s pleased.” He turned and gestured toward Johnny. “Allow me to introduce Mr. Madrid. Mr. Madrid, this is Peter White, from the—”*

*“Three Oaks Ranch to the east,” Johnny finished, turning his attention on the young man.*

*While Peter acknowledged the introduction with a nod, there was no hint of surprise on his face. Instead an appreciative smile crossed his lips. “Ah, so you’re the gunfighter. Mark has*

been telling me all about you, Mr. Madrid. He says you've been showing him some of the tricks of the trade."

Johnny raised an eyebrow. "Don't know about any tricks of the trade. I've just been showing him what he needs to be able to defend himself—just as I've been working with the rest of Mr. Stanton's crew."

"Of course," Peter smiled, unperturbed. "I've no doubt we could all benefit from your—," he paused just enough to give the next word extra emphasis, "—expertise."

"As a matter of fact," Mr. Stanton interrupted, "I've asked Mr. Madrid to consider staying on here, after the difficulties with Mitchell are resolved."

The quick glances of apprehension, furtively shot among Stanton's guests, did not go unnoticed by Johnny.

"Staying on?" Garson asked.

"Yes, as foreman," Stanton replied, smiling at Johnny. "He and Cisco have already taken over the responsibilities anyway."

"Foreman, huh?" Ballin seemed to consider the idea. "That'd be a bit of a change for you, wouldn't it?"

"I might be willing to give it a try," Johnny replied.

"So, you haven't decided, yet?" Peter asked.

"I'm considering it," Johnny said.

"Wouldn't be quite the excitement you're used to," Garson added.

"Yes, I'm sure you would find the monotony of regular ranch living not to your liking," Peter spoke up, taking a nonchalant sip of his punch. "Wait until you've had to go through one of our winters. I can't imagine a man of your background choosing to be bored to death."

"There are worse ways to die," Johnny replied dryly, meeting Peter's nonchalance calmly, with just a hint of amusement.

Ballin chuckled, "So true." He took a sip of his drink. "Not counting this business with Mitchell, not much other than the weather and the rattlesnakes to keep a man on his toes."

"Well, we do get our share of both of those," Garson acknowledged with a tip of his head.

"You can't seriously be considering adding notches for rattlesnake hides?" Peter scoffed.

*“Interesting thing about rattlesnakes,” Johnny replied coolly. “There’s always plenty of them around—and not all of them have their belly to the ground.”*

*Though Peter chuckled appreciatively along with the rest of the men, Johnny noticed the young man’s expression lacked humor.*

*Clapping Peter on the back, Ballin chuckled, “I think he got you on that one.” He then lifted his now empty punch glass in a gesture of tribute. “I think I’ll get a refill. Anyone else?”*

*“I should be getting over to the Missus,” Garson said. “I see her over there, giving me that look.”*

*“And I think I’ll head back to the dance floor,” Peter replied, adding with a quick look at Johnny, “Laura promised me a dance.”*

*Johnny took the opportunity to favor the young man with a faint smirk. “Be sure to give Miss Stanton my regards.”*

*As the three men all headed away, Stanton chuckled. “There’s a little bit of the fox in you, isn’t there, my boy?”*

*“I’d rather be the fox than the rabbit,” Johnny replied.*

*Stanton chuckled again. “Come on, then, Mr. Fox. Enjoy yourself. Have some cake.” He guided Johnny toward a table laden with assorted desserts and a large cut-glass bowl filled with the frothy, pink punch.*

*Already a crowd of people were backing away to make room for them to pass, and while Stanton showed no notice, Johnny knew his employer had to be aware of the furtive looks and the hidden whispers which followed them as they passed among the crowd. By now, all in the room knew just who and what he was.*

*Already feeling half-naked without his sidearm, Johnny decided it was useless to ignore the stir his presence had made in the room and felt he might as well give his audience the full effect of what they were expecting. Picking up a small plate with a square of frosted cake perched on its center, he leisurely pivoted, sweeping his audience with a cool, penetrating gaze.*

*And, as usual, people either quickly looked away or seemed frozen, almost startled like an animal about to be pounced upon, unable to pull away from his scrutiny.*

*He was in the process of panning back over the crowd in a nonchalant course to resume his conversation with Stanton, when his attention was caught by a figure at the end of the room. It was Laura. She was wearing a deep green dress, with fine gold beading and decorative thread that accented the gown, catching the candlelight, shimmering as she moved about the room. And for a heartbeat he found himself captured, then the moment was lost when he saw her turn her eyes toward him, the sparkle they’d so recently displayed, darkening to a deep*

*emerald at the sight of him. Immediately he turned his attention to his desert, dismayed to find that it no longer seemed appetizing.*

*“Well, I should mingle with some of the other guests,” Stanton said, drawing Johnny’s attention. “I hope you’ll stick around, enjoy the food and the music,” he gave a knowing nod toward a group of ladies gathered in one corner. “And the guests.”*

*Murmuring an appropriate remark, Johnny stepped to the side so that Stanton could work his way in among the crowd, pausing to shake hands or convey a greeting. Then with a mental sigh, he turned his attention to the small square of cake. Stabbing it with his fork, he popped the whole thing in his mouth. As he was placing the empty plate on the end of the table along with the other used plates, his thoughts turned to the possibility of making a quick and unobtrusive exit. The plan was just taking form when he turned to find himself face to face with Laura. Her eyes mockingly studied him over the brim of her punch glass.*

*After taking a small sip, she lowered the glass and cocked her head to the side, her amusement filtering down to the corners of her mouth.*

*“So, Mr. Madrid,” she murmured, her eyes flicking to his empty hip. “I’m relieved to see that you aren’t planning on killing any of my guests.”*

*He met her taunt with a half-smile of his own. “Oh, your guests have nothing to worry about, as long as they behave themselves. However, if anyone decides to start something, I’ll be more than happy to finish it. ‘Cuz you see, Miss Stanton, I **never** go unarmed.”*

*Laura’s eyes widened, dropping to survey both hips before looking back up in bewilderment.*

*He met the look with a soft chuckle. “So, then, is anyone giving you difficulties?”*

*Laura’s eyes narrowed, her lips pursing in irritation. “You enjoy your work, don’t you?” she hissed. “Killing’s just a game to you.”*

*Johnny gave her a cool half-smile.*

*Without waiting for a reply, Laura turned on her heel and strode back into the crowd, leaving Johnny watching her retreat, the cool smile replaced by amusement.*

*“So, you gonna ask her to dance?”*

*Startled, Johnny glanced down to find Carolyn looking up at him.*

*“What?”*

*“Dance,” Carolyn said with a nod of her head. “Don’t you want to dance with her? All the boys do. I think she likes you.”*

*“Likes me?” Johnny raised an eyebrow, chuckling softly. “Whatever gave you that idea?”*

*“She’s always looking at you.”*

*“Yeah,” Johnny said. “But I don’t think it’s ‘cuz she likes me.”*

*“No?” Carolyn cocked her head thoughtfully. “You don’t? Hmmm. But I think she’d like you a lot. I mean, I do.”*

*Johnny suddenly grinned. “Yeah, well, that’s ‘cuz you have better taste, Chica-lyn.”*

*Carolyn laughed. “So, you want to dance with me?”*

*Johnny shook his head. “I don’t dance.”*

*“You don’t?”*

*“No.”*

*“Don’t you know how?”*

*Johnny’s answer was cut off by the sound of the front door being opened and raised voices in the entry. Automatically, Johnny moved past Carolyn to make his way toward the door. He reached the entry at the same time that he heard his name spoken.*

*“Madrid,” the man gave a relieved sigh. “It’s Benj.”*

*The way it was said, and the look in the other man’s eyes, told Johnny all he needed to know. Pushing his way past the older man, Johnny made his way out the door into the darkness.*

*A small group of men were milling about a horse in the yard, the dark, ominous shape of a body draped over its back.*

*As he made his way toward them, he noticed Harley and Ram, another hand, untying the cords which had secured the body to the back of the horse.*

*“Johnny,” Cisco stepped out of the crowd and put a hand on his arm, slowing him.*

*“Torq said it’s Benj.”*

*Cisco nodded somberly.*

*Without a word, Johnny pulled away to drop down next to the body just as Harley and Ram lowered it to the ground.*

*The face of the young cowhand, eyes now closed, was visible in the pool of light from the lanterns. He looked peaceful, one could almost believe asleep, if not for the gaping hole in his chest.*

*“What happened?” Johnny demanded tersely, his eyes not leaving the body.*

*Ram moved closer. “He—he was shot.”*

*“I can see that,” Johnny retorted, raising his eyes. “By who?”*

*The man hesitated a second. “Mitchell’s new gun.”*

*Stanton suddenly appeared, dropping down beside Johnny. “What happened?” he demanded.*

*Looking up, Johnny realized a number of the party guests had moved outside, now forming a second ring of spectators beyond the tighter ring of cowhands. This outer ring, however, was split into tight, whispering groups, curiosity their main objective.*

*“Mitchell,” Johnny replied tersely, getting to his feet, Stanton joining him. “It’d be better if you got your guests back in the house. I’ll handle this.”*

*Stanton hesitated, then nodded and turned, raising his hands. “Okay, everyone. Let’s get back to the party. Everything’s under control.”*

*Johnny waited until the party guests had dispersed back into the house before he rounded on Ram. “How the hell’d this happen? Didn’t I make it clear that no one was to go out alone?”*

*“He didn’t—I mean, we didn’t. I was with him.”*

*“You were with him?”*

*Ram nodded. “We were in town for Mr. Stanton.”*

*“And—”*

*“We’d stopped in the saloon. This guy came up to us—told us we weren’t welcome. We told him we weren’t botherin’ nobody and had just as much right to be there. He then knocked Benj’s drink out of his hands. Benj—well, Benj really got riled. I—I tried to stop him, but, well he drew on the fella.” Ram stopped, shook his head. “But it was a slaughter. Benj didn’t stand a chance, never even knew what hit him. When—after it was over, this guy comes over to me, says he has a message for me to give to you.”*

*Johnny’s eyes narrowed. “Let’s have it.”*

*Ram looked uncomfortable. “He said—he said, ‘Tell Madrid that Marcus Black’s waitin’ for him. And I don’t care if I have to kill every simpering mama’s boy around ‘til you decide to come out of hiding.’”*

*For a long moment Johnny didn’t move. No expression, no visible movement of any kind. He didn’t even appear to be breathing.*



*“Get the body into the bunkhouse,” was his only reply.*

*Two men quickly came forward, lifting Benj’s body and making their way to the low, stone building, the other hands following. Soon only Harley, Wes and Cisco remained.*

*“Damn!” Johnny muttered. “He was just a kid.”*

*“You didn’t have no way of knowing,” Harley said.*

*“Yeah, well, I knew the type of snake we were dealing with. I knew it’d been too quiet for too long,” Johnny snapped, running his fingers through his hair in irritation. “I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.”*

*“C’mon, Johnny. Don’t go beatin’ yourself up over it,” Wes urged.*

*Johnny turned and glared. “He was just a kid, Wes.” He turned to glare across the yard toward the bunkhouse. “I shoulda sent him on his way.”*

*“It was his choice, Juanito,” Harley stressed.*

*“Harley’s right,” Cisco added*

*Face still averted, Johnny sighed as his hands went to his hips.*

*“What’cha gonna do, Johnny?” Wes asked.*

*“Meet him, of course,” Johnny snapped, turning around.*

*“He’ll be lookin’ for you,” Harley warned.*

*“I’m countin’ on it.”*

*“Juanito—” Cisco’s admonition was cut short.*

*“Black. Black. Haven’t we run into him before?” Harley suddenly interrupted.*

*Johnny gave a curt nod. “Once.”*

*Harley nodded slowly, his eyes flicking quickly to Wes, then Cisco.*

*“I remember,” Wes murmured, his eyes suddenly going wide. “Whoa! He was one sneaky son-of-a-bitch. Didn’t you leave him with a bullet in the leg?”*

*Johnny nodded.*

*“Oh, he’s gonna be gunnin’ for you, Johnny, my boy!” Wes exclaimed.*

*“Big time,” Harley added.*

*Johnny hissed sarcastically, “I didn’t think he sent me a dead body as an invite to a poker game.”*

*“Juanito,” Cisco cut in sharply. “Aren’t you getting tired of this? All this—all this death?”*

*“Oh, c’mon, Cisco!” Johnny snapped. “Not now, okay? Just let the preaching go for once, would you?”*

*“I would, if I just thought you were listening!” Cisco shot back. “Don’t you see? It’s just like I’ve been saying. You shoot Black, he shoots Benj, now you—what? You shoot him again?”*

*“Yeah,” Johnny hissed. “Only this time I make sure he’s dead!”*

*“Damn it, Juanito! Can’t you see that this is all you’re going to have for a future? All you’re going to have to look forward to? Death and more death? Your survival is contingent on the death of others! And you’re going to have to go on killing until the day comes when you inevitably lose. And it’s going to happen, Juanito! It’s going to happen! Someday you’re going to be the one lying dead in the street somewhere, with only a string of corpses left to show for your existence!”*

*Wes and Harley stood in stunned silence as Cisco and Johnny rounded on each other with tightly reined volatile expressions. For a moment no one dared breathe, then Harley tentatively broke the silence.*

*“Come now, Cisco. No need to—”*

*“To what?” Cisco snapped. “Tell him the truth?” He pointed at Johnny, his gaze narrowing. “And you know I’m telling you the truth, Juanito. You **know** I am. Leave this now. Leave it before it’s too late.” Without waiting for a reply, he curtly turned and stormed toward the second, smaller bunkhouse.*

*For a moment, all was quiet again, then Wes cleared his throat with a weak chuckle. “Don’t worry ‘bout him, Johnny. You know Cisco. He’s only happy when he’s preachin’ or teachin’.” He smiled, reached out to give Johnny’s arm a bolstering jab, then nodded to Harley. “I’ll go check on things, get together a couple of men to go in for the undertaker in the morning.” With a smile of reassurance shot Johnny’s way, he turned and walked toward the larger bunkhouse.*

*After he’d left, Harley sighed loudly then cast a furtive gaze toward Johnny who still stood, riveted to his spot, his eyes fixed on the direction Cisco had taken.*

*“Hey, Juanito. It’s okay. You heard Wes.”*

*Johnny blinked, nodded slowly. With a soft sigh, his nod turned into a dismal shake.*

*“No. Cisco’s right. Just like he always is—”*

*“Juanito—”*

*“No, Harl.” Johnny shook his head. “It’s okay. Problem is, Cisco doesn’t realize I have been listening, but there’s no other choice. This is what I am. What I do...” He sighed tiredly, tilted his head to stare up at the stars. “I **do** know he’s right, Harl. But where the truth seems to bother him, I’ve long since come to accept it.”*

*Harley’s expression clouded. “You don’t need to continue, Juanito. Not if you don’t want to. There’s nothin’ or no one forcin’ you to meet this Black. Nothin’ or no one holdin’ you here.”*

*“There’s a dead body in the bunkhouse keepin’ me here, Harl,” Johnny said, turning toward the larger man. “A kid now dead ‘cuz I didn’t send him on his way when we took this job. You know just as well as I do what’ll happen if I leave. Mitchell will take over. He’ll take over and stomp on the people, he’ll bully them and terrorize them into submission, and soon he’ll control everything and everyone around here. ‘Cuz that’s the type of man he is.*

*“We were hired to get a job done and I plan to see it through,” Johnny continued. “If you and Wes and Cisco want to leave, then go. But I’m going to see this finished—I’m gonna see that Mitchell pays for every death he’s responsible for!”*

*Harley shook his head with a grim look. “You know I couldn’t leave you, Juanito. I’ll stay ‘till the job is done.”*

*Johnny nodded.*

*“But you promise me you’ll be careful. You gotta watch that Black. I got a bad feelin’ ‘bout him.”*

*“Caution’s my middle name,” Johnny replied with a sudden crooked grin.*

*Harley chortled. “Ha! That’s a laugh!”*

*“Hey. I’m still alive, aren’t I?” Johnny quipped then started for the bunkhouse.*

*Harley shook his head, watching as Johnny entered the building. He was sighing heavily when he thought he heard a sound. Turning he saw a shadow of a figure barely visible on the porch. It was Laura.*



Johnny stopped. Scott looked up from the empty wine glass sitting on the table in front of him, his long fingers threaded to encircle the base. He waited a moment until Johnny looked at him. “You were saying you left Harley outside.”

Johnny nodded, shifted back in his seat and took a deep breath. “Yeah. The next day Harl told me Laura had been out there. She’d heard our conversation.”

Scott nodded, trying to absorb all the information which had suddenly spilled out as they sat after enjoying a late dinner. “Did that change things between you?”

Johnny gave a soft snort. “Not that you’d notice.”

Scott raised an eyebrow. “So, what happened to Black? I’m guessing you met up with him.”

Johnny’s look darkened and he turned his attention to his own wine goblet, tapping the stem sharply with a forefinger before bringing it to his lips to down the last swallow. “Yeah, I eventually met up with him.”

Scott hesitated, sensed the terseness in his brother’s manner and wondered if this was a moment to pursue or retreat. A year earlier, he knew he would have decided knowledge wasn’t worth the possibility of dragging Johnny—and himself—into an uncomfortable subject. But a lot had happened since then. And Scott had learned the hard way that letting sleeping dogs lay was not always the best course of action, as they often woke to bite you in the butt later when you weren’t looking.

“What happened?” Scott ventured.

Johnny’s dark look took on a bitter mien, and he set the goblet on the table, slid his fingers to its base and began to move it in a tight circle. “What happened?” he muttered, then leaned back, pushing the goblet to the center of the table and fixing Scott with a hard look. “I’ll tell you what happened. I went into town the next day, expecting to take him on—planning to take him on—only he wasn’t there! He didn’t show! No. Instead while I was in town, he was out on the range and picked off another of my men!” Johnny hissed. “Another kid gone, just like that!” He snapped his fingers then turned to glare out the dark window for a moment.

“For two weeks he played the shadow, refusing to come out. At one point, I was ready to ride into Mitchell’s place, and would have if Harley—” He stopped, his expression though still dismal, took on a wry hint. “Let’s just say, I never made it.”

Scott did a quick assessment and decided to let that one go. “So, what did happen?”

Johnny sighed tiredly.

“It was the day before Christmas. I was going into a town for a present—”

“A present?” Scott cut in. “For whom? Laura?”

Johnny frowned sourly. “No, Scott. We still weren’t even speaking. She avoided me and I avoided her. I was going in to pick up a pony—”

“A pony?” Scott looked surprised.

“Yes, a pony,” Johnny replied dryly. “For Chica—I mean, Carolyn. I’d found another rancher whose children had outgrown their pony, and I bought it for—” Johnny stopped and grimaced. “Oh, c’mon, Scott. Lay off.”

“What?” Scott asked innocently.

“That look you’re givin’ me.”

“What look?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Oh, you mean the look that says I just knew my brother was really an old softy?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

Scott chuckled. “Tell me about the pony.”

“Well, Carolyn deserved it. No one else would get her a pony and she’d worked so hard. I mean, you shoulda seen her at first, Scott. She was terrified, really terrified of horses.”

“I understand,” Scott nodded.

“She’d come so far already. All she needed was something smaller, something her size, something of her own that she could get comfortable with.”

“Of course,” Scott nodded.

Johnny sighed and grimaced. “You’re enjoyin’ this way too much.”

Scott smiled. “I just enjoy seeing that Madrid had a warm side.”

Johnny scowled. “You may want to reserve that opinion until you’ve heard the whole story.”

Scott reached out to the wine bottle on the table and poured what was left into the two goblets. He sighed dramatically as he set it back down on the table. “Not much,” he murmured apologetically as he indicated the now filled goblets, “but it ought to be worth another chapter.”



*The wind was bitterly cold, blowing straight out of the north from Canada and blasting unimpeded through the Dakota Territory. It was a dry, biting cold that seemed to find furs and leathers but a minor obstacle. In fact, Johnny had heard the ranchers talk about the dry winter they were having so far. The few minor snowfalls they’d had had amounted to little more than dustings, which had been blown into the Indian Territory and Texas, leaving only small rivulets of white amongst the sides of buildings and in the ruts of the roads.*

*But today, the day before Christmas, Johnny, other than uttering his customary curse against any temperature lower than sixty degrees, was focused on a task that for once brought a smile to his lips.*

*As he rode into Lost Springs, he immediately spied the object of his desire standing outside the Brown Dog Saloon. Short, petite, perhaps not as young as she used to be, but still the object which had brought Johnny all the way into town. A small black mare—Carolyn's present. Something he knew she'd never expect and no one else would think of getting her.*

*Mr. Whitting, the previous owner of the pony, appeared to be in the saloon warming his insides as well as his outsides while he waited for the buyer. While the pony had already been paid for two weeks earlier, Johnny had asked Mr. Whitting to keep her until just before Christmas.*

*Johnny dismounted next to the little mare, giving both her and Charco a friendly pat on the neck before entering the saloon. He'd been around the Lost Springs area long enough and had dispatched Mitchell's first hired gun in front of most of its inhabitants, so everyone knew who he was. Consequently they immediately moved out of his way, the reactions a mixture of respectful nods, lowered eyes and a few bolder ones grinning and raising their glasses in salute.*

*At his entrance, Mr. Whitting slid down to make room while the bartender placed a steaming mug of some local brew on the bar in front of him.*

*Johnny wasn't particularly fond of the warm drink, but had decided anything that would generate a bit of heat would be welcome today.*

*He nodded to the bartender and was reaching under his leather coat for a coin when Mr. Whitting held up his own mug and smiled. "On me, Mr. Madrid."*

*"Thanks," Johnny replied, reaching out to grasp his drink. "Hope you didn't have to wait long."*

*"Oh, no," Mr. Whitting shook his head. "I'm just starting to get some feeling back in my fingers." He chuckled. "Damn, it's cold!" He took a healthy swallow of his drink before turning to nod toward the doors. "Sure you saw her out there. Had my boys polish up the bridle and saddle, too. Nice to know she'll be getting a good home since my own kids have grown."*

*Johnny nodded. "It's gonna make one little girl very happy."*

*Whitting raised an eyebrow and looked down at his mug uncomfortably. "You know, Madrid, I'm thinkin' you're payin' five—maybe ten dollars mor'n that mare is worth. I mean, she's twelve years old and all and—"*

*Johnny smiled. "Maybe I'm payin' more than she's worth to you, but not to me. She's just what I was looking for."*

*"I mean, I just wouldn't want you to be feelin' I was gypping you in some way," Whitting added.*

*Johnny suddenly chuckled. "I'm quite content with the deal, Mr. Whitting."*

*The man returned the smile hesitantly. "I bought her a new blanket."*

*"Why, thank you," Johnny said then took a long draught of the drink and set it on the counter. "I'd best be getting back."*

*Whitting nodded, adding as Johnny turned to leave, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Madrid."*

*Johnny turned back, a slightly quizzical expression on his face. Then he smiled and nodded. "Merry Christmas to you, too, Mr. Whitting." He walked out onto the boardwalk as he brought his coat tight about him and ducked under the railing between Charco and the mare.*

*"Si. You're just what I need," he murmured softly as he ran his hand along the mare's neck then bent to untie her from the railing.*

*"Madrid."*

*Johnny paused and for a second did nothing but close his eyes and shake his head with a sigh.*

*"Later, girl," he whispered as he rubbed the mare's frosted muzzle. Turning, he raised his hands high enough to trail along the two horses' backs as he walked between them and out to the windblown street. Keeping his gaze fixed forward, he walked to the center, but in the corner of his vision he could see the dark figure of Marcus Black. It wasn't until he'd reached the middle of the road that he pivoted slowly, his gaze finally coming to rest on the figure, a sardonic smile playing across his lips as he gave his challenger a mocking nod of acknowledgement.*

*"How's the leg, Marcus?"*

*The gunfighter met the question with a snort. "I don't shoot with my leg, Madrid."*

*Johnny smiled coldly, acknowledging the line, noting that Marcus had taken the northern position, gaining the advantage of the cold prairie wind, which was gusting miserably straight into Johnny's face.*

*"So, how'd you like my messages, Madrid?"*

*"Oh, the meaning was quite clear. Only I kept trying to show up for the fiesta, and the host would never arrive."*

*"What, and spoil the anticipation, Madrid?" Marcus shot back. "Well, you don't need to wait any longer. I'm here," he said as he theatrically spread his hands to his side, flipping his jacket behind to reveal a double holster.*

*Johnny chuckled. "Oh, Marcus. You got a lot to learn. If you couldn't outdraw me with one gun, what makes you think two's gonna make any difference?"*

*"Don't be so sure, Madrid."*

*Johnny gave a slight shake of his head. "Well, then, Marcus. Since I wasn't expecting an invite today, I didn't come properly dressed." He took off his gloves and threw them off to the side. Then slowly he unbuttoned his coat and let it slide off his shoulders to fall behind him, where he gave it a kick with his boot, pushing it off to lie in a heap near the gloves.*

*The cold wind now bit through his red flannel shirt, and he flexed his fingers to bring them some warmth. He was at a disadvantage, but wasn't surprised. This was how Marcus Black worked. He was dressed more appropriately, had the wind at his back, and had probably been sitting indoors somewhere, warmed through, while Johnny was still stiff from the cold, two hour ride to town.*

*But the adrenaline was already flowing, the cold becoming a minor nuisance; the only thing that truly put him at a disadvantage was the wind. It stung his eyes, making them water.*

*"So, are you gonna draw, Madrid, or are you just gonna stand there 'til you freeze to death?"*

*Johnny took only a second to process the information. Marcus was clearly going out of his way to let Johnny make the first move. But why? Certainly not because he was trying to prove how fair he could be. No. There had to be another reason, a hidden motive to his behavior. Because both of them knew he was no match for Johnny's speed.*

*Which meant it could only be a set-up.*

*In the next second, Johnny made a quick study of every movement in his field of vision. And was rewarded with the glint of a revolver from the shadows of a window in the second story of a barn just behind and to Marcus' right.*

*In the next second, he noted the shadow of a figure behind a whiskey barrel on the second story porch of the saloon behind and to Marcus' left.*

*The double holster made sense now. Marcus didn't really care whether he actually shot them both, he just needed them for show, to help conceal the fact that two other guns were going to be firing.*

*And that's why he was being so generous. The two weapons were already drawn and aimed. What did it matter if Johnny got to make the first move? He was already dead. Marcus had made sure that the deck was stacked in his favor, and now it was up to Johnny to discover how to even the odds once more.*

*"Hey, Madrid! The cold freeze your nerve?"*



*Johnny smiled wryly, hands still open and to his side. “No, just thought I’d let the wind freeze your ass a little while longer.”*

*“While I might have a cold ass when this is over and done with, you’re gonna just be stone, cold dead,” Marcus sneered. “Now, draw!”*

*Johnny’s grin spread slightly and he slowly pivoted, gesturing toward the townsfolk gathered on the boardwalk. There weren’t many, maybe a dozen or so, but Johnny wasn’t really interested in them—they were simply a part of the setting, his audience.*

*He wasn’t afraid of turning around, knew Marcus and his men didn’t dare shoot him in the back, not with so many witnesses, and as he turned, he gestured with his left hand. “I’m surprised you want to have so many witnesses to your unbelievable lack of skill,” Johnny called out as he turned his head to let the gusting wind catch the brim of his hat and push it back off his head.*

*The extra movement was what he needed, knew it would draw his opponent’s attention for that split second. With his gun side away from Marcus, he drew while finishing his pivot. And in rapid fire precision he sent a bullet toward the shadow behind the barrel and another toward the dark opening of the barn. By the time he had his gun leveled at Marcus, his opponent had drawn. Giving him that extra second to back down, his attention fixed on his opponent’s eyes—for they wouldn’t lie like hands could—Johnny saw the moment of decision, the flash of hatred and anger which took over reasoning. As Marcus pulled the trigger, Johnny propelled himself off to the side to land in the dirt, but not before he got off his own shot.*

*Marcus screamed, struggled and fell, clutching at what had been his good leg.*

*Johnny gave a grunt as he pushed up from the cold, hard ground, pausing for a moment as his eyes flicked from Marcus rolling on the ground, to a crumpled shape slumped against the second story railing, to the sprawled form of a man face down on the ground in front of the barn, then back again to Marcus.*

*As the rush of adrenaline began subsiding, he became conscious of the excited, yet strangely hushed voices of the crowd and the slow return of movement along the street.*

*He slid his revolver back into its holster and began to walk forward. As he did so, Marcus quit his rolling, though he still clutched at his leg, blood seeping between his fingers.*

*“Told you it wouldn’t make no difference,” Johnny stated.*

*Marcus’ eyes narrowed, and though Johnny saw the flash of unchecked rage, he was still almost caught off guard as the hand that had been clutching the underside suddenly appeared with a revolver. “Oh, you think so!” Marcus yelled as he fired.*

*Johnny heard the crack and the whine of the bullet as he found himself once again dropping to the ground, his own revolver back in his hand, smoke dissipating in a gust of chill wind.*

*Marcus lay still, sprawled on his back, a gaping hole where his jaw had been, a pool of blood oozing under his head, melting the frost.*

*“Yeah, I think so,” Johnny muttered as he rolled back to his feet.*

*The noise from the crowd increased as another dozen or so people came out of the safety of the buildings to gape at the aftermath.*

*Johnny took a step back as Doc Patterson ran first to Marcus, where he took one look and shook his head before running toward the other man sprawled on the ground. There, two other men were already kneeling by the prone figure, one of whom stood as the doctor approached.*

*“This one’s dead.”*

*The doctor knelt beside the man and turned his face, sighing as the blank eyes of death stared back at him.*

*“Up here!” came a shout from the porch and the doctor, clutching his black medical bag to his chest, ran across the street.*

*Johnny shivered, a chill settling on him, and he quickly reholstered his weapon and bent down to retrieve his coat just as Mr. Greyson, the undertaker, stomped up to regard Marcus’ body with mild interest. “Yeah, I guess he be pretty damn dead,” he stated tonelessly as he flicked the ashes from a cigar onto the ground and shoved it between his teeth before turning to make his way toward the men gathered about the other body.*

*Johnny shrugged into his coat and was stuffing his hands into his pocket for warmth when he noticed the sheriff walking toward him. He wanted to go into the saloon, get away from the cold sucking at him from both inside and out, but he knew talking to the sheriff was a necessary formality, an understood agreement between the law and the one who barely skirted its borders. He and the sheriff had been through it all before with the first gunfight, the one with the young hotshot gunfighter Mitchell had on his payroll, who had obviously talked a better game than he played...if he had ever really played it before.*

*What was that guy’s name...damn...you’d think I’d remember it... Johnny shook his head, irritated that the name eluded him while the face, unfortunately, did not.*

*He turned at the sound of his name being called, and was surprised to see Harley loping in his direction. His friend, his beard stiff and frosted from the cold, reached him just as the sheriff did. Harley quickly gave the lawman a deferential nod, then stepped back, waiting until Johnny was finished with the obligatory ritual.*

*“Never saw nothin’ like that,” the sheriff commented. “How’d you know that Marcus had back-up?”*

*Johnny shrugged. “Just felt it, I guess.”*

The sheriff shook his head, turning as he brought cupped hands to his mouth, blowing on them for warmth. He did a quick survey of the scene, the barn, Marcus's body, the small crowd of people on the porch and shook his head. "Damn," he muttered before turning back. "Well, I guess I saw just as much as anyone else." He paused. "Think he was hired by Mitchell. He's kept to himself, naturally, but I could swear the fella over there," he nodded toward the barn, "was on Mitchell's payroll." He sighed. "Hope your luck holds, Madrid. If Mitchell takes over, I'll lose my job fer sure. Nothin' to do about it though, as I ain't in no hurry to be dead." He paused again, shook his head as he eyed Johnny. "Damn, you're fast, Madrid. But I'd sure as hell hate to be you." He turned and headed toward Marcus' body.

Johnny shifted his attention to Harley, but as he did, his eyes caught sight of a cloak-wrapped figure standing a few yards away on the boardwalk. Though the hood almost obscured the face, the dark green eyes were still visible. And for a moment the parting words of the sheriff seemed to echo around him, and he grew even colder.

Annoyed, he turned to Harley. "What are you doing here?"

Harley glanced uncomfortably over his shoulder. "Mr. Stanton asked me to take Miss Stanton into town. I guess he'd tried to catch you before you left, but—" Harley shrugged.

Johnny grimaced as his eyes flicked over Harley's shoulder where Laura was stepping off the boardwalk, headed in their direction.

"Damn," he muttered, his expression one of open annoyance, as he watched her approach, coming to stand beside Harley.

"Well, I guess I now know, firsthand, how you conduct business, Mr. Madrid," Laura coldly stated.

"Why don't you get on home, where you belong," Johnny responded sourly.

"While your business appears to be finished," she replied archly, with a pointed glance over Johnny's shoulder toward Marcus' body, "I still have mine to attend to."

Harley turned to her. "Why don't you go on ahead. I'll meet you at Ballin's."

"I'll need help. I have a couple of packages—" Laura stopped as the sound of terse voices approached.

Four men were carrying the injured man along the boardwalk, his moans attesting to the fact that while he was alive, he was in a lot of pain. The doctor was following closely, trying to monitor and give orders at the same time.

"Oh," Laura murmured as the group stepped onto the street and headed toward the doctor's office, the direction of which would take them right in her path. As they drew closer, Laura stepped back out of the way, Harley following her. For a second Johnny hesitated, drawn to the face of his would be assassin. A young man no more than Benj's age, his hand clutching

at his bloodied right shoulder, his shirt and the hastily applied bandaging already stained a deep red.

Johnny stepped back to allow the men to pass. But as the doctor drew abreast, he paused and fixed Johnny with a look of contempt. "I wish all you damn gunfighters would just leave. Maybe Greyson likes the extra business, but I don't," he said. "While those two," he motioned with his hand, "get a tombstone for Christmas, I'm hoping this one won't mind if all I can give him is his life, if not his arm." Without waiting for a response, the doctor curtly turned away to hurry after the men on their way to his office.

For a moment Johnny watched until he felt a hand on his arm.

"Hey, Johnny." Harley's voice dropped. "Juanito."

"I'm fine," Johnny responded curtly, his expression void of emotion. But when Harley's gaze didn't waver, he found himself unable to maintain the façade, and lowered his eyes.

"John—"

"Harl," Johnny said, his tone heavy with warning as he pulled his arm out of Harley's grasp, mindful of Laura's watchful presence.

"C'mon, Juanito. I know—"

"Go help Miss Stanton," Johnny hissed tersely, turning away.

Harley reached out again to grab Johnny's arm, only releasing his hold when he was met with an icy glare.

"You're not gonna—" Harley whispered, his eyes flicking toward the saloon.

Johnny's glare turned sour. "Go do your job," he enunciated. "As Miss Stanton's pointed out, I've done mine."

Turning away, Johnny headed into the saloon he had just been in not fifteen minutes earlier. Although his entrance was met with murmurs of congratulations and nods of approval, he ignored them all and went straight to the bar.

"What can I get you, Madrid?" the bartender asked. "On the house, of course."

"A shot of whatever you've got handy," he replied.

As the bartender quickly reached for a glass and a bottle, Johnny noted gloomily that two men were making their way toward him.

He turned his shoulder and lowered his head, accepting the drink the bartender offered without so much as a nod. He hoped the men had enough sense to take a hint.

*“Quite a show out there, Madrid.”*

*Sense was obviously not one of their attributes.*

*“If you enjoy watching someone die,” Johnny answered curtly, gulped his drink, and pushed away from the bar. “Thanks,” he said, sliding a coin across the bar, turned and left.*

*Outside he glanced about quickly, but was relieved to see no sign of Harley. After a shoot-out, while Cisco would feel a need to lecture and moralize, Harley would become his shadow, seeming to sense that in those first twenty-four hours after a gunfight, Johnny was at his most vulnerable. Johnny didn't know how his friend seemed to innately understand that while the inevitable burden and guilt settled around him, those were the rare but real moments when he could make a mistake—a deadly mistake. And it had been more than once when Harley had needed to intervene in Johnny's attempt at finding his own absolution, sometimes at the bottom of a bottle, but more often than not by joining in some bar room brawl where he stood the real possibility of having the pulp beaten out of him.*

*Normally Johnny would have accepted Harley's comforting presence, but not today, not with that Laura Stanton studying him through those dark green, accusing eyes.*

*Besides, he knew he had a bottle of tequila back at the bunkhouse.*

*He untied the horses and with the mare's reins in his hands, was ready to swing up on Charco when he noticed two men walking in his direction. He gave a tired sigh and wondered pessimistically whether common sense was one of their attributes. Something told him it probably wasn't.*

*“Madrid.”*

*Damn, sometimes he hated being right.*

*Johnny shot what he hoped was a clear and concise glance of irritation at the man who had spoken. But intelligence didn't seem to be an attribute either.*

*“A word, Sir,” the other one said.*

*Johnny gave them a quick once-over, but found nothing threatening in either their tone or manner to indicate trouble, though they both packed the requisite hardware and looked hardened enough to know how to use it.*

*“I'm in a hurry,” he replied curtly as he made to mount up.*

*“Mr. Mitchell would like to speak to you,” the first man said.*

*Johnny paused as he eyed the two men with some amusement. “I'm sure he knows where to find me.”*

*“He’d like to speak to you in private,” the man continued. “He’s waiting at Mr. Jacobson’s office, down at the next block.”*

*“Well, then he’ll just have to keep waiting, as I’m not meeting him inside, private or not.”*

*“But Mr. Mitchell—”*

*“Look. I’ll tell you what,” Johnny interrupted leaning an arm across his saddle, “if Mitchell wants to see me so bad, I’ll meet him down this alley. I’ll wait five minutes. Go tell him that.”*

*“But—”*

*“And you,” Johnny turned toward the second man, “go out and see if you can’t find me a cup of coffee. Somebody ought to have some brewing, somewhere.” Johnny paused expectantly, but when neither man moved, he flicked his hand, “Now go. Shoo!”*

*The men gave each other a quick look and took off, while Johnny waited a moment before sighing and heading toward the alley, the two horses in tow. At the rate things were going, he wondered if he’d ever make it back to the ranch before nightfall.*

*He turned into the alley, made a quick assessment of it, and leaned wearily against a wall. If nothing else, he was at least out of the wind.*

*It really hadn’t come as any surprise that Mitchell wanted to talk to him. He knew he would get contacted eventually. It always worked that way. Once the opposition had tried him, and found he was just as good as the stories said, they always came calling, hoping to buy him off with either money or power, and sometimes both.*

*But prudence—and the game—required that he never meet on their turf. And the alley, while not totally secluded, had one great advantage. It was the only alley in town that had no windows looking down on it, and therefore no possibility of a man hiding in ambush.*

*Then there was the timing. Five minutes. Just enough time to deliver the message and get to the appointed spot. Not enough to put together a plan of attack.*

*And the coffee? Well, he was damn cold, but mostly by sending the extra man off on a chore, he was keeping him from being a source of trouble.*

*It was nearing five minutes before Mitchell arrived, attempting rather gamely to appear unperturbed at the change of plans, the man Johnny had sent back with his message flanking him.*

*“Mr. Madrid.”*

*“Mitchell,” Johnny nodded*

*.*

Mitchell adopted a congenial manner, rubbed his hands to warm them and smiled. "I've been wanting to make your acquaintance for quite some time, Mr. Madrid."

"You mean, at least since I took care of your gunfighter—again."

Before Mitchell could respond, the sound of approaching steps were heard and the man Johnny had sent for coffee came around the corner, two mugs in his hands. "Here's your coffee," he said, handing one to Johnny and the other to Mitchell.

Johnny blew on his then took a sip, mentally applauding his decision to send the man for something warm.

"If you're referring to Marcus Black, that had nothing to do with me," Mitchell protested.

"Oh, please, Mitchell. We both know he was on your payroll, so let's quit playing games. There's no sheriff about. Now what do you want?"

"As I said," Mitchell replied, "I wanted a chance to talk to you. I saw what happened earlier, how you handled Marcus." He paused, gave a meaningful smile. "That was a tidy piece of work."

"Wouldn't exactly call two men dead and another wounded a clean gunfight."

"I didn't know anything about the other two men planted."

"No? Somehow I find that hard to believe."

A flash of irritation washed across Mitchell's face. "Regardless, Mr. Madrid. The little show you put on out there made me realize something—"

"What?" Johnny interrupted, a slow, sardonic smile spreading across his face. "That you're obviously not getting what you paid for? I mean, here I still stand, while two of your gunfighters are dead. Bet that irritates the hell out of you."

"It would, if I didn't know how to remedy the situation," Mitchell countered, the timbre of his voice reminding Johnny of a cat's purr. "But I do."

"Well, I don't plan to oblige you by dyin'," Johnny replied, almost bored by the predictability of the conversation.

"That's not what I had in mind. Rather, I'd prefer to have **you** come work for **me**."

"For you?" Johnny feigned the requisite surprise.

"What's Stanton paying you, Madrid?" Mitchell continued, smiling confidently. "Whatever it is, it can't be near enough what you're worth."

*“He’s paying me enough.”*

*“Come on. How much? I’m thinking it’s...what?...maybe two hundred...two hundred fifty?” Mitchell paused, waiting for some reaction, however Johnny made no reply. “What would you say to four hundred a month?”*

*“I’d say that’s four thousand eight hundred a year,” Johnny replied smoothly.*

*Mitchell looked pleased. “That it is. And if you come work for me, that’s what you’ll get.”*

*“That’s a lot of money.”*

*“I think you’ve proved you’re more than worth it.”*

*Johnny nodded slowly as he seemed to consider the offer. “Must be a lot of people you want dead for money like that.”*

*“Oh, not just dead, Madrid. I want to own, not just this town, but this part of Kansas. And with someone like you working for me, well, let’s just say I have a feeling there’d be a lot less opposition to my plans.”*

*Taking his time, Johnny nodded thoughtfully as he rubbed his chin. “Hmmm. I got a question first.”*

*“What is it?” Mitchell asked, still smiling self-confidently.*

*“Is there a quota?”*

*“Huh?” Mitchell’s brows furrowed in confusion.*

*“You know, on bodies. If I go over my quota, do I get extra?”*

*“What?”*

*“And Sundays. Do I get them off?”*

*“Sundays?”*

*“Yeah,” Johnny nodded, straightening up. “Cuz I’m thinking, with all these killings you’ll want me to take care of for you, well, I’m gonna be really needing to get to church, you know.”*

*Mitchell’s eyes narrowed and he scowled. “You’re playing with me, Madrid.”*

*“Oh, I’ve been playin’ with you for a long time—at least a coupla months now. And we can keep on playin’ as long as you’d like. But there’s no way in hell I’m gonna go work for you.”*



*“Stanton can’t possibly be paying you more than I offered.”*

*Chuckling, Johnny gave Mitchell a cool half-smile as he turned and gathered up the reins to the horses. “Mitchell, I’ll tell you this. Stanton’s paying me exactly what I asked for, which is a hell of a lot more ‘n you could afford. Now, if you don’t mind.” He swung up on Charco and tipped his hat. “It’s been interesting. Not altogether unexpected, but interesting nonetheless.”*

*With a look of unconcealed amusement, he urged his mount down the alley and out of town.*

*“Shit!” Mitchell swore, tossing the still full coffee mug against the side of the building.*

*“What are we gonna do now, Mr. Mitchell?”*

*Mitchell hissed and shook his head, glaring at the path Johnny had taken. “I don’t know. But I will damn-well think of something.”*

*Around the corner, hidden in the shadows of a doorway, Laura had listened to the exchange. She had been coming out of a shop on the other side of the street when she’d noticed Johnny standing in the alley, seemingly just waiting. At first she’d been surprised to see him holding the reins to a pony, along with the reins to his own horse, but then her initial curiosity had turned to suspicion when she’d seen Mitchell cross the street and turn into the alley to join him. Quickly she’d gathered up her skirts and as quietly as possibly, had made her way across the frozen, dirt street and up onto the boardwalk to hide in the recessed doorway of a business already closed for the holiday.*

*There she remained until she’d heard Mitchell and his men leave*

*Head bowed in thought, she’d only gone a short way before she heard Harley call her name. Though she gave the large man a warm smile, her thoughts were on the gunfighter—and the questions she wanted answered.*



Once again, Johnny’s narration stopped as suddenly as it had started as the train abruptly lurched, the wheels screeching as it curved downward along the rim of a steep mountainside. Scott watched silently as Johnny shook his head, blinking, as if he had just realized that he was staring at his own reflection, night having fallen, blotting out the scene outside, the glass now catching the light from inside the railcar, mirroring their images.

Johnny slowly turned to face Scott, a drained expression on his face. He smiled without much feeling and nodded toward the exit. “Ready to head for bed?”

Attempting to keep his disappointment from showing, Scott nodded back. “Yeah. It’s been a long day.” He glanced about the dining car. “I suppose they’d like to get us out of here so that they can clean up.”

Standing up, Johnny lead the way as Scott followed him out of the dining car and through three coaches until they reached their own Pullman sleeper. Many of the small compartments were already occupied, the hour being late, though a faint whispering of hushed voices carried into the aisle. Murdoch, in his need to do something practical, had purchased a private berth for both of them. There, in the darkened passageway, they studied each other, one with a look of sympathetic appreciation, the other with a look of apologetic regret.

Reaching toward his brother, Scott started to speak, but was cut off when Johnny raised both hands and stepped back.

With a shake of his head, Johnny murmured, "Let it go for tonight, Scott. There's only so much hell anyone should have to revisit at one time."

The warning caught Scott momentarily off guard, and he frowned, his brows furrowing as he fought the urge to repudiate the reprimand. With a forced smile and a nod of his head, he watched as Johnny climbed into his berth. Then with a heart heavy with the knowledge of partially disclosed information, he parted the curtains to his own sleeper and climbed in, his thoughts already turning to the next day and the possibilities of unearthing more of the story of Madrid—an explanation for what had brought his brother down to the lowest point in his life, where his choices turned self-destructive, and he started on that downward spiral meant to bring about the eventual escape from the brutal and hopeless life of a gunfighter.

In the adjoining berth, Johnny lay in the darkness, his thoughts returning to the events which he had recently recounted to Scott, his chest tight with the dread of what was yet to come.

Clenching his jaw, he hissed in irritation. Partially at himself, for having waited so long to tell Scott the story, and partially at the ghosts which now ran through his thoughts. For relating the events had brought a steep price. He had tried hard, over the course of the last few years, to bury and forget this time of his life. But now, though he had mentally prepared himself, and had known for quite some time that it needed to be done, he had found he was totally unprepared for the toll it was taking on him. For while he had tried to remain dispassionate and detached, he had found himself thrust back to that time, to that period in his life where he had gone from hope to hopelessness.

But his irritation was nothing compared to the respect he felt for Scott. For while Johnny had continued to evade the issue, even after promising Cisco he'd tend to it, Scott had shown his unyielding faith and steadfastness in committing his support before ever hearing all the details. Despite all that had happened, despite all they had been through, and even with the prospect of the Kansas trip looming before them, never once had Scott tried to force the subject. He had been content to bide his time, allowing Johnny the opportunity to initiate the account when he felt ready.

And now the story was opened, a tragic tale for all players—and an ending yet to be written. He hadn't originally planned to go into such detail, but for some reason, once he had begun, it seemed important to relay the events accurately. He had found himself wanting his brother to understand all of what had happened, why and how he had found himself in the position he had.

TO BE CONTINUED ...



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