

*PATH
OF
FIRE*



BY AVB

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*Between paths of fire and ice runs a river of temperate peace
- Chumash saying*

PROLOGUE

February 20, 1896

Springtime was always fickle on Lancer but on this day, the weather cooperated with a bright sun, clear skies and a warm, gentle wind that carried the smell of new grass and ancient oak. As expected, the turnout for the funeral was large. All the hotel rooms in Morro Coyo, Green River, and Spanish Wells and as far as Cross Creek were booked to capacity. Gracious neighbors opened their doors to the rest - it was the least they could do to honor a man that had helped shape their valley.

A murmur of voices surrounded the ornate oak casket as everyone assembled for the graveside service. Earlier in the day, the church overflowed with mourners. Now they stood to offer their final farewells to Murdoch Lancer with their feet on the very earth he forged into a legend.

All eyes seemed to be on the priest as he thumbed open his bible but Father Michael knew otherwise. He angled his head for the best focus on God's words in his hand realizing he would have to work for the assembly's full attention. Clearing his throat to ensure full projection, he wondered if he would be able to refocus the assemblage's curious eyes from the single vacant graveside chair and the grieving figure seated beside it.

CHAPTER ONE

"That was a nice service."

Somewhat winded, the dark haired woman tugged off her gloves standing in the doorway of Lancer's great room and feeling like a part of all that surrounded her. Her eyes traveled over the massive bookcase and delicate ship model, finally settling on the man standing by the expanse of glass that overlooked the ranch she once called home. Outside glare made an inky profile against the thriving landscape. As always, Lancer, the ranch beyond, overwhelmed those within these walls.

With the sound of her voice, the ebony silhouette turned slightly in her direction and for a fleeting second as the outside rays caught his blue eyes, he looked like the virile young man she remembered first meeting so long ago. Then he turned his gaze back to the hills and the illusion was lost.

"*He looks so . . . vulnerable,*" Teresa O'Brien Newhall thought. When he moved from the picture window the sum of years became clear before her. Still, the aura of what he was glowed in her memory. "*He has Murdoch's strong jaw line.*" Teresa cleared her throat, quickly pushing aside the what-had-been thoughts, and spoke with genuine regret. "I . . . I really thought he'd come."

The lone figure ducked his head at the comment and chuffed. Leaning heavily on his crutch and with his back to the expanse of land, Johnny Lancer gave his surrogate sister a sidelong look. The smile that touched his mouth was small but true and Teresa could not help but return it with her own. When she took a step toward him, a young woman appeared in the great room doorway with a sniffing baby hitched on her hip.

"Mama?" The young woman's focus shifted suddenly from her mother to the man at the window. "Oh! I'm sorry, Uncle Johnny. I didn't know you were in here."

Johnny's smile warmed and the well-earned lines in his face softened. Teresa then saw more of the man she once knew in his expression. "It's all right, Eliese." He regarded the young beauty for a moment; Teresa knew what he was thinking. Eliese was the spitting image of a very young Teresa O'Brien. "You aren't interrupting anything." The smile faltered.

"All right," she acquiesced politely, refocusing her attention on Teresa. "I'm putting Helen down for her nap. I'll meet you in the kitchen in a few minutes?"

Teresa nodded an acknowledgement and asked, "Is your father still in the barn?" Unable to

hold her daughter's gaze, Teresa's attention returned to her surrogate brother.

"Yes, along with Paul and Alex." Eliese followed her mother's lead and turned back to her uncle, who had moved from the window to the desk. The well-worn end of the wooden crutch softly thumped on the floor. "They said they would go to town this afternoon and get those things you need, Uncle Johnny."

"Thank you, honey," Johnny replied, his smile reduced to a ghost.

"Eliese," Teresa said, tearing her stare from Johnny as memories surged. "I'll see you in the kitchen."

Eliese nodded and with a gentle word to her baby, retreated from the room. The silence was heavy with history for the remaining moments until Johnny's voice broke the quiet reverie.

"She's a beauty just like her mother." Johnny's voice was soft. "And your granddaughter has the same traits."

Drawn from the past, Teresa smiled. She moved to Johnny's side and settled her hand in the crook of his elbow. "Sit, Johnny, before you fall. You're exhausted."

Amazingly, he complied without comment or complaint and worked his way into the big chair that once belonged to Murdoch Lancer. Taking a moment to gage his condition, Teresa became concerned at the paleness beneath the natural darkness of Johnny's skin. "*He's had to fight for so much in his life,*" she thought, not for the first time. "*It just isn't fair.*"

She kept her voice low and ducked her head. "Do you think he knows?" Teresa took Johnny's hand and leaned a hip against the desk. He squeezed her fingers slightly.

"I don't know, querida. I wired Garrett Enterprises but I probably won't get an answer. I never do." Johnny released her hand and rubbed his eyes, the picture of weariness. "I thought maybe, since Harlan's died, I'd get an answer this time - that maybe my message would get through."

Suddenly uncomfortable, Teresa bit her lower lip and wondered if she should ask the question that had haunted her for so many years. "*Now is the time,*" she told herself. "*He's all alone and he knows it.*"

"Johnny, have you tried to find him at all since he left?"

Expecting anger, she fought the urge to tense up, well aware that he would notice. Instead, she got that blank look that was so familiar - the look that slipped over her surrogate brother's face whenever things got tough and he needed emotional distance to cope. It was the mask of Madrid, and she had not seen in it in years. The room suddenly seemed colder.

"Yes," he replied. His jaw tightened and he dropped chin, his attention on his sole hand as he slipped it from her grasp. Moments passed while he studied the appendage as if it were brand new. Then Johnny flexed his fingers as if using them as a distraction from whatever

thoughts tumbled through his mind.

Then with a sudden sigh, the edges to his face softened and the angles became aged curves. The next words sang with raw emotion as the mask cracked. "I could have tried harder, though. I . . . I didn't think I was ready. I didn't think I was good enough for him or Laurie yet." Johnny's voice cracked at the admission. "I just couldn't stand to see disappointment in their eyes."

Teresa encircled his shoulders with her arm and held on. Johnny's uneven gasps told her he was fighting for control and that was when she realized how exhausted he really was. Giving her beloved brother time to recover, Teresa looked aside hoping to find a reason to change the subject. Her gaze fell to an object sitting on the desktop. It was a rectangular metal box, about nine-by-twelve inches, standing as high as one of Murdoch's books. One of the long sides held a sturdy lock. When Johnny's breathing evened and their eyes met, she tipped her head in its direction and asked, "What's that?"

He acknowledged her question by following her line of sight and reached out, resting his hand on top of the box. The metal was cool under his palm. He studied the item a moment before speaking, grateful for the distraction and reacquired focus.

"Mr. Dixon from the bank brought it to me just before the funeral," Johnny replied hoarsely. "Murdoch arranged to have it delivered here . . ." His voice caught. The arm of his surrogate sister tightened sympathetically across his shoulders. Clearing his throat to loosen the sudden constriction, he continued. "I . . . um, was about to open it. Not sure I want to now."

Teresa slid her hand across his upper back and took a step backward. "Then I'll give you some privacy."

"No," the Lancer heir said quickly, his hand moving at an unbelievable speed to snatch her wrist. "No. I'd rather you stay." After the passing of many ticks from the room's Grandfather clock, he raised his head and met Teresa's brown eyes again. Although she'd gained some lines on her pretty face, her eyes still had the same soulful earthiness he remembered. She was his strength at this moment. Relinquishing his grip, he let his hand trace her wrist just before he took her fingers with a gentle squeeze. "Please. Stay."

She eked a tiny smile and nodded, then settled her hip back on the edge of the desk. "Do you have the key?"

Johnny nodded as he reached into his shirt pocket. Teresa held the box in place with one hand as he slipped the key in the lock and gave it a twist. The lock popped open without hesitation and he slipped it from the hasp. Teresa pulled her hand away and Johnny opened the lid.

A neat stack of files and papers filled the inside. Johnny lifted a pair of envelopes on top to look at the larger files beneath. The worn edges of the files crumbled with age but the Pinkerton logo was still clear on the top cover.

"He kept them," Teresa said quietly as Johnny lifted two files out, one much thicker than the

other.

"Looks like it," Johnny murmured. He held the thick one bearing his two names aloft, the events creating its girth seeming so long ago - a lifetime ago. With a thoughtful pause, he put the two folders back without opening them, after checking that there was nothing more underneath. Then he picked up the two fat, legal-sized envelopes that were on top and opened them. One held the original document that he, Scott and Murdoch had signed so long ago forming their partnership. The second, labeled in Scott's familiar hand, bore a date Johnny only vaguely remembered. With trepidation, he slipped the folded paper out from the second envelope with ease because the wax seal had become brittle and flaked away at his touch.

The document trembled slightly in his hand as they read. It stated that Scott Garrett Lancer had relinquished his third of the ranch for Johnny and Murdoch to split evenly. His brother had signed it, but the lines for Murdoch Lancer and Johnny Lancer's signatures were blank.

Johnny heard a small gasp just before Teresa whispered, "He never intended to come back!"

Taking a long, deep breath to open his again constricting throat, Johnny felt the sharp sting of tears in his eyes. In an emotion-thick voice, he rasped, "Murdoch never told me about this." In all honesty, he had to admit he probably wasn't very receptive at the time. He ducked his head in short-lived regret, knowing it was a useless sentiment. Shame, however, was a little more difficult to put aside.

As if she were reading his mind, Teresa's arm wrapped around his scarred shoulders once again as if reading his mind. "I guess Murdoch still held hope that he would come home."

"Til the day he died," Johnny choked. He cleared his throat once more, blaming fatigue for his loss of control. When he did speak, his voice was a husky whisper. "His last words to me were to bring him home."

There was a long silence. The air tingled with raw anticipation. Johnny knew Teresa had questions; he also knew she deserved answers. What she had been put through so many years before had never been acknowledged and he often wondered if all those events were the reason she moved to Los Angeles. Everyone he loved left him eventually; it seemed inevitable.

If that were true, then what was the point of finding his half-brother? Tiredly, Johnny rubbed his grainy eyes with his work-calloused hand and then unconsciously rubbed the rounded stump of his left arm. The curtain of fog at the edge his mind was difficult to break through.

"Johnny."

Teresa's sweet voice brought his attention back and he smirked, eyes fixed on the oak desktop where the pattern of the wood was whorled and interesting. "I know what you're thinkin'," he said, tracing the elongated ring patterns with his fingers.

“You do?” He could hear the smile in her voice.

Johnny closed his eyes and stilled his hand. Teresa’s voice recalled her young face as he had first met her at the stage stop in Morro Coyo.

“Mr. Lancer?” The voice was soft and sweet and edged with uncertainty. The girl looked very young as she stood there at the stage stop with that silly hat.

“Yeah?” they both answered in near unison. The Eastern dandy turned his head and gave him a perplexed glance.

Johnny smiled every time he recalled that look, just as he did this time. They were all strangers then; then they weren’t for a long time, until suddenly, they were strangers once more. How did that happen? He felt his easy smile start to fade, but looking up into those familiar eyes allowed the smile to hold. “You’re thinkin’ I need to eat and get some rest.”

Her laugh was still light and breezy and the best thing he’d heard in years. “Dios, I’ve missed her. I was - am - such a fool.” Even with that deprecating thought, his smile endured.

“It seems that’s all I ever told you, doesn’t it? And all I ever did was boil water and make enough willow bark tea for an army.” They both had a chuckle as Teresa rose to her feet. “But seriously, Johnny, my husband and boys are perfectly capable of taking care of things here for a few hours,” she said lightly. “You should rest.”

Johnny nodded, knowing she was right. The Newhalls and their Segundo, her son-in-law Alex Avalon, were all experienced ranchers. The Newhall Land Company was the largest ranch in the Los Angeles area one of the largest and most diverse in the entire state. He felt Teresa rub his back sympathetically.

“Come on, Mr. Lancer. No one is above nap time.”

Before he rose, the latest head of the Lancer household pulled a sheet of paper in front of him and dipped his pen in the inkwell. Placing a glass paperweight to hold a blank sheet, he scratched a message, taking his time and frowning with concentration - this message needed to be perfectly clear.

Teresa did not interrupt her brother-by-heart as he worked. When he was finished, he tugged the paper free and read it over. After blotting it dry, he folded it carefully and held it out for Teresa. She glanced at his sorrowful eyes before taking it from him.

"Make sure your boys send this wire when they get to town." Johnny's voice was thick with barely concealed emotion and he chastised himself again for sounding so weak.

Teresa nodded. "Sure, Johnny." She tucked the note in the patch pocket of her dress and smiled with affection, then put her hand on the back of his chair to steady it as he rose.

Suddenly Johnny felt tired. Using a little more effort than he cared to admit, he pushed himself up and found his crutch. Teresa stood to his right with a light hand on the small of

his back. She knew better than to try to support him; Johnny got around quite well with his crutch and remaining leg. Any interference could disrupt his balance.

Instead, she carefully shadowed him with a feather light touch. Johnny had grown to appreciate that gesture, one that used to infuriate him. Thoughtfully, he pressed his lips together as they made their way to his room on the lower floor – Teresa's old room.

With time, he finally learned to accept help, and with that acceptance, the anger slowly dissipated. It had taken a long, long time to find something to replace the hot emotion; it was that now established feeling of self-confidence that set the direction of his latest thoughts. So much time wasted on anger. Would he now have the time to complete what he contemplated starting?

Teresa left him at the bedroom's door. Johnny moved in, alone, and settled on the low bed, exhaustion dragging him toward sleep. Unbidden, his mind returned to the day everything changed because of time and Madrid.

March 15, 1876 – Twenty years ago

"Look at the time! We missed the stage!" Scott Lancer snapped as he rounded the corner of the Barley Creek train depot. "Now we have to wait until tomorrow afternoon!"

"Aw, comon', Scott, what's another day? We'll get to sleep in our own beds tomorrow night." Johnny stopped in his tracks with the glare his brother threw at him. Properly chastised by the look, he mumbled lowly, "I'll buy ya a beer. Would that help?"

Scott dropped his valise on the boardwalk in disgust and brushed off the sleeve of his jacket. "Johnny," he started, lifting his eyes to meet those of his half sibling's. Hesitating, he worked his jaw then shook his head and sighed. "Two beers. You owe me two beers."

"Two?" Johnny protested, snatching up Scott's valise in an act of penitence. "Why . . ." He stopped and took a step back from the warning glare that burned his direction.

"The way I figure," Scott started slowly, his eyes unwavering, "is one from Johnny Lancer and one from Johnny Madrid."

Johnny had the decency to flush slightly before nodding acknowledgement and dropping his chin. "Yeah, okay, I see your point. Two beers." Knocked down a peg, Johnny grumbled, "Let's go, then."

They entered a saloon just past the train depot, not wanting to go back to the establishment that they had just vacated.

The one where Madrid had been called out to prove himself once again.

The one with fresh blood on the ground near the entryway.

The one that the sheriff just let them leave after a lengthy grilling, making them miss the train to Cross Creek.

Without another word, the brothers made their way to the second saloon of their day and sidled up to the bar in silence. Johnny dropped his saddlebags and Scott's valise to the floor and ordered two beers. Not a word crossed between them until the cool beverages arrived. Johnny took a sip, then said quietly, "I'm sorry, Scott. But ya gotta admit, it's been awhile."

Two sips later, Scott finally nodded. "Yeah, it has. I wish Madrid would just die, though." He must have realized how harsh that sounded because he turned to his brother, who was studying his foamy brew with downcast eyes. "I'm sorry, Johnny. You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," Johnny quietly replied. "Someday, we'll live just normal, boring lives."

Scott snorted. "Fat chance with you as a brother."

Johnny grinned shyly. "Back at ya, Brother."

"So tell me," Scott started after a long silence. "Is there a truly honest way to earn a living with a gun? I mean, avoid all you went through but still earn good money and gain respect?"

"Well, sure," Johnny said. "Let's see - there's Marshalin', and bein' a Sheriff."

"True, true. Neither of which I can see you doing, especially at 15 years of age. What else?"

"Um - soldierin'? Like in the army? Sharpshooters."

Scott nodded, "Yes, that's true, too. They use rifles, though."

The dark head nodded slightly. "True, and I did try the army once. Didn't last long enough to hear about any sharpshootin'." The unspoken reason why hung between them for a few extended seconds. Long fingers turned the beer mug in circles on the scarred wooden bar. "If I weren't a breed, maybe I'd a tried your army."

Scott scowled. "You know I hate that term. Without your heritage, you wouldn't be you."

Johnny's smile was sadly crooked when he hefted his glass. "That's true. Are ya sayin' you'd miss me if I got arrested?"

Scott choked slightly in mid-sip and flat foam dribbled down the outside of his mug, the previous anger dissipated. He placed the beer down and wiped his chin, then opened his mouth for a smart retort.

"Mr. Lancer?" a small voice interrupted.

The two men turned in unison to look behind them. There stood a young man twisting a cap in his hands. He appeared to be in his early teens and not one bit happy to be where he was at

this moment.

"Which one?" Scott asked. The boy looked at him with confusion. "We're both Mr. Lancer,"

"Oh! I think I mean him," he pointed at Johnny. "Used to be called Madrid?"

"That's me," Johnny replied as Scott rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to his beer.

"Mr. Lancer, Mr. Evans at the bank would like a word, if you don't mind."

"Mr. Evans? The bank?" Johnny glanced at Scott, who shrugged noncommittally. "Why?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lancer, but he spoke with the sheriff then told me to fetch ya."

Johnny took a leisurely sip from his mug and surveyed the boy. Why would a banker in a town he'd never been to be asking to see him? "Okay," he said, curiosity taking over. "I'll be over in a minute."

The young man nodded but didn't move. His hat made jerky circles in his hands. Johnny raised his eyebrows at him. "I was told not to come back without ya," the boy explained.

"Oh," Johnny said before draining his beer. "Then let's go. Scott?"

"I'll stay here," Scott said shortly. Johnny looked at his brother questioningly. "Well, I have a second beer coming to me and somebody's got to wire that wife of yours when you get thrown in jail."

The boy's eyes widened suddenly. "No! This has nothing to do with . . . that . . ." The kid's hat was now undergoing an unfair mangling. Johnny wondered if it would fit its owner's head anymore. "But that's all I know!"

Johnny turned the boy with a push to his shoulder then slapped the boy's back. "Well, then, let's go!" Johnny fell in behind the nervous young man, but then turned to his brother and shook his finger at him, whispering menacingly, "Say nothing to Laurie about today! You hear me?"

"Hmmm," the older man pondered, leaning heavily on one forearm while thoughtfully stroking his chin with the other hand. "Sounds like you may owe me another beer."

"Keep an eye on my saddlebags," Johnny grumbled. "And I will get even someday. You know that." Johnny's empty threat only made Scott's smile broader as the ex-gunfighter fell in behind the skittish messenger.

CHAPTER TWO

Johnny jerked awake, instantly recalling the dream-memory that started prior to falling asleep. It was still as clear to him as the day it happened. He often wondered if he was actually remembering the events as they happened twenty years ago, or if he was simply picturing what he'd been told after the fact. Memory, he found with time, was an easily manipulated thing.

Even so, the longing for the feelings of that time was unwavering even though they were the last hours of Johnny Madrid. It was impossible to turn back time, but could the feelings be rekindled?

Time - after the accident, it seemed like he had more of it than anything else. Time had been his enemy for what seemed like forever but in the end, time had been what eventually healed him. Why, now, did he suddenly feel like time was the one commodity that was quickly running short? Abruptly, Johnny sat up and raked his hair with trembling fingers.

A cool breeze from the open window raised tingly goose bumps over his bare torso. The gauzy curtain rustled, coercing Johnny to hear whispers of phrases spoken long ago on the wind; bits of smart mouth retorts chased by a cocky smile. Scott gave as good as he got and Johnny never passed up a chance to give. He laughed shortly, knowing he must sound crazy doing it so soon after burying his father, but then became painfully aware that there was no one near enough to hear him.

The dream memory brought into focus how alone he now was. It wasn't supposed to be this way; he'd spent many years early in his life thinking that's how things were just going to be but since being at Lancer, a different reality involving family had evolved and crept into his soul. Johnny rubbed his face to hasten wakefulness and the ability to push aside the dark feelings of loneliness that threatened to dog him.

It was mid-afternoon. Real voices drifted through the slightly open window which told him the ranch hands were starting to come in. "*I've gotten nothing done today except bury my father,*" he thought bitterly, wiping his hand over puffy eyes. That reality settled hard on his heart.

Johnny breathed deeply to clear his mind and then smiled when he heard the sound of his great niece crying in the kitchen. Eliese shushed the child, her murmured voice low and comforting. The baby eventually fell silent and a pang of self-pity rolled through him. "*You had your chance with raising family,*" he scolded himself, slipping off the bed and finding his

crutch. *"And you let it go, so get on with it."*

The hacienda was just starting to hum with activity with the preparations for the evening meal. The smell of onions and peppers hit his nose as soon as Johnny cracked his room door, the odor making his stomach roll. Food had not set well with him for the past several days.

Johnny managed to make it out the front door without being waylaid by Teresa or the kitchen staff and headed to the barn. The dusty smell of hay and horses always settled his soul, and his soul was definitely in need of something right now; Johnny felt the emptiness of the huge hole inside him.

Low rumbling greeted him as he stepped inside and his mood lightened. The old palomino, gray around the eyes and muzzle, bobbed his head over a stall door. At twenty-nine, the horse was thin and stiff, his eyes clouded, but still eager for the attentions of his only master.

"Hola, amigo," Johnny replied warmly. "Been ignored the last coupla days, huh, Barranca?" When he reached the door, he scrubbed the horse's forehead with affection. The horse dropped his head a bit lower and his eyes contentedly closed halfway at the sound of Johnny's voice. The peaceful feeling was obviously mutual as the man stood quietly for a few minutes simply stroking the old horse's bony head.

A shout outside jerked Johnny from the moment - a rider was coming in. A quick mental calculation told him Teresa's boys weren't due back from town this soon. The rider was probably another neighbor relaying sympathies. Johnny felt himself stiffen as he pulled his emotions tightly in check in a well-practiced way.

As he turned from the old horse and moved toward the barn doors, he heard Rafael, his Segundo, speak in a questioning tone that indicated the rider was someone he did not know. Johnny slowed his pace as he reached the large doorway, unnoticed from the outside. This gave him a bit of time to examine the new arrival.

The rider sat deeply in his saddle, comfortable in his position on the shiny, blood bay. He was a broad shouldered young man, his face unreadable with his hat pulled low and his head angled away from Johnny as he spoke to Rafael. Dark hair curled over the collar of his patterned shirt and a well-worn holster lay snug against his thigh. When the new arrival turned his head, something in the young man's profile coupled with an odd feeling of familiarity centered on the red bay made Johnny step from the doorway and into the late afternoon light. An anxious feeling of anticipation made his gut tingle.

"Can I help you?" Johnny queried. The young man turned at his voice and Johnny instantly recognized his son although he had not seen him in nine years. He fought to keep his face passive as his heart leaped.

Arctic blue met with questioning indigo as the two men's gazes collided and fused. Johnny could easily read the smoldering emotion behind the icy depths; the all too familiar anger and distrust had lived together for a long time behind his own eyes. If ever there was a moment for calling forth Madrid for self-preservation, this was it. Johnny, however, swallowed hard and faced his son as Johnny Lancer.

“Jason,” he said in a tight, controlled tone as the pair regarded each other. “It’s good to see you. Gracias, Rafael, I’ll take it from here.”

In his peripheral vision, Johnny saw surprise flash across the Segundo’s face. Then the wary Mexican nodded shortly and headed toward the corrals. Jason reined the striking blood bay to face Johnny, then, after a moment of indecision, he nudged the horse forward and stopped immediately in front of Johnny not for a second relinquishing his eyes from those of his father.

Leaning heavily on his crutch, Johnny automatically raised his hand and rested it on the animal’s long face when it stopped before him. He tore his eyes from those of his son in an attempt to dampen the strong emotion he felt rising inside and turned his attention to the horse.

“This the colt I sent to you?” he asked in a soft tone, not quite trusting his voice. “He was just a yearling when . . .” he quickly checked the thought and took a new tack. “He doing well by you?”

“Yeah, he is.” Jason’s tone strained with heavy control. The younger man dropped his head and cleared his throat before speaking again. “Mama thought ya might need some help so here I am. Sorry I missed the funeral. Took a bit for the word to get to me.” His tone had turned flat and anger-edged, the lines well practiced to Johnny’s ears. Then his son’s eyes met his again. “I wasn’t sure I should come.”

Johnny held the look of muted anger and nodded an acknowledgement to the unspoken vastness of the last statement. He also recognized the same defiant fire and ice skillfully tempered with an admirable show of control that he’d seen in the mirror at that age.

“You’ve got your mother’s eyes,” he said, the phrase echoing from his past as it spilled from his tongue. “And my temper,” he added with a half smile, ducking his head. He stroked the horse’s nose. “Is your mother doing all right?” he finally asked, both to diffuse the antagonism and satiate his need to know.

A flash in Jason’s eyes told the older man of an initial comment held back. Instead, his son’s answer was a short, “Yeah.” The seconds that followed were heavy with the unsaid as he seemed to make a decision. Jason touched the saddlebag nested behind his right leg. “I have a letter from her for you.”

Both men fell silent. Johnny was admittedly relieved that his son didn’t rise to the bait he’d not really meant to dangle by acknowledging, and then ignoring, the obvious anger. It was such a surprise to see him here; Johnny felt a little off kilter with Jason and the painfully clear barriers he carried with him. Still, Johnny was pleased at the turn of events and vowed to seize the opportunity and find a way to connect with him.

Did Murdoch have these same thoughts twenty-six years ago, here, on this same piece of land? He wondered.

Hopping sideways a step, Johnny laid the flat of his hand on the bay’s face and then trailed it

along the wide cheek and half way down the animal's neck where he felt the tackiness of dried sweat. With a final pat, his hand dropped to his crutch and he stepped back, tipping his chin up to face his son. Taking a wild chance, he spoke from the heart, unlike his own father all those years ago. "I'm glad you came, Jason. We have a lot to talk about." Jason's eyes narrowed before he gave a silent nod of acceptance. "You've been on the trail for a while. Please, take care of your horse and come into the house. Teresa's here."

The offer wasn't rebuffed and, instead, Jason's head cocked sideways in a questioning manner at the mention of his aunt. The hooded eyes brightened a little and one corner of Jason's mouth curled into a small, crooked grin. "She makin' a cake?" he asked lightly, using the momentary truce in a backhanded way.

Johnny laughed shortly. The lightness of the reply was a good omen. "Don't know. Been kinda busy today."

Jason's smile instantly disappeared and his voice laced with sincerity. "I, ah . . . I'm sorry about Murdoch. I tried to get here in time for the service but it just didn't happen that way. I, um, don't remember a lot about him but I know he was a great man."

Johnny's gamble at an opening was called.

"The man had to be great to stand by me all these years," Johnny thought automatically. Regret flared as he refocused his attention. His ability to keep up this dance of emotional positioning was waning quickly. Johnny knew he had to withdraw and regroup. He adjusted the crutch in his grip and spoke softly. "Yeah, he was. Why don't you come on in? I'll tell Teresa and Eliese that you're here."

"Eliese is here?" Jason said in unmasked surprise.

Johnny felt a connection stripped of history and circumstance and he warmed. "Yeah, why? You afraid she'll knock you into the horse trough again?" Johnny grinned. The reference came to him in a flash and he went with the feeling without a second thought.

Jason's surprise that his father was aware of that incident showed clearly on his face. Then he flushed slightly with embarrassment and fiddled with his reins. "I was ten years old and probably deserved it," he mumbled, embarrassed, as the defensive wall cracked ever so slightly.

Johnny smiled. "You did, so I understand." For at least a moment, he felt like they were on even ground and relaxed a little. "Come on, I think she's probably forgiven you by now. Put up your horse in the barn. There's a couple of empty stalls."

Jason nodded and moved to stable his horse while Johnny started to the hacienda. As the bay's rump disappeared inside the barn, Rafael appeared from the corral and fell in beside his boss and friend. "I should have recognized him," the Segundo said. "It has been a long time. Is it all right that he is here?"

"I think so," Johnny drawled.

The initial shock of seeing his son again had worn off, allowing his weariness to return. Even with the tension, the arrival of his estranged son sparked the darkness with hope. Could he rebuild a family? Should he even entertain such a thought? Would he ever be able to have the extreme patience that Murdoch had shown him? Silently vowing again to try, Johnny nodded to his Segundo and gave him a weak smile. "Guess we'll have to see how it goes."

Although the mental dance had tired him, Johnny felt refreshed. He turned from Rafael and started to the hacienda courtyard to wait for his son and perhaps start a second round of talks, determined to make some kind of progress this night. Time was a commodity he felt slipping away like Lancer's soil through his age-tempered fingers, and it was time to face that fact.

As he passed under the courtyard arch, the long shadows pointed toward the blooming greenery of Teresa's garden. She had been gone from this household nearly two decades now but the garden was still considered hers. The stone bench placed at the edge of the courtyard, dividing the yard and the garden, had originally been in the garden itself. After she married and left Lancer, Maria and various members of the extended family came to fill the void but would visit the garden only to harvest what they needed and to encourage growth. Anymore, it was not the place of reflection it had once been. The bench moved to the courtyard for better visibility of the barn and working area. Johnny knew it had been moved for him. It took a while for him to appreciate the gesture.

He appreciated many things now and more things as each day dawned. Johnny settled on the bench with a weary sigh. The decision to wait for Jason was made without any prior thought. The two of them had to start talking sometime and his heart raced with idea of confrontation. The boy deserved answers – it was right and long overdue that he was here and Johnny resolved to complete the connection with Jason that he aborted so long ago. From his own life experience, he knew it was possible. Definitely not easy, but possible. He took a deep breath to settle his mind.

Johnny allowed the sounds of the ranch to surround and soothe him. He was at a place now in his life where it was comforting to hear the bustle around the estancia. A short time ago, that wasn't the case. He shook his head at his own past folly. Allowing himself to relax, Johnny leaned his head back against the hacienda wall and shut his eyes as the warmth of the dipping sun washed over his face. The uneasiness of talking with his estranged son slipped away as a pleasant breeze, thick with the scent of roses, wafted over him.

He'd given fresh cut roses from this garden to Laurie when his son was born.

My son.

April 12, 1874 – Twenty - two years ago

The squall from the upper floor was immediately followed by the jar of a firm slap on Johnny's back.

"Sounds like you're a daddy, little brother!" Scott smiled broadly. "Let me be the first to congratulate you."

“Thanks,” Johnny choked. He wondered how he could be so completely shocked at an event he had known would happen for the past seven months.

“Yes, son, congratulations!” Murdoch’s arm slipped around his younger son’s shoulders to give him an affectionate hug. The other hand offered a shot of tequila. “Here’s to another generation of Lancers.”

Still a bit dazed, Johnny accepted the drink and held it aloft to join his brother and father’s glasses.

“Here, here,” Scott agreed as they clinked glasses and threw back the drinks in unison. The crying upstairs continued, unabated.

“Sounds like he’s got your lungs, old man,” Johnny said with a shaky, lopsided grin.

“And your temper,” Scott added.

Maria appeared in the great room doorway. “Juanito, you have a son.” The tired creases around the woman’s eyes transformed into cheery laugh lines as she smiled. “Come and meet him.”

Johnny didn’t hesitate. He shoved his glass into Scott’s hand and grabbed the bunch of roses he’d gathered in Teresa’s garden earlier in the day. Upsetting the crystal vase that contained them in the process, there was a moment of desperate juggling to save it from crashing to the floor before he had it firmly in his grasp. Then he leaped from the room, laughter swelling in his wake.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Johnny made it to his room well ahead of the small Mexican woman and pushed open the door. Then he found himself frozen.

Laurie had never looked so beautiful. Her skin glowed and her eyes shone with pride. Cradled across her breast within her comforting arms was a wiggling bundle, now reduced to quieter protests and gurgling mews.

“He’s beautiful, Johnny.” Her sky blue eyes sparkled with emotional tears and he found himself inexorably drawn into the room, the gift of flowers forgotten in his hand.

When he reached her side, Johnny dropped his stare to the swaddling cloth and the tiny hand he could see grasping at air.

The first time he saw his son’s eyes the depth of awe nearly paralyzed him. Without thought, he reached out and allowed the tiny fingers to clutch his thumb as the mesmerizing blue eyes drew him in. So small, so fragile, yet his grip was astoundingly strong.

Laurie’s small gasp broke the connection. Tears ran down her face. He went to reach for her, but the flowery gift prevented the motion. He looked at the vase with surprise then quickly set it on the bedside table only to be forgotten once again. Unwilling to break his son’s grip on

his one hand, Johnny's other hand traced the line of her tears with a finger before cradling her cheek in his palm. "Why the tears, querida?" he asked huskily.

"Because I'm so happy, my love," she whispered.

He smiled at her, then removed his hand from her cheek and laid it gently on his son's head. It was warm and soft, the downy hair dark and ample. Struck speechless, he studied the face of his child.

His child. The strong feelings evoked by this vision before him was overwhelming. Johnny thought for a moment to blame it on the heady perfume of the roses, but he knew better. This was what everything was all about – this is what made sense. This was family, and he finally found his voice.

"Jason Murdoch Lancer, welcome to the world," Johnny said softly. Then he lifted the squirming bundle and took him to the window. "Let me show you your birthright," he whispered in the boy's ear as they looked out over the rolling hills of Lancer.

When Jason stepped from the barn, Johnny would be ready. The sound of jangling spurs would reach his ears and Johnny couldn't help but grin at the vision he saw of his son walking toward him, worn saddlebags draped over his shoulder as he brushed dust from his sleeves.

In that instant, he remembered what it was like to be young and full of life, your future out there to grab. The bounce in the boy's step filled him with pride; there was his legacy and the future of Lancer. His heart ached that Murdoch had not seen this young man striding across the stockyard, raising the dust of his ancestral land. The thought rang of one of those Scottish sagas Murdoch was prone to tell about his homeland and Johnny was both comforted and strengthened by the memory.

CHAPTER THREE

Jason unsaddled his horse and tried to sort the various feelings that burst forth at the sight of both Lancer and his father. He'd paused just before crossing under the stucco arch that steadfastly held the family name; seeing the large letters spelling out Lancer unleashed a rush of unexpected feelings and forgotten memories. He had nearly turned around and gone to town instead, but his mother's voice sounded clearly in his mind - *"Promise me you will cross under that arch and stay, Jason. You are obliged by blood to do so and I'm hoping you'll oblige your heart and stay."*

Jason shook his head to loosen the grip of the words. Well, he'd crossed all right but staying was another matter. Stepping on this land brought forth a strange combination of elation and anxiety and he didn't like it. His first inclination was to run and that alone was a reason to try to stick this out. He didn't like feeling out of sorts or controlled by emotion; if there was a cross to bear regarding this place, then he would bear it for however long it took to get over it. He would worry about staying or leaving after he figured out where he stood.

The bay shifted uncomfortably and Jason immediately stopped his vigorous brushing. "Sorry, amigo," he apologized. "Got a little heavy handed there, didn't I?" Jason stroked the red neck as he spoke and the horse dropped his head as he relaxed. Satisfied with the grooming, Jason pulled the lead rope free of the tie ring and led the animal to a far stall.

An old palomino watched, ears pricked forward, as the young man released his horse in the adjoining stall. "Hey, Solano, I think your neighbor here can probably give you the low down on the place." After latching the door, Jason moved to the ancient gold head and gently rubbed behind one ear. "Barranca here knows the ropes, I'm sure. How are ya doin', boy?"

As he rubbed, the old horse pressed against his hand with eyes half closed. Jason studied the bones of Barranca's face and remembered what he looked like when he was much younger - a flash of gold romping in one of the pastures.

"You sure could work a cow, old man," he said softly. "My mama says you and pa were quite a team." Considering his words, Jason continued. "You know my pa better than I do, you know that? What was he like back then?" Barranca bobbed his head against Jason's strong fingers, enjoying the moment. Jason considered his words. "Guess I have a chance to find out now, don't I? Shouldn't let the chance pass by? You think it's a good idea that I stick around?"

Itchy spot finally satiated, the old palomino stepped aside and shook his head. Then he licked his lips in satisfaction and turned a large, amber eye to Jason, measuring up the young cowboy with a look.

Jason laughed. "Well, which is it? Stay or go?" Barranca blinked slowly and stretched his neck out just enough to push his muzzle into Jason's hand. The horse's eyes half closed again. "Looks like one vote to stay," the young man mused. "I'll consider your advice."

Gently stroking the thin neck for a moment, Jason finally stepped back and collected his saddlebags. "See you later, Barranca, Solano." He stopped by the red horse's stall. Solano had apparently settled in quite happily because he didn't lift his head from the manger. "Looks like you'd like to stick around too, huh?" Ignored, Jason shook his head with a grin. "I think I'm getting' ganged up on, here."

Jason tossed the saddlebags over his shoulder and walked to the barn doors. The light outside was tinged in pink and gold, dusk on its heels. He stepped into the stockyard and noticed the thin layer of trail dust on his sleeves. He paused and gave his arms a cursory brush that would make him at least acceptable enough to enter the hacienda.

With that thought, he turned his attention to the large structure as he walked. The afternoon sun patterned it with shadow and light, blush and black. The western windows sparkled brightly and red bougainvillea draped lazily around them, softening any sharp angles. The same flowers bedecked the wall surrounding the home but the roses are what he smelled in the gentle wash of wind. Jason canted his head into the slight breeze and saw his father sitting alone on a bench just inside the wall and next to the garden.

He hesitated; the man was an enigma. What he saw right now, what he remembered, and what he'd been told were all different things. Which one of them was his father? Nevertheless, one thing was certain - the man before him was inexorably tied to this land, to Lancer, and therefore tied to him. His stride paused as he considered his emotions again. Should he allow this undefined anger toward his father to rule him forever?

Ordering his feet to move, Jason made the decision to stick it out long enough to try to understand Johnny Madrid Lancer. Maybe then, he could understand why he and his mother were driven away so many years ago. Maybe in doing that, the hole he always felt in his heart would heal. What did he have to lose?

Now that he was in front of his father, Jason could see the amused tilt to Johnny's lips. A slight nod of Johnny's head toward the open part of the bench delivered an invitation to sit. After a moment of thought, Jason accepted. He lifted one ankle to rest on the opposite knee and dropped the saddlebags to the ground at his feet. Then, he lifted his eyes to the setting sun.

"That's a beautiful sight," he commented quietly.

"And it's even more beautiful because it's here," his father replied.

There were several minutes of quiet as the pair watched the sun drop behind the coastal

range to the west. Delectable smells emanated from the direction of the kitchen as the evening meal was being prepared. Light gray smoke wafted from the bunkhouse and the sound of the hands' laughter carried faintly on the air as they drifted in at day's end. The blanket of the night quietly drew over Lancer.

A slight movement in Jason's peripheral vision caught his attention. In the dusky dark, he could see his father's fingers working something in the palm of his hand. A creamy light from somewhere in the hacienda slanted over the bench and Jason caught the dim shine of something surrounding Johnny's wrist, just below the cuff of his sleeve.

"What's that?" Jason asked, pointing at the adornment.

Johnny looked to his wrist, turning his palm upward. Jason could see the dark line of a bracelet encircling his father's wrist and the knot where it joined just above Johnny's palm. Two tails trailed down from the knot, the ends trapped against his skin with his father's fingertips. Johnny opened his hand and released the twin tails. The two strands lay across the lifeline of his palm, each one tipped with an aquamarine bead.

Johnny snorted softly. "Habit. Don't even know I'm doing it half the time." He lifted his arm and twisted his wrist, allowing the cuff of his shirt to slide back enough to expose the bracelet. Jason could now see that it was a string of beads. In the dark, all he could see was that some of the beads were lighter and some as dark as the night's shadows.

"This was given to me when I was around eighteen," he said slowly. Jason noted the hesitation before continuing. "The tribe that gave it to me was gracious enough to save my life once." Another pause, and when he spoke again, Johnny's voice was softer. "There was a time I considered that a worthless gesture. Now I don't. I wear this as a reminder."

Jason frowned slightly. "A reminder of what?"

Before he answered, Johnny dropped his wrist and trapped the trailing ends against his palm once again in a practiced manner. It was a few seconds before he spoke again and Jason turned his attention to the shadows of his father's face. The elder studied the bracelet. "Of another phase of life, another mindset. Another path. And, that a cause once taken up has meanin'. That painful memory fades, but never goes away and shapes the person you become."

Sitting a little straighter, Johnny twisted slightly to face Jason and raised his chin to connect eyes with his son. The dark blueness was barely discernable in the feeble light, but the power of the look did not allow the younger man to look away. Then his father spoke.

"I need to apologize to you and your mother, Jason. I threw away a lot of valuable time and wasted away a lot more. I need to tell her that she was right; she was always right. I disrespected both of you and I intend to make amends. I just don't know how."

"I don't know how you're going to do that either." Jason held his father's stare, his voice bitter. "She never spoke ill of you, did you know that?"

Johnny broke the connection and dipped his head. “No, I didn’t know that.”

Anger welled again inside Jason as the wall between them began to crack. “Even when I said I hated you, she never wavered. She never gave any excuses, either; she just kept saying how you loved us. I believed her for a long time . . .”

Recognizing the white hotness of his anger before it completely consumed him, Jason shot to his feet, hands clenched as he reined in the emotion. He took in several deep breaths as his father sat, head bowed, before him. Jason worked his jaws then spoke between clenched teeth. “I believed her even though what I saw didn’t match what she told me.” Jason made an effort to relax, remembering the decision made in the barn. “She made me come back here all those times with Teresa and her family. I could not figure out why she wouldn’t come with us. I finally told her I wouldn’t come back - ever - unless she came, too. Then you sent that colt to me . . . Solano.”

Jason clenched and unclenched his hands as he stared at the top of his father’s silver-laced head. Then he bent over and picked up his saddlebags, slinging them over his shoulder in a single motion. His father had not moved. Jason let out a sharp breath as he adjusted the leather. “I just can’t figure you out. I want to see what my mother saw. I want to know what happened. I want to know the man that took the time to notice what mare and stallion I favored and gave me their colt. I just want to know you. But you won’t let me.”

Finally, Johnny sat up and then struggled to a stand. Once there, he met his son’s penetrating stare. Even in the cloak of night, his sincerity was stunningly clear. “I can now, son, if you are still willing. Stay.”

Jason could only trust himself to nod. Then he remembered the letter from his mother and retrieved it from the depths of his saddlebag. He handed it to his father, who then accepted it after a moment’s hesitation. Johnny looked at it, folded it in half and tucked it away in his shirt pocket. After doing that, he found Jason’s gaze again. Each searched the depths of the other trying to calculate where, exactly, to start their new relationship when the sound of the kitchen door opening caught their attention.

Framed by the warmth of the kitchen Teresa greeted Jason and then called the both of them in for supper. Jason waved an acknowledgement and in that instant realized she had arranged for the time alone with his father, and that she had more than likely made sure they were not disturbed.

As if reading his mind, his father said, “She couldn’t be any more a Lancer if she shared our blood.”

Jason nodded and with a half grin, stepped aside to let his father pass. When they entered the kitchen, Teresa broke away from the bustle to peck him on the cheek.

“Welcome home, Jason,” she said. “Take the first bedroom to the left at the top of the stairs. It was your father’s room.” She squeezed his forearm and smiled a smile that made her brown eyes shine. “And hurry. Supper’s waiting.”

Johnny watched his son's back disappear from the kitchen. He looked at this surrogate sister across the room, the noise and action of the kitchen unnoticed. She smiled and he mouthed "Thank you." With a slight blush, she nodded an acknowledgement before turning to a small Mexican girl that demanded her attention.

Johnny headed to the great room where the cluster of men there gave him time to regroup, mentally and emotionally. It wasn't long before Jason bound down the stair and then they were called to the table. When they sat to their meal, Johnny was acutely aware that Murdoch's position at the head of the table was reserved for him. Whatever pensiveness he felt after he sat faded with the good-natured chatter that filled the air. With the stressful emotions of past days finally laid to rest, the future could be considered.

As Johnny looked around the table and enjoyed the easy give-and-take of conversation and teasing, he mentally thanked Teresa for keeping his son connected with Lancer. She had been the one to stay in contact with Laurie and Jason all this time, even more so than Murdoch had. Again, he brushed aside the shame and focused on the good intentions of his acquired sister. He smiled at her from across the table. She returned it easily with familiar dancing eyes and Johnny felt elation at the fortunes he still possessed.

After the meal, the women fell on the dishes and preparing baby Helen for bed while the men – Johnny, Jason, Alex, Paul and Daniel – retired to the plush seating surrounding the fireplace for libations. Johnny opted for the lemonade that was always available on the bar as the others sampled Murdoch's scotch. They raised their glasses in a silent toast and then settled down to talk.

Ranching was the main topic. Johnny listened to the talk, pleased that Jason seemed well versed on the subject. Although Laurie lived in a town on the outskirts of Los Angeles, she had encouraged her son from the very start to learn about ranching when and where he could – and he apparently did with interest and enthusiasm. Daniel and Teresa's ranch was the boy's classroom. Daniel added that Johnny's son had a reputation for his eye for cutting horses, his interest kindled years ago by the blood bay Johnny had sent him on his fourteenth birthday. Johnny had heard about his son's ability from Teresa in her regular letters, but coming from the mouth of another was pleasing to hear.

He'd missed so much. Johnny leaned back in his armchair and absorbed the feeling of family that surrounded him, doubly aware of the circumstances that brought them here. Still, he didn't feel remorse or the long-residing anger he carried for years, or even any sadness at what he had lost. What he felt was growing contentment in his heart. The table talk about the approaching new millennium and fresh starts raced in his mind and energized him in a way he hadn't felt for a long, long time. It was a certain kind of feeling borne of hope and with it, a plan sprouted in his mind: Once Teresa's family returned home to Los Angeles, this great room would again hold his own family. He knew that in his heart, his instant belief stalwart.

When Helen finally settled and slept, Eliese and Teresa joined them. Conversation eventually dwindled as the effects of the past days' events hit them all. Daniel, with Teresa on his arm, gave their excuses for the night. Eliese and Alex soon followed leaving Teresa's son Paul alone with Johnny and Jason. The young men spoke of heading into town for a

nightcap, the power of youth energizing their blood.

Johnny listened with half an ear, his mind awhirl. There was so much he wanted to say but hesitated to speak. All he felt was a longing to be surrounded by family, always. Trying to quiet his mind, Johnny focused his attention on the two young men and was amused. Jason was the elder of the pair by almost five years but they were very similar in appearance and build. They could have been brothers, the way they interacted. Johnny wondered if Jason had ever wished for a sibling.

Like Johnny wished right now.

With that thought, all hesitancy was gone and he spoke. "I don't mean to interrupt your plans, boys, but I want to ask you a favor."

The two young men turned to Johnny. "Ask away, Uncle Johnny," Paul said. Jason remained silent.

"Paul, would you stay here at Lancer for a spell? I'm going to speak to Eliese and Alex, too. Do you think your daddy can do without you three for awhile?"

The boys glanced at each other questioningly, and then back at the senior Lancer. "I suppose so," Paul said slowly. "Pa has plenty of help right now. Why? You goin' somewhere?"

"Was thinkin' about it. How about it, Jason? Join me on a trip?" Johnny quirked the corner of his mouth into a grin and regarded his son.

Jason stood a little straighter, a look of surprise arching his eyebrows. "I don't know," he said. "I'd have to wire Mama." He nodded his head a moment later, the decision made in his mind but apprehension still apparent in his eyes. He spoke slowly. "I suppose I could. I guess I should ask where we're going."

"Not sure yet, but I hope to find out soon." Johnny waved the boys off. "I'll tell you as soon as I know. And my lips are sealed if you two want to take a trip into town."

Youthful exuberance instantly lit their faces with wide grins. The pair grabbed their hats and headed for the door without a moment's pause. Chuckling at their quick departure Johnny pushed to a stand and gathered his crutch. Tiredly, but with a good measure of excitement marking his motions, he made his way to Murdoch's desk – it would always be Murdoch's desk to him – and looked out the huge window over the moonlight-frosted land that was his. If his plans worked out, he would be sharing this view in the near future with Laurie and Scott.

Was he being too optimistic? What did he have to lose at this point? Where should he start?

Leaning heavily on the crutch, his hand strayed to the pocket of his shirt where his wife's folded letter nestled over his heart. Making the decision to wait until he was alone to open it, Johnny knew that in reality, he had to build the courage to do so. When he saw the dark forms of the boys trotting toward town on the moonlit road, he thought, "*No or never, coward.*" Johnny took a deep breath to dispel the tingling of his nerves. He turned to the desk. Laurie's letter sat heavy in his pocket. He rested his hand on the tall back of the desk chair

for support as he paused and acknowledged the anxiety he felt. Johnny took his time settling in the chair, knowing full well that he couldn't put off the inevitable. Finally, he slipped the sealed envelope from his shirt and leaned back, regarding the missive as worn leather embraced him. He swallowed hard to dispel his nervousness. The paper trembled between his fingers.

The letter was crumpled and browned from Jason's saddlebags. Johnny felt the corner of his mouth soften and curve up at the minor mauling; his son was just like him in that respect. He broke the seal and removed the letter with agile fingers, then shook it open. He took a fortifying breath before reading the neat, familiar script.

My Dear Johnny,

I am so very sorry about Murdoch. He was a wonderful man and a good father. My heart goes out to you and Teresa. I can only hope that you have found Scott and he was able to pay his respects.

I sent Jason as soon as I could. I know it may be uncomfortable for both of you, but it is a long overdue meeting. You both need each other, Johnny. He is a fine young man, but longs for his father. I am sure you know how he feels. If you have to be angry, be angry with me because it was all my doing.

Please let me know how you are. Lancer is a big ranch, but I have no doubt you will do a good job keeping it going. If things had been different, I would be there at your side. I still love you and always will. I can only pray that someday you will believe that.

*Sincerely from my heart,
Laurie*

Johnny's hand dropped to the desk, the letter still in his grip. She thought he would be angry to have Jason here. Wearily, he released the paper and rubbed his eyes. Another mistake had just slapped him in the face as he realized just how large the gap was between them, and that it every bit of it was his fault. He sighed. "You'd think I'd be used to the pain of my mistakes by now."

Suddenly incredibly tired, Johnny slipped the letter in the top desk drawer and found his crutch. Before standing and retiring to his room, Johnny turned the chair and again drank in the sight of Lancer under the moon's curtain of light. Now, it seemed lacking.

His gaze fell upon the path that threaded under the monumental Lancer arch in the distance. The moonlight was bright, silvery and full of life in an enticing way - it always reminded him of the first time he laid eyes on Laurie Kinkade. Flashes of life with her paraded through his

mind, all of them taking place before the accident. He felt a stirring long missed.

Standing a little too quickly to stop *that* enticing line of thought, Johnny swayed dangerously before recovering his balance, forcing his mind back to the matters at hand. Setting the crutch, he made his way through the great room dousing lamps as he went to prepare for bed. Alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

July 2, 1873 – Twenty -three years ago

The bright light of the full moon was all he had to find his way to the private stable just outside the town limits. He easily found his way along the path, but the shimmering light slowly dimmed by the leading edge of an approaching storm. The growing darkness told Johnny there wasn't a lot of time to find the stable before he and his charges were soaked. Stockton didn't get many thunderstorms, but when it did, they were memorable.

Barranca and the two horses in tow trotted steadily along the path with Johnny hoping they wouldn't stumble by a hole or rock in their path. One particularly long patch of light finally showed him the outline of the spread he was looking for and he sighed in relief. It was bad enough that all the stalls in town were full for the livestock auction, but getting rained on while ferreting out remaining stalls would just be insulting.

Johnny knew he could really only blame himself. Murdoch had arranged for holding pens but Johnny did not want to crowd these two horses in with the rest. There was no reason to risk fine horses like this with an errant kick or bite. He knew he could get top dollar for this particular pair.

The low growl of rolling thunder announced his arrival at the front porch of Jacob Garbaldi. "Hey, in the house!" Johnny called. Long moments later, the front door opened. "Mr. Garbaldi?" he asked. "Johnny Lancer."

An older man stepped onto the front porch holding a lantern high. "Oh, yes, Mr. Lancer! My son told me to look for you. Go ahead and put your horses up in the barn. You're welcome to stay the night, too. Storm's gonna hit right quick and you'll never make it back to town dry."

"Thanks," Johnny smiled, untying the lead lines from the saddle horn. "We've got some rooms in town and I don't want to be a bother. Do appreciate you puttin' up the horses, though."

"No problem at all. Get them comfortable and I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Gracias," Johnny said as he headed to the barn. When he got there, he dismounted and shoved the wide doors open, more thunder covering the noise. "Come on," he said quietly to

the animals as he led them inside. A brisk wind chased them through the entrance and one of the doors broke free of his grip, slamming open.

“Oh!” a feminine voice yelped. “You startled me!” Johnny turned, searching the shadows of the barn for the source. After a second or two, the moon once again prevailed and a shaft of light entered a side window, high in the barn wall. The moonbeam fell directly on a woman framed over a stall door, causing her blonde hair to shimmer and glow in the light. The woman blinked, used a hand to push an errant lock of hair from her eyes, and then disappeared back into the depths of the stall.

Johnny wrestled the barn door closed. “Are you all right?” He asked, somewhat taken aback by the sight of a woman in a barn this time of night. “You live here?” he asked as he started securing his horses to tie rings on a central pillar.

An airy laugh prefaced a reply. “In this barn?” she questioned lightly.

Johnny grinned. “No,” he said, liking the sound of the laugh. “Not in the barn. In the Garbaldi house. Mr. Garbaldi didn’t say anything about you being out here.”

“Nope,” she said, “I rented a room for the night but I don’t believe he knows I’m out here. He’s a bit deaf, I think.” Her voice suddenly dropped to such a soft tone he could barely hear what she said. “I’m here to sell some horses. This one and the chestnut next door.”

Curious, he tied off the second horse and walked to the stall with Barranca trailing behind. He looked in. There was a lantern mounted high in one of the stall corners that threw enough light to paint the stall in sepia tones. The blonde woman murmured in a soothing voice and stood at the neck of a horse in obvious distress. The reason for the animal’s pain was clear.

“First foal?” he asked quietly.

“Yes. She isn’t due for another week or so. She’s not very big. Between the storm and her pains, she’s pretty scared.”

“Understandable.” Knowing Barranca’s presence may be upsetting the young mare Johnny pulled him aside and began unsaddling. “My name’s Johnny. Johnny Lancer.”

“Laurie Kinkade. And this surely is an awkward place to meet, Mr. Lancer, wouldn’t you say?” Her voice was musical and soft as she tried to keep the mare calm.

Johnny smiled. “It’s a first for me,” he replied just as soothingly. After the palomino was unsaddled and brushed, Johnny turned him loose in one of the empty stalls then followed suit with the two sale horses. The woman’s even voice floated in the background all the while as she comforted the mare.

“You brought these horses here by yourself?” Johnny asked as he latched the final stall door.

“I had to. There was no one else. Everything was going just fine until now. I wasn’t expecting

this so soon.”

Leaving his charges happily munching on hay, Johnny returned to the mare’s stall just as the barn was lit up suddenly and brightly. Thunder rattled the walls within a heartbeat of time. The mare jumped in terror, spinning suddenly and bumping the woman into a corner. She let out a surprised grunt when she hit the wall.

Instantly in the stall, Johnny spoke rhythmic Spanish and moved slowly but steadily to the woman. The mare’s ears twitched nervously, the whites of her eyes visible with fear. Laurie made it to her feet and cradled an injured elbow when Johnny arrived at her side.

“You all right?” he asked, placing his body between her and the frightened horse.

“I’m fine,” Laurie answered, her voice remaining low and steady even with her grimace suggested otherwise. “Just a bump. Her water broke just a few minutes ago. I can’t leave.”

“Then I’ll stay and help you,” Johnny replied, returning his attention to the horse.

The sound of the rain was nearly deafening when it finally started. The following spate of thunder snapped in a seemingly endless concert. He finally was able to catch the nervous mare’s halter and he spoke soothingly near her active ears. His constant reassurances finally calmed her edgy pacing, but she still trembled with every clap of thunder and flash of lightning. Laurie stood right next to him, refusing to leave until the leading edge of the storm had passed and the thunder blew away into the distance. The rain eased its furious downfall, eventually becoming a gentle, steady patter.

The mare, finally settled, dropped her head and her eyes became dark as she accepted the inevitable. When Johnny released her, she circled once and pawed the ground.

“I think her time’s about here,” he noted.

“I think you’re right. Let’s give her some space and see how she does,” Laurie said, moving to the stall door.

It was at that time when all the distractions of nature were finally quiet that Johnny really looked at Laurie Kinkade. What he saw in that moment was both pleasing and comfortable – a combination he’d never felt with one of the fairer sex. For the next several hours, with the smell of damp earth and dusty hay never seeming so wonderful, Johnny and Laurie watched the wonder of new life introduced to the world.

“She seems to be doing fine,” Laurie observed quietly. “I appreciate the company, Johnny. If there had been a problem, I’m not sure I could have handled it.”

“Oh, I think you would have done just fine,” Johnny smiled.

Laurie ducked her head a second, embarrassed by the compliment, and then instantly looked aghast. “Oh no, just look at me! I’m a mess!” Her head snapped up and she looked around.

“And alone in a barn with a man I just met! What’s everyone going to think?”

Johnny laughed and took her elbow, directing her to the barn doors. “I won’t tell if you don’t and I really don’t think anyone else here will say a word. Your secret’s safe, Miss Kinkade.”

She stared at him for the moments it took to realize how silly she was being. Then she giggled and Johnny’s heart leaped.

Johnny awoke with a start from the sudden rush of emotion. It took him a moment to realize that he’d just experienced a vivid dream about his wife; he hadn’t felt like this in a long while. He scrubbed his face with a shaky hand and laughed at himself. It was as if he was waking up from more than just sleep – he truly felt alive again.

“I can’t believe I slept at all,” he thought. The last thing he remembered after settling on his bed was thinking of Laurie and now he had wakened with thoughts of her. The pressing feeling of running out of time nagged him and stoked a long dormant restlessness. Sitting up, he swung his leg over the side and tried to focus on other things. When he heard the child noises of his great niece, he smiled. The sound of youth had been gone too long from this house.

By the time he wandered into the kitchen, the table was clear of dishes. The second round of breakfast started with Eliese placing a plate of eggs drowning in salsa and corralled by fresh tortillas in front of him as he sat. “Good morning, Uncle,” she said cheerily. “I hope you don’t mind a little company while you eat.” She bent down and plucked her daughter from the floor, then settled into a chair with little Helen in her lap. A plate of plain eggs and tortillas was immediately the focus of grabby fingers.

“Sure, I’d love some company.” Chuckling, he reached over and playfully ruffled the little girl’s hair. “I’m the last up, I take it?”

“Yes you are, lazy bones,” Eliese teased. She worked to keep egg bits on the plate as she spoke. “Dad sent out the crews, and Paul and Alex are unloading those supplies from yesterday. Jason’s seeing to the barn.”

“They send my wire?” he asked between bites. The food was tasteless on his tongue but he knew his niece would report to Teresa if he didn’t at least try to eat.

“Yes.” She bounced her leg, making the baby giggle as she ate. “Do you think he’ll answer this time?”

“I didn’t send it to Scott. I sent it to the Pinkerton Agency.” He felt his heart race, hope flaring once again.

Eliese’s leg stopped bouncing and her mouth dropped open for a moment before her attention forced back to the wiggling child in her lap. “Really?” she said.

“They found me once. I’m thinkin’ they can find him. I should have done it much sooner.” The surge of hope made butterflies flurry in his stomach. He put the fork down, dropping any

pretense of an appetite. Instead, he picked up the heavy white mug emblazoned with the Lancer brand.

“That would be wonderful,” Eliese said. “I was so little when he . . . when I last saw him. I wouldn’t recognize him.”

Johnny studied the young woman in front of him, smiling thoughtfully. “No need for that, Eliese. He’d recognize you in a heartbeat.”

Eliese glanced up, a very familiar grin gracing her lips. “I look that much like mama, huh?”

Johnny could only nod. Carefully setting his mug down, he pushed the plate back and shoved to a stand. “Guess I’d best look at the books,” he said. “They’ve been neglected a bit. Life goes on, and all.”

Eliese looked at his plate and frowned. “Mama said . . .”

“. . . to make sure I ate that, right?” He gestured toward the plate. His niece nodded, her attention again taken by the child’s more than enthusiastic dealings with her meal. “I’ll do better at lunch,” he said quietly. He left the kitchen to the mother’s gentle chastising of the recalcitrant Helen and moved to the great room.

As always, the ranch ledgers demanded attention by their mere presence on the corner of the massive oak desk. Johnny paused, his eyes running over the worn spine for a moment before he continued on to the large picture window. He stood close enough to feel the coolness radiating from the glass onto his cheek. Gazing out, he felt the mantle of weariness that had settled on his shoulders weeks ago grow heavier. As Helen squealed in the kitchen, he recalled Eliese’s face and his thoughts strayed to Teresa.

March 1, 1871 – Twenty-five years ago

Johnny was in the barn forking straw into the stalls. It was a cool day, but he still had his shirt off. His skin shone with sweat and bits of straw stuck everywhere. The itch drove him crazy. Managing to ignore it and concentrate on the work helped to keep his mind away from forbidden territory. That's why he was out here in the first place.

Avoiding Teresa was nearly impossible. He couldn't formulate in his mind why he felt he should avoid her other than the fact that what he was feeling was wrong as well as dangerous. He feared his feelings for her and feared even more that she felt the same. The point had been reached where something needed saying. When he was near her, he wanted to touch her hair or her cheek. He felt drawn to her eyes and his thoughts went places he knew they shouldn't whenever he met her gaze. The girl had just turned seventeen.

This had to stop. He did not need any more complications right now, what with him trying to hammer out some kind of relationship with his father and all. Grudgingly, he decided that some kind of rules had to be set. Rules. He couldn't believe he'd come up with that thought. Rules are usually the last things he wanted. What was that word Scott used the other day?

"Parameters," that's what it was. Some kind of parameters had to be set.

Emitting a grunt with the final pitchfork load, Johnny put the tool aside and wiped his forehead. He leaned against the stall door's frame and grabbed the canteen hanging on a nail. The cool water felt good going down and he closed his eyes for a moment as he drank, his reason for being out here almost gone from his mind. Then a noise in the barn's doorway made him turn and he nearly choked.

Teresa!

Johnny quickly swallowed and grabbed his shirt from the stall door.

"Isn't it a little cold without a shirt?" she said, a small smile on her rosy lips.

"S'okay," he answered, hanging up the canteen and slipping on the shirt. "The work, ya know, warms ya up." He took a breath to both settle his nerves and organize his thoughts. "In fact, I'm glad you're here. We gotta talk."

"I know," she said, dipping her chin. Her entwined hands rolled together. The young girl hadn't come in more than a step the doorway and looked as nervous as Johnny felt.

"Sit down," Johnny offered, patting a bale of hay. After a moment's hesitation, she walked over and sat. Johnny dropped down next to her after he buttoned his shirt. There was a stretch of tense silence. The youngest Lancer chided himself for finding this so difficult; he would rather be facing a gunfighter, he realized disgustedly. "Teresa," he finally forced himself to start, "we haven't known each other very long. . . ". He paused, searching for words.

Teresa glanced up at him through incredibly long lashes, her doe-like eyes starting to melt his resolve. "Johnny?" she queried. "What is it?"

Johnny stood quickly, her nearness simply too distracting. "Teresa, I can't . . . we can't. . ."

She cocked her head and frowned. "Can't what?"

While trying to find his tongue again, he motioned between them with his index finger. "Us. We can't do anything about it." Dios, he thought angrily. Did that even make sense?

She looked at his hands and his uncomfortable posture, and slowly rose to her feet, her mouth hanging open.

"You're only seventeen," he said softly.

Teresa's expression went from wonder to shock and then to dismay in a handful of seconds. Then she blushed and her lips pressed into a firm line. "I won't be seventeen forever," she said tightly, the telltale quiver of pre-tears touching her words. Quickly, she ducked her head and swiped angrily at her eyes.

"I know, querida, but we just can't. We're family, and I don't want that to change. Murdoch would..."

Her head jerked up, doe-eyes now smoldering with hurt. "Murdoch isn't my father," she snapped. "I don't care what he thinks."

Johnny gently took her shoulders; she trembled under his hands. "I don't think that's true. And, well, he's my father and I'm havin' enough trouble gettin' on with him without complicatin' things."

"So I'm a complication?" she replied, her voice rising.

"No, no, honey, no. You're my sister! You're family to me. I can only love you as family and that's as far as it can go. Do you understand?" The hurt in her eyes seemed to fade a bit, but the tears still wavered on her lashes. "I'm not ready to take anything more on right now. I can't. I'm still trying to fit in here."

The young girl's lips twisted for a moment with thought. "I... I did tell you to think of me as a sister," she whispered, remembering the day clearly.

"Yes. A sister I never had. In less than a year, I've gained a sister, a brother, a father and a new life. It's a wonderful thing having family. I cherish each one of you. As my sister, we are bonded forever."

Teresa looked up again, the tears somewhat abated and a soft smile on her features. "I understand. Really, I do." She sighed and Johnny dropped his hands, reaching with one hand to frame her chin with his fingers. He smiled at her and she reflected it right back, eyes shining. "One day we may wonder what it would have been like."

"Yeah, probably so." They attained a mutual understanding. Johnny felt relief wash over him as well as a sense of comfort in knowing his family was now on stable footing. "You are going to make some man very happy one day, Teresa."

"Thank you," she said, her eyes twinkling. "And I suppose you'll have to approve of him?"

Johnny took a step back and tucked in his shirt. "Darn right. That's what brothers do."

And that's just what he'd done when, three years later, Teresa met Daniel Barnett Newhall.

Still standing at the window, Johnny took a moment to remember exactly what Teresa had looked like when she left the barn that afternoon in 1871. The sun had just dropped under the distant hills and he recalled the pink and purple background of sky and mountain outside as she left. Her silhouette of billowing skirt and uplifted chin was black against the fading light outdoors. He especially recalled how delicate her outline was, and he could clearly imagine how she would look as a grown woman.

"So many chances ignored. It could have been so different," he thought. "But would it have made a

difference?”

Teresa had been right. He often wondered in the past several years what it could have been like and damned himself as a fool again. The heartache of Laurie never would have happened, but then again, there probably would have just been a different heartache. He never would have had those few years of unmitigated happiness only Laurie could provide. So many paths not taken.

Recognizing the all too familiar dark spiral his thoughts formed, Johnny let out a short, explosive breath and forced himself to move to dispel regret and remorse. Tearing his eyes from the expanse of Lancer bathed in golden midmorning sun, he spoke aloud to turn his thoughts in another direction.

“Well, desk, looks like you and I need to get close.” Johnny crutched his way to the massive leather chair, the previous darkness of spirit trying to reclaim him again. He sank into the buttery softness and tried to herd his thoughts to the area of bookwork instead.

Unexpectedly, a vision flashed in his mind’s eye of the lean, blond form of his brother in this very chair, his eyes locked in concentration on the Lancer ledger lying open on the desktop. *“I’ve made too many mistakes,”* he thought. *“But now I have a chance to correct them. One step at a time - Laurie first, and then Jason. Then just maybe I’ll have the courage to face Scott.”*

“Johnny?” Teresa’s voice made him raise his head where he found the girl – woman – framed in the doorway to the entry hall. “Mr. Randolph is here.”

Johnny saw the thin frame of the town’s most respected lawyer follow her into the room, pulling his hat from his head. Jason trailed in behind them, a youthful bounce making his spurs jingle. Johnny’s lips quirked at the familiar sound and he gave the boy an amused look. *“Was I ever that young?”* he thought.

Jason hesitated a moment at the look then returned a tiny, but wary, smile before he dropped onto the worn couch.

“Johnny,” Thomas Randolph’s calming voice greeted. “Again, my condolences. Murdoch was a great man.”

“Yes,” Johnny replied, his attention now on the lawyer. “He was. Thank you. Please, have a seat. Teresa? Coffee?”

“Mr. Randolph?”

“Yes, Teresa, that would be nice. Thank you.”

Gathering his crutch again, Johnny moved into the great room seating area. “Have a seat, Mr. Randolph.”

The visitor did so next to Jason, setting the leather valise he carried on the low table in front of the couch. Johnny settled into an armchair across from his son as Randolph began

removing papers from the case.

The lawyer arranged two stacks of papers. "It was a memorable ceremony yesterday. The valley has suffered a great loss. He will be missed," he said.

"Thank you." Johnny cleared his throat then nodded at the papers. "I take it that's his will? He said you were the executor."

"Yes, it is. I've sent one of the hands to get Rafael, since he is named, and had Jason come in." He gave the boy a glance and a smile. "It's good to see you, young man. It's been a long time."

"Yessir," Johnny's son said. He hiked a booted and spurred ankle atop his knee and leaned back. Busy fingers immediately began toying with the silver rowel on his heel.

"Teresa should be here, too," Randolph continued. "You haven't heard from . . ."

"No," Johnny cut him off. "I sent word, but I haven't heard anything." Further explanation was averted as Teresa entered the room carrying a tray laden with refreshments. Rafael, who nervously clutched the rim of his dusty hat in his hands, trailed her.

"Have a seat, Rafe," Johnny said tiredly. For some reason, weariness again enveloped him and the polite chatter and clatter of the tray seemed distant. The matching armchair next to him caught his attention. It seemed very empty. "*That's where Scott should be sitting right now,*" he thought. The busy noises quieted and Johnny's attention snapped back with a gentle word from his surrogate sister.

"Johnny, I put your coffee next to you." She regarded him with a slightly worried look as she sat on the smaller couch next to the hearth.

He glanced at the small table, surprised and a bit embarrassed that she was able to approach without his noticing. "*Pull yourself together, Lancer,*" he scolded himself. "Thanks," he said quietly, averting his eyes in a useless attempt to conceal his weariness from her.

"Now that everyone is here, we may as well proceed," Randolph began. Tilting his head back to see through the glasses perched at the end of his nose he cleared his throat and read the introduction before moving into the body of the document. Johnny knew what most of Murdoch's wishes were and therefore was not surprised that Rafael was the first named. His thoughts began to drift and Randolph's voice faded into the background as another scene played out in Johnny's mind.

September 21, 1870 – Twenty-six years ago

"Sign there."

Before him was another lawyer's table. Bending over it signing a document was his brother. Scott wrote his name boldly and without hesitation as Murdoch smiled next to him. Johnny felt the hard texture of his hat's stampede strings in his mouth as he chewed thoughtfully on them. The scent of Teresa – a mix of soap and lavender – touched his nose as she stood next

to him, beaming.

“Just above your name.”

Murdoch’s smile was not limited to his lips; the big Scot’s eyes sparkled like the stars in the sky when he reached for the pen that was still warm from his older son’s grip. Johnny’s newfound brother spared him a glance as their father signed, his blond eyebrow arched with pride and amusement.

“And you, sir?” The man offered the inked pen to Johnny for the final of three signatures that would forge a future. He released the strings from his teeth and took a step forward, his hand reaching for the instrument that would bond them.

“Mr. Randall.” The room paused with the baritone words. “I, uh, should have told you that the last name should read John Madrid. Not Lancer.”

“It’ll take me a minute.” The binding pen withdrew and, surprisingly, Johnny felt his heart lurch.

“No.” The word escaped his lips in an instant and the pen paused over paper. It took less than a heartbeat to make the decision. “Let it stand.”

“ . . . And to my sons John and Scott Lancer, I leave my remaining assets and holdings of Lancer to divide evenly between them, with the stipulation that part of these holdings be evenly shared by their children.’ As I said, it was a clean and basic will. I am sure there were no surprises. My only concern, John, is Scott not being here. This can’t be finalized without his signature or power of attorney.”

“What if he’s . . .” Teresa started. “. . . um, I mean, we haven’t heard from him or of him in so long.” The shine of her eyes spoke of valiantly held back tears. Despite the threatening flow, her voice was strong and his heart surged at her bravery. Teresa O’Brien Newhall’s devotion to the Lancer family was still strong despite everything, and Murdoch had confirmed his love for his acquired daughter by remembering her well. Johnny knew he had absolutely no objections to what he had left her; she deserved every bit of it and more.

“If Scott has offspring it could complicate things. Murdoch knew that. That’s why he worded it as he did, I am sure. The division cannot be made definitively until we know. It would also depend on whether . . . I mean, if he . . . well . . .”

Johnny rarely saw Timothy Randolph at a loss for words and he decided to rescue him. “You mean if Scott’s dead, right?”

Both Teresa and Rafael ducked their heads at the question. Only Jason held his chin up. Johnny’s tone was flat – even to his own ears it sounded nearly Madrid.

“Er, yes. Exactly. I know Murdoch looked for him before, John. There’s one more thing we could do to finalize this.” With the last sentence, Randolph’s demeanor became edgy. The usually well-spoken lawyer cleared his throat and actually stuttered with the next

suggestion. “After seven years of no contact or no sign of existence, he, ah, could be legally declared . . . dead.”

“No. I won’t do that.”

“John, you have a lot of responsibility here, not only to yourself, but to every employee of this ranch . . .”

“I said no!”

Somewhat exasperated, the lawyer shut his valise leaving one of the stacks of paper on the table. “Think about it.”

“No need. I won’t do it.”

Four of them rose together while Johnny remained ensconced in the heavy armchair. His stormy blue eyes followed Murdoch’s old friend as he picked up the case. Johnny saw that Teresa’s face was set, her lips pressed together in distaste. Jason’s jaw was set determinedly. Rafael’s eyes looked exactly like those of his father Cipriano’s – dark and steady and, as always, faithful. Johnny knew they all stood together on this point.

Teresa finally took pity on the lawyer and stepped to his side, taking his arm. Her eyes softened. “It broke his heart not knowing about Scott,” she said lowly. “I understand why Murdoch did it this way.”

Randolph patted her hand acknowledging the olive branch and the tension melted from the room. Johnny didn’t move from his chair. He wasn’t sure he would be able to stand anyway.

“I guess that’s it, then. We will have to try to locate your brother before I can finalize this. I’ll leave the options with you. Again, my condolences. I can see myself out.” The lawyer slipped his hat on his head. “Jason, good to see you. Rafael, John.”

“Would you like a cool drink before you leave?” With a smile, Teresa led Randolph toward the kitchen. A respectful nod to his patron prefaced Rafael’s departure.

Teresa and Randolph’s voices faded and the room choked into silence. Jason turned his eyes to his father and he waited for any indication of the next step.

Johnny’s stare fixed on the low table. When he felt able several long seconds later, he pushed to a stand and positioned his crutch, eyes never leaving the few sheets of paper that would declare Scott dead sitting on the table.

Johnny awkwardly maneuvered around the table and paused, eyes still cast downward. Then, as quickly as he could without losing his balance, he grabbed the papers and hobbled to the fireplace. Jason shadowed him without a word and reached for the long fireplace matches. Johnny held the papers over the hearth and Jason set them ablaze. Johnny ditched the flames onto the cold coals.

Johnny stared at the black, curling papers. "He's not dead and I won't kill him."

He had gone through many changes since the accident. Many of those changes had come much too late and because of his hard headedness and pride, Johnny Lancer had lost almost everything. His attention turned to his son studying the fiery statement aflame in the hearth and he felt warmth in a heart he thought was long dead. Then it struck him – this must have been how Murdoch felt that first day in the great room - that day he finally had his two sons together at his side.

Was this hope?

"*Bring him home.*" Murdoch Lancer's last words to him burned Johnny's soul. The old man had never lost faith that Scott would return, even to his final breath. Grabbing on to his father's hope, Johnny prayed that maybe there was a chance he could get back most of what he'd lost before he left this world.

"You're going to find Uncle Scott, aren't you?" Jason said quietly, his gaze on the quickly dying flames. "This is the trip you asked me to go on, isn't it?"

"I want my family back," Johnny said with quiet determination. "But I thought I start with your mother."

In the corner of his eye, Johnny saw Jason's head jerk sharply in his direction. Jason's mouth opened, then snapped closed as whatever words he was going to say stalled on his lips. Then, the younger man nodded silently and turned back to the hearth.

"Do you think she's open to that idea?" Johnny finally asked, his voice nearly a whisper.

Several seconds ticked by. The Grandfather clock rang the three-quarter hour before Jason replied, his voice quiet but strong. "I think she's been waiting for just that. Don't mean she won't make you work for it, though. She'll want to be sure."

Johnny sighed and nodded. As he adjusted his crutch, he cleared his throat and then spoke in a gravelly voice. "You have every right to be here, and so do your mother and Scott. This ranch is your legacy, Son. I wasn't much younger than you are now when I came home so I know it's not too late. Will you consider claiming your birthright and staying?" Johnny raised his chin, met his son's eyes without flinching. Unlike his own father, Johnny didn't ask for the boy's arms, legs and guts – he had no right to expect that because of the circumstances under which they had parted. His family had already paid dearly.

Jason held his look, his slate eyes revealing a wash of emotions as he thought. Finally, he nodded shortly. "I can't think of a better place to call home. Again." His brow dropped slightly, which seemed to intensify the depth of Jason's slate blues beneath. "But maybe it'd be a good idea to see how this trip goes first. No promises."

Considering, Johnny gave a sharp nod and released his visual hold on his son. He returned his attention to the settling ashes. "If that's what you want. I won't change my mind, though. It's the way it should be. I intend to make this place alive again. You may hate me completely

by the end of all this, but that's a chance I'm willing to take. I've held too many secrets for too long."

Jason stood straight, hooked his thumbs on his belt and thrummed his fingers on his hipbones as he raised his eyes from the hearth's darkness to meet those of his father. "I expect there's a chance you'll hate me, too, for some of the things I've said and done."

Johnny shook his head slowly. "There's not a chance in the world I could ever hate you, Jason. That's the least I can hope you'll believe by the end of this trip. It's time to come home."

Jason nodded shortly. As he turned and walked from the room, Johnny let his eyes linger on the image of his boy and felt stirrings of pride, longing and profound sadness.

"*So much to mend,*" he thought wearily.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jason left his father in the great room and began to reacquaint himself with his old home. The rest of the day and the one that followed were a bittersweet reunion as he rode through the nearby hills. The last time he rode this path was nearly ten years ago, sent by his mother and accompanied by his Aunt Teresa and cousins Eliese and Paul. He didn't remember seeing much of his father at the time but clearly remembered the quality horses and cattle.

Jason rode Solano up the gentle rise visible just beyond the Lancer arch. He looked down over the estancia and felt a long denied connection flare to life. Surveying what stood below him, Jason opened a dark door in his mind and examined the memory of his last visit here tainted by youth's naiveté. He had been twelve years old. Here and now, through adult eyes, it looked different.

Jason recalled a man that kept to the shadows and watched from afar, knowing it was his father but not feeling any compulsion to approach him - he had been afraid of him. The few memories he had of the man were not pleasant. In his young mind, the stories about Madrid and the aloof, damaged man he saw blended together. For many years, he believed his father looked and acted the way he did because of Madrid so any youthful thoughts of becoming a glamorous gunfighter never entered his mind. He never asked about Madrid or joined his friends' admiration for the tales he heard.

Teresa made the effort to bring Jason to Lancer whenever she visited. She and his mother were quite close and their friendship forged the determination to keep Jason linked to his history. After that visit when he was twelve, Jason finally put his foot down and refused to visit anymore. As much as he adored Lancer, he didn't think his father would ever let him stay. Hadn't the old man run them off once already? Jason wanted to find his own way and left Lancer land on his own terms.

Now, he saw his desires of making it on his own could have been a bid for his distant father's approval. Back then, however, it was a stubborn statement to show his father that he did not need him. Jason Lancer kept his head, used hard work to find his way and kept any questions about his father to himself.

Two years after that last visit a blood, bay colt arrived at his door. It was a colt sired by the stallion he admired most at Lancer and the mare he preferred to ride during his last visit. The man in the shadows had a keen eye.

Jason accepted then that maybe his father cared; that there was a man other than Madrid in that skin and in his own blood. That colt came to mean the world to him and still did. Solano was one of the things that managed to cool a lot of the anger toward his father for so many years and crack the hard shell of denial of his own heritage. That gift, coupled with his mother's calm and constant reassurances that John Lancer did love him, made him take pause. Now he had the opportunity to confirm or deny all he thought knew.

Even back then, Jason could tell that his mother still felt something for his father. He thought she was crazy to hold onto something that was long dead but held his tongue. Whenever she spoke about their courtship and marriage – before the accident – her eyes ignited with unique and bright life. He hoped that look would come to stay some day; this could be the way. It all depended on who this man was offering himself up, and if he was the same man that had married his mother.

Still, he had plenty of questions he wanted answered and it looked like he would finally have that chance. Sometimes he wondered if the answers really mattered anymore but the desire to ask them never went away. All he truly wanted at this point in his life was purposeful work – which he figured he could have anywhere with his growing horse training business – and to see his mother, Laurie Kinkade Lancer, happy.

Jason was more than ready for this trip to find his uncle and maybe see his desire for his mother's happiness realized. When the sun began to fall into the pallet of colors that preceded nightfall, Jason reined toward the hacienda. When he pulled up in front of the barn, the stable boy excitedly took the reins of his horse and announced that his father wanted to see him – Scott Lancer had been located.



Everyone was stunned at the short time it had taken for the Pinkertons to locate the wayward Lancer. Johnny leaned against his father's great oak desk as he read the telegram. The message from the agency was short:

SCOTT L. GARRETT CURRENTLY IN SCOTIA, CALIFORNIA –
STOP – RECOMMEND PICKING UP INVESTIGATIVE PACKAGE
IN ROUTE – STOP – REPLY WITH DATE OF ARRIVAL IN SAN
FRANCISCO OFFICE – STOP – AGENT C. DRESSLER,
PINKERTON AGENCY, SAN FRANCISCO

Johnny regarded the message with a trembling hand. The desire to head north was both sudden and overwhelming, and he dug deep to still his hand and the urge. In that moment, doubt took hold; doubt about his abilities to make the journey and for a successful ending. It was a huge step. Settling the twist in his stomach with a hard swallow, Johnny looked up to find Teresa and the others looking at him expectantly as they stood in a half circle in front of the desk.

“Scotia - isn't that a logging town north of San Francisco?” Teresa asked, her hand excitedly clutching her husband's sleeve. “They had a big fire last year, I think.”

“Yes, they did.” Daniel patted his wife's hand and her fingers relaxed. “They just got up and

running again; quite a feat, too, to do that in a year. They had to completely rebuild and lumber's been a little hard to get because of it."

Teresa and Eliese bent their heads together as Daniel and Paul debated how long a trip to Scotia would take. Johnny listened to all of them then with half an ear as he chewed his lower lip. It was a few minutes before they heard the front door pushed open and the sound of spurs announcing Jason's arrival. Jason paused at the entry of the great room and then pulled off his hat as he surveyed the group. Slowing to an amble and shifting his hat back and forth between his hands, he eventually stopped next to his father, who then handed over the telegram.

The low chatter of the others stopped when Jason asked, "Are ya changin' your plans, then? Goin' north first?"

The others turned to Johnny, eyes wide.

"You're going to see Laurie?" Teresa said excitedly, figuring out Jason's query in a way only a woman could. "Oh, Johnny, that's a wonderful idea! Are you going to bring her home? To Lancer?"

Johnny cocked his head at her quizzically. "Sounds easier than I thought it would be," he said lightly. "You know somethin' I should know?"

Daniel and Teresa laughed. She reached out, patting Johnny's shoulder in a sisterly fashion and speaking with serious affection. "Johnny, she was always devoted to you. She still is, trust me on this."

The idea of seeing his wife again, face to face, made Johnny's stomach flip. He found he voice frozen. Instead, he nodded and tucked the telegram in his belt and set his crutch, plans and ideas tumbling through his head in rapid succession. Finally, he made a decision.

"Scotia's a trip that will take some planning. I can make the necessary arrangements during my trip to Newhall." Teresa and Eliese exchanged excited smiles. Johnny turned away and started to his room, uncomfortable with the attention. "Guess I'd best start packin'. Jason, would you join me a minute?"

The family chatter faded behind them as they walked down the hall toward Johnny's room. Johnny went directly to a corner of his room and pulled saddlebags from the top of a chair. He tossed them onto the bed and began pulling clothes from drawers. Jason hovered at the foot of the bed, his fingers tapping the carved wood bed frame.

"Will you to stay here and watch over the place with the others while I go talk to your mother?" he asked.

"Travel by yourself? Is that . . . I mean, can you . . ." the young man stumbled over his words.

Johnny snorted. "I think I'll manage. I need to do this, Jason. It's a first step. I need to do it on my own for my own reasons. I'm travelin' light." He nodded at the saddlebags. "I can manage this. The trip to Scotia's going to be a different thing all together. Would you go into town

with me in the morning so I can get a few things done?" He glanced at the mantle clock. "I think there's a train leavin' just before dark from Cross Creek."

"Sure thing," Jason nodded. He looked a bit apprehensive as he thrummed his fingers on his thighs.

Johnny threw him a glance and grinned at the action. "You ain't the only one nervous about this. I have no idea how to start with her." He stuffed the clothes in the bag. "I'm kinda hopin' it'll come to me on the train . . ."

Jason sighed and shook his head as his fingers became still. "Good luck with that. I wouldn't know where to start." Embarrassed, he ducked his head. "I need to go check on Solano." He turned to go.

"Jason," Johnny called, stopping his son at the door. "I'd like you to go with me to get Scott when I get back. Alex and Paul can look out for the place while we're gone, but Daniel and Teresa need to get home. In the meantime, Rafe can show you the ropes." Jason nodded and turned to leave again. "And Jason," Johnny said, stopping the boy again. "Ah . . . you'll also need to tell me how to get to her house. I haven't . . . well, you know . . . been there."

Jason nodded sharply again, this time with a small smile, and slipped from the room. Johnny stared at the door for a moment before turning back with a sigh to finish packing.

The morose heaviness of the past days had lifted for at least a little while. Dinner was an animated affair, the excitement of Johnny's trip firing the conversation. Johnny learned about Newhall and how to get to Laurie's small house, as well as where to rent a surrey and who to contact for assistance in town. The Newhall ranch started at the north end of town; Johnny recalled the spread from his one visit there during Teresa's engagement party, less than a year before the event that inexorably changed all their lives.

The night passed blessedly fast. Now with his agenda set, Johnny felt a bit of peace and was actually able to sleep soundly for the first time in a week.

Morning broke fresh and bright. Johnny took advantage of the after breakfast bustle to give a nod to Jason and slip from the house. He was relieved to find that his son had already hitched the team and stood waiting just outside the courtyard arch. Johnny tossed the saddlebags in the wagon then went to the kitchen door to say goodbye. Teresa gave him a quick hug and a reassuring smile. Her eyes sparkled.

"It will be fine," she said, taking his hand. "Really, Johnny, don't worry. I think she's been waiting for this."

Johnny lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I hope you're right, querida. Still, I feel like I'm steppin' up to a gunfight."

Teresa rolled her eyes. "Oh, for goodness' sake. It won't be that bad!"

He grinned lopsidedly. "I hope not. I'll see ya in a few days, sweetheart. I'll send a wire when

I'm on my way back.”

They grew somber, both reluctant to break away. The bond they had was deep and familiar; Teresa had seen him at his best and worst, and she was still here. That thought gave Johnny the spark of confidence he needed to take this first step. The next time, he would be leaving on a journey that boded a more dubious result. He thought about a book he read a couple of years ago when he was in prison. *“It’s like that fella tiltin’ at windmills.”* He looked down and realized he still clutched Teresa’s hand. He released it and gave her a shy smile.

“Jason’s waiting, Johnny. You best get going. Vaya con dios.” She gently put her hand on his shoulder and caught his eyes with her gaze. “Murdoch was so proud of you, Johnny,” she said softly. “I hope you know that.”

Unable to reply, Johnny pressed his lips together and gave a quick nod. It was a difficult notion to accept, but it felt right in his heart. At that moment, he became pointedly aware of the beads that adorned his wrist. The ornament’s dangling twin tails brushed against the heel of his hand as he gripped his crutch. That caused a tiny smile and gave him the strength to turn and go. His son was waiting for him at the courtyard gate and the young man had been waiting for his father to come to him for much too long already.



Jason helped his father into the wagon, the saddlebags already stowed in the back. He climbed up, took the reins and clucked at the team, flicking leather at the same time. The horses moved off. Passing under the arch that bore his name, Jason tried to make sense of his thoughts and feelings. Confronting his conflicted thoughts since before his arrival here, he realized that many years of anger and frustration could not be overcome in just a day or two. Still, the desire to have a whole family, to belong to something, was strong.

A few minutes after leaving the arch behind Jason got a niggling feeling of familiarity. He had experienced it on his arrival Lancer but dismissed it as nerves. This time, though, he saw the range silhouette as an old friend and the lay of the land familiar and welcoming. Then it came to him in a flash.

“There’s another house nearby. I remember riding to it,” Jason said as his eyes scanned the terrain and a realization came to him. “It’s up there, isn’t it?” He pointed to a small road, softened with overgrown wild oats, which branched off the main road. “We used to stay there when we’d visit. Aunt Teresa said that’s where we lived when . . . you know.”

“Yeah, it is. We moved in right after you were born,” Johnny said as his eyes took in the small valley. “You can see the chimney and part of the roof from here.”

Jason squinted in the early afternoon light. “I see it. That was our house, then? Mama never said much about it.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said softly. “We started building soon after we were married.” He chuffed softly. “Scott accused me of slacking off on chores to get it done. He ended up workin’ right alongside me most of the time, though.”

Jason could just see the rock chimney, the unique shape and color of the stone sparking a

memory.

September 6, 1881 - Fifteen years ago

It was hot. Mama was hurrying him along, her voice sharp and her tone short. Jason was wondering what he had done to make her mad. He remembered being excited and scared that day – it was his first day of school and his new shirt itched.

“Come on, Jason,” his mother chided. “We just have enough time to go by the hacienda before school. Grandpa and Teresa will want to see you.” His ma quickly and efficiently corralled his hair into submission. The pain of it took his mind off the itch of his shirt.

“Pa too?”

He felt the firm pressure of her hands on his back as she propelled him out the door of their house. “Pa may not feel too well today, but he loves you. He just has a hard time showing it right now, you know that.”

“Why?”

The buggy was waiting for them, parked next to the natural stone chimney around the corner from the front door, as it would be every school day from then on. Someone always came from Grandpa’s house in the morning to ready it and lay in wood while Jason was doing his morning chores. It was one of the hands or Cipriano or even Grandpa that he saw those days readying the buggy and checking the horse. Jason remembered that even then, he knew those chores were beyond his pa’s physical ability. It was his Pa’s other abilities, or apparent lack of, that stymied him at this young age.

He remembered his ma not answering, so he asked again. “Why, Ma?”

His mother helped him into the buggy and went around to the other side. When she started to get in, Jason saw that she was crying but trying to hide it, just as he did when other kids said mean things about his Pa. Suddenly, he was sorry he asked. He felt a surge of fear. His ma rarely cried in front of him. She tried to hide it, but Jason knew there were many tears shed behind her bedroom door at night, making him feel helpless.

“Ma?” he said in a quivering voice.

Laurie Lancer gathered up the reins in one hand as she quickly brushed the tears away with the other. Then she took a deep breath, set her shoulders and firmly gripped the reins. When she turned toward him, Jason recalled her sad smile before she spoke. “Your pa is a good man, Jason. He loves us, he really does. He’s just a little lost and a lot angry these days.”

“When’s he gonna be better?”

A snap of the reins put the horse in motion. “I don’t know, sweetheart. It’s up to him.”

The ride to the big house was only a few minutes but Jason remembered it seemed much longer that day with the nervous tingle in his stomach and all. School meant everything would change. No more watching the hands break horses or "drivin' ol' Jelly to distraction," as the funny man said. No more long hours of playing. It also meant no more having to pretend it wasn't his father he heard yelling and cursing from inside the hacienda. No more hearing made up reasons for broken windows or destroyed pieces furniture by the woodpile. He knew the reasons why they removed Pa from their house. He could barely remember a time when his Pa did share their house.

Yes, he definitely couldn't make up his mind about school. He did remember thinking that maybe if he did really well in school and made his Mama proud, she wouldn't cry so much at night.

Jason shook his head to bring himself back to the present, away from a memory that took place in his last year of living on Lancer. He gripped the reins tighter. They moved to Newhall when he was seven. Realizing he was cutting close to a subject he wasn't sure he was ready to rope yet, Jason scrambled for a different topic. "Ma says you met in Stockton."

His father chuckled and his eyes sparkled brightly, the memory obviously a good one. "Yeah. We were there for a livestock auction. I made a point of gettin' to Stockton as often as I could after that." Johnny leaned back and looked down the road ahead. "Don't think I fooled Murdoch or Scott with my reasons. They saw right through me."

Jason was quiet for a moment then he tilted his head sideways. The question left his lips before he thought about it. "You still love her, then?"

If he hadn't been watching, Jason would have missed his father's catch of breath. Johnny hesitated, eyes fixed on a spot somewhere in the distance and let out a slow breath. He replied in a near whisper. "I never stopped. That's one thing I know for certain."

Jason relentlessly spoke again, part of him appalled at his lack of tact and the other part driven by long suppressed anger. "Then why did you drive us away?"

The question was finally out, the hard undercurrent of fury glaringly clear. When Johnny turned to face him, Jason's eyes pinned his father immediately. Johnny looked away after a tense spread of moments and ducked his head as he shifted on the hard seat. Jason knew he was forcing his father to lay out his hand for all to see. When he finally did speak, the older man's voice was soft and unaffected by Jason's tone.

"Because I didn't think I deserved your mother's love. I didn't believe it was real. I mean, how could a beautiful woman like that love half of a man?" The warm tenor of his voice cracked. Johnny's voice cracked. He paused, cleared his throat and continued. "I thought she deserved better, much better. She'd married better. I thought she should throw down the hand she'd been dealt and get on with her life. Start fresh."

"What about me?" Jason tossed back immediately. "Didn't you learn anything from growing up without a father?" Accusation made the words sharp and his knuckles were white from

gripping the reins. He forced himself to relax his grip.

Johnny broke the challenging stare by looking ahead again. He pressed his lips together for a moment before answering in a soft, even tone. "I thought I did. I convinced myself that Laurie would find a better man, a whole man, to do that job. I didn't think I could, and looking back, I was in no shape to be a father. The only way for her to move on was to get away from me. She could easily find another; she was so beautiful." Johnny's voice had grown soft with wonder. "She deserved so much better and so did you."

"And you didn't bother to ask us, what with it being our lives and all?" Jason felt somewhat confused by the fact that his anger seemed to dissipate with each question asked and answered.

Johnny's gaze remained silently focused on the distant. When he finally spoke again, his voice was strong and clear. "No. I didn't ask. I was on a path of fire at the time, Jason, that's the only way I can explain it."

That answer surprised Jason. He blinked and adjusted the reins, quickly turning the phrase over in his mind without the long festering anger. It struck him that he never thought beyond his questions; that he never tried to figure out the answers himself. Still, that phrase would never have come to him because he never heard it before. In his mind's eye the phrase was easily visualized – a dangerous path of flame and ember, one a person would surely not follow if he had a choice – and his curiosity was instantly piqued, the anger tempered for the time being.

"Path of fire," Jason repeated slowly, sounding skeptical. Could whatever it meant explain everything? "What's that mean, exactly?"

Jason saw how his father's eyes narrowed slightly in thought, clearly toying with what to say and how to say it. Jason knew then that his deduction about the phrase was right – words were inadequate to explain the meaning. Finally, Johnny sighed and met Jason's gaze with a sidelong look.

"It means I was lost . . . that for a long time I was more concerned about who I was instead of where I should be," he said evenly. He bowed his head. "Let's save that for the train ride north. It has been awhile since I've told the story. It'll take some time."

Jason found himself acquiescing with a nod. He also noticed how his father's attention turned his to his wrist, twisting it slightly to regard the bracelet that encircled it. The beads were smooth and worn shades of the earth. What struck him then was the pair of turquoise beads dangling separately from the rest of the bracelet – their color was similar to that of calm water over pristine white sand, a sight that came clearly to his mind's eye.

"*Where did that come from?*" Jason thought, puzzled. He did not remember ever being at a beach. He'd seen the ocean, sure, but only from high cliffs along the shore. He frowned, the vision fading quickly.

They rode most of the way to Cross Creek in relative silence broken only by the normal exchanges that came with such travel. Jason was surprised at how much he remembered

about the area. Johnny had opted to skirt the town, not wanting the friends he had there to slow them down. Jason was grateful for that suggestion. He did not like being the center of attention and he knew that's what his father and he would become if they went into town. It had been uncomfortable enough being there with his uncle Daniel, Alex and Paul getting supplies. Apparently, Jason looked enough like his father to turn more than his share of heads and invite more questions than he wanted. If they rode into town side by side, they may not make it out before dark.

Johnny sat completely relaxed, his bowed head nodding with the motion of the wagon, absently rubbing the stump of his left leg. Jason wondered what thoughts were running loose inside his father's head and then turned his own thoughts inward.

"*Path of fire*," he mused silently, trying to remember back as far as he could. As he did, Jason made the supreme effort to mentally stand back and view his time at Lancer – what he could remember of it, anyway – as a neutral observer. It was impossible. His anger from the perception of being thrown out of paradise was still too strong.

Jason glanced at his father who now sat quietly beside him. Who was the man his mother fell in love with? Was it the same man that pushed them out? It was easy to conclude that the accident was the reason he changed once, but why the change again? What motivated his father to leave this "path of fire", as he called it?

"What happened?" Jason queried aloud, turning his eyes to the man next to him. "What happened that you finally made the effort to change? If losing your entire family wasn't enough to change you, then what was?" It was difficult, but Jason thought he managed to keep anger from his voice.

If Johnny was surprised at the question, he didn't show it. He sat still for many long moments. Finally, he replied without meeting Jason's look. Instead, his gaze fell on the beads on his wrist. "I had nothing. Nothing," he started. "I couldn't fall any further and I knew that I was the only one that could drag myself up again. I was in prison . . ."

His father tilted his head toward him and Jason felt his own jaw sag in surprise. Pain from the revelation flickered in the older man's eyes and Jason knew that his sudden and obvious trepidation at his father's words did not help sooth the hurt.

"I . . . I didn't know," Jason whispered. "I had no idea you went to prison."

Silent hesitation filled the air with tension. Johnny dropped his head and stared at the colored beads once again. A sigh accented his nod. "Eighteen months," he said softly. "I hurt a woman."

"Did . . . does ma know?"

"Yeah. I asked Murdoch . . . I guess I asked him many times if Laurie knew. He was always honest with me but it took a while for the knowledge to stick. I was bad off, Jason. Couldn't get any worse. In those eighteen months, I finally faced myself and made a decision. It's funny, but prison was the best thing ta happen to me."

“What . . . what decision did you have to make?”

“The decision to live; that I really wanted to live. After I realized that, I planned the steps it would take to do that.” He turned toward his son in earnest. “It’s been a long road, Jason, and there were a lot of times I didn’t think I’d make it. One of the first and hardest things to do was let go of regret.” Johnny leaned back slightly and turned his attention back to the spot ahead that only he saw. “Not as easy as it sounds. Murdoch was the reason I made it. He stood back and forced me to do it on my own. I never felt abandoned by him, but he didn’t help me either. That’s a tricky line to walk; not sure I could have done what he did.” Johnny paused. “He made me earn everything back, including my self respect.”

Jason shifted, going over this new information in his mind. Although he tried, malignant curiosity remained and apparently, his body language made that very clear. His father again cocked his head in Jason’s direction.

Johnny raised an eyebrow at him and smiled. “Go ahead. Ask,” he said. “You’ve gotta have questions.”

“The woman you hurt,” Jason started. “What happened?”

“I grabbed her and forced her to sit in my lap. I treated her like a saloon girl, from what I’ve been told.”

“And she wasn’t, I’m guessing?”

“No. Far from it. She was the Mayor’s daughter. The Mayor of Stockton.”

Jason hissed and shook his head. “How hurt . . . ?”

“Bruised her arm. Bloodied her nose. Not sure how; I was pretty drunk and out of control.”

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Jason schooled his expression into unreadable blankness for the first time since riding under that adobe Lancer arch. He felt disappointment radiating from his father, but on the other hand, what did he expect from such news?

“How did it affect Murdoch and the ranch?” Jason asked, his expression giving nothing away.

“Poorly, I imagine. We never spoke of that, specifically. There had to be some backlash, and I’m sure my being out of the picture made it a little easier for Murdoch to mend fences. I do know that I’m not welcome back in Stockton but Murdoch is . . . was.”

Jason flexed his fingers as he thought. Now that the initial shock had faded, anger again claimed a stake. This new information pressed heavily; it fit exactly with what he remembered, and clearly, his father was able to read him again.

“Just get it out, Jason,” Johnny urged sharply. “We need to clear the air if we’re to run Lancer

together. No doubts. I said you might hate me after all this.”

“You hurt Mama, too, you know. Physically.” He leveled his eyes with those of his father, his voice deadly flat. “Do you remember that?”

Johnny’s eyes widened and his jaw tensed. He was first to break the look between them, dropping his head in apparent defeat. “I was afraid of that,” he said ever so softly. Restless fingers again captured the bracelet’s twin tails. Jason inwardly welcomed the length of silence between them as it gave him time to regroup emotionally. Finally, Johnny asked, “Tell me.”

Jason worked his lips, his feelings difficult to control. The heat of the day was suddenly uncomfortable, the wagon seat unusually hard. Jason noticed the buzz of insects, the sharp chirping of faraway birds and the grinding of the buggy wheels on the hard-packed road, which made the silence of the two men seem unbearably heavy. He wanted to flee, but Jason fought the urge and, instead, centered his gaze between the horse’s ears. Only then was he able to unleash the memory.

September 29, 1880 – Sixteen years ago

It was late in the afternoon and getting dark. It must have been autumn – the coolness of the night set in as soon as the sun dropped out of sight. Jason was riding his first horse – a pony-sized gray named Snowball – at a lope toward the large hacienda. He must have been no more than five years old.

Mama had sent him to get someone to help her because Pa was in a mood again. When Pa pushed Mama hard enough to make her fall, Jason knew it was only a matter of time before things got broke and his mama would cry. Her wide-eyed look of horror of what Jason had just seen and the trickle of blood along her cheek set his feet in motion before she uttered a word.

Pa usually stayed quietly in one place because of taking his medicines and tonics, but lately that wasn’t the case. Something was going on, and whatever that something was, it was getting worse. Jason did not understand what was happening and it scared him; his Pa scared him.

The French doors of the hacienda opened as soon as he pulled up to the courtyard wall. He passed under the Lancer arch at a speed much faster than allowed and Jason had a fleeting fear of a scolding when Uncle Scott stepped through the doors.

“What’s wrong, Jason?” his lanky uncle barked. He sounded understandably tense and Jason nervously fingered the reins, still expecting a dressing down.

“It . . . it’s Pa. He h-h-hurt mama . . .”

By then, Grandpa and Aunt Teresa stood in the doorway. Uncle Scott ran his hand through his hair and swore softly. Aunt Teresa frowned at him then stepped around Uncle Scott and

approached Jason. She smiled up at the boy, but Jason saw that the smile didn't temper the sorrow in her eyes.

"Come in, Jason," she said softly, but firmly. "Someone will take care of Snowball. I made some cookies and Maria can make some of that hot chocolate and cinnamon you like . . ." she reached up to help him down from the horse but he shook his head.

"I . . . I should help," The quiver in his voice was hard to hide as his throat tightened. He remembered how the sweat of his hands made the leather reins slippery.

"We'll take care of your daddy," Grandpa said calmly as he waved a hand toward the barn. "Uncle Scott will put Snowball in a stall. We'll be back in a little while and everything will be all right." His Grandpa then spoke to his elder son in a low voice before sending him to take Snowball's reins. Uncle Scott looked grim and wouldn't meet Jason's eyes.

Before he knew it, Jason's feet were on the ground and he was being ushered into the comfortably warm house. He remembered that Aunt Teresa would be leaving soon to return to her own family in Los Angeles, and held her hand tightly as she led him inside. When she was here, the feeling of the hacienda was so much different – calmer and quieter. Having his cousin Eliese to play with was lots of fun and he looked forward to the day when little cousin Paul would be big enough to play with them. Jason always felt a little cheated when they left. He wondered if the household calmness was at their house in Newhall, too, when Aunt Teresa was there.

The men spoke rapidly and quietly for a few minutes before heading to the barn. Even muted, Jason knew anger when he heard it and Uncle Scott's voice was thick with it. He wondered if it was because they were brothers – related – that both his pa and Uncle Scott were angry a lot. Jason then wondered if he would be like that, too, when he grew up, but the calm voice of Grandpa Murdoch made him think twice. He was their Pa and he wasn't angry all the time. What did that mean?

Teresa took him into the cozy kitchen, set him at the butcher-block table, and then entered the pantry. He could feel the lingering heat of the cooking grill beside him. Absently, Jason picked at one of the two old burn marks that scarred the surface of the table, the aged craters shiny smooth with wear. The voices of his parents echoed in his mind, his pa's reason for being so mad going through his head. What did it mean to have the pains he had? How could that be?

When Teresa came out of the pantry with a covered basket, Jason blurted, "Will his arm and leg grow back? Is that why he feels 'em even though they aren't there? It drives him crazy when he can't stop the pains."

The slight hitch in his aunt's step made him wonder if she tripped on something. "No, Jason, the doctor says that won't happen," she said. "It's just a common thing for someone like your daddy to imagine. They still want something even though it's gone."

“But pa says he can feel his hand and foot plain as day. They even itch. It makes him crazy tryin’ to scratch ‘em.” Warm tears tickled his cheeks and he was embarrassed. He swiped them angrily with the back of his hand. “I . . . I just want pa to be the way he was. The way I heard he was before I was born.” The darn tears wouldn’t stop and he remembered chewing his lip in an effort to get back control. He tasted salty blood after a few seconds.

Teresa settled on the chair next to him and wrapped her arms around him. He remembered how fresh she smelled when he buried his face in her shoulder and how much he missed her when she was gone. She was the only person besides mama that spoke to him like a grown up. He could tell by the huskiness of her voice when she spoke again that Teresa was about to cry herself and he felt ashamed for making her sad.

“No one knows why God does the things the way he does, Jason. You just have to believe there is a reason. He’s speaking to your dad when that happens.”

“An’ Pa don’t listen. I don’t think he trusts God anymore.”

“It’s between them, Jason. Your job is to love him and be patient. I know it’s hard, but like your Grampa says, good things don’t come easily.”

Jason remembered picking at the cookie Teresa put in front of him. He also remembered almost three-year-old Eliese running into the kitchen at that moment and Teresa sweeping the girl up in her arms. Teresa sat next to him, daughter in her lap, and offered his cousin another one of the fresh baked sweets.

“The other kids at school say mean things about Pa,” Jason muttered, watching his fingers as he nervously crumbled the cookie between them. Normally, he wouldn’t mention that fact to anyone. In fact, he hadn’t up to this point but with Teresa leaving soon maybe, he wouldn’t feel so peculiar about her knowing. He didn’t look up to see her response. After a few quiet seconds, he regretted mentioning it. He glanced up in desperation. “I . . . I shouldn’t have said anything,” he stuttered, finally finding her eyes. “Don’t tell anyone, okay? It’s okay. It’s only a couple of boys.”

Teresa’s cheek was lying against the crown of Eliese’s head, her warm brown eyes shining with something that made Jason’s stomach turn. “Jason,” she said evenly, her arms wrapped securely around her wiggling daughter. “I’m sorry. People can be mean. I’m so sorry.”

“Whatcha sayin’, Mama?” Eliese said as she chewed. “What?” The girl twisted and tried to look up. Teresa shushed her and she refocused her attention on the cookie.

Jason found he had no more words. It seemed that whatever he said made someone sad so he decided to keep things to himself from that point on. He knew it was up to him to be the man of his house now; it’s just how it was. His Ma needed him, and, when his pa wasn’t mad anymore, he would be proud of him. Jason just wished he knew how long that would take. About an hour later, his pa returned to the hacienda. Uncle Scott carried the limp form in the house and Jason knew they had made him take medicine again. Blood dripped from the

knuckles of his pa's single hand as his arm hung down and swayed with his uncle's stride. With his eyes shut and mouth agape, Pa's hair swung wildly as his head lolled backward over Scott's arm. Jason touched his own hair and smoothed it down; looking for some measure of control over something he could touch. Grampa followed Uncle Scott, a grim look on his face. The awkward troop headed down the hall to the room put aside for his pa.

His mama came in last, Jelly leading her by her forearm. Jason could see her cheek darkening already. When she saw him, Laurie quickly removed the old man's hand and stood straight. A weak smile brightened her face and she absently straightened her hair and wiped a spot of blood from the corner of her mouth. She smiled again, took a breath, and came to him.

She always smelled like wildflowers. Whenever she took him in her arms, it was the only place he felt truly sheltered from this life.

Jason felt drained when he stopped his narration, relieved the anger seemed to have ebbed. For a long time, the two men sat, turning over their thoughts. Jason wasn't quite ready to face his father yet. Neither was he expecting any clarification about the memory - how could it possibly be questioned?

Most importantly, what, exactly, was his father going to say when he came face to face with his mother?

CHAPTER SIX

Cross Creek was a town whose growth sprung from the train station's ability to keep up with the demands of the north San Joaquin Valley's agricultural market. The town, at first, had a hodge-podge feel that reminded Johnny of the young days of Tia Juana, but with the passing years and a string of savvy town leaders, the young town had lost the trappings of its dusty beginnings. Now, it was a bustling community.

Checking the time on his pocket watch, Johnny decided they had plenty of time to go to the bank and then get a few supplies. The men spent the next hours together dealing with the superficial – getting cash, loading up supplies that neither Morro Coyo nor Green River could offer, and quickly looking over the train schedules. It was late afternoon before Johnny was ready to board the train.

“I'll arrange our train tickets for Scotia when I get back from Newhall. Be prepared to leave as soon as I return,” Johnny said as Jason escorted him to the waiting train. He paused, allowing the other passengers to board first and turned to Jason. “Take the time to get familiar with Lancer again, Son. Don't be afraid to ask questions and make some decisions where you'd like some horse corrals to go. Gotta start sometime.” Jason's eyes widened with either surprise or alarm; Johnny couldn't tell which.

“Uh, sure,” he replied, shifting nervously. “It's a good thing Daniel's around for a little longer.”

Johnny laughed shortly and offered his hand. Jason took it in a firm grip as they shook. “Daniel knows his stuff, that's for sure. Listen to what he suggests, but follow your own heart, Jason. We'll call the tune together.”

“So, how long are ya gonna be?”

“That depends on your mother,” Johnny replied, a little worriedly.

The train whistle prompted the men to separate. Johnny mounted the first, tall step with Jason's help.

“Here,” Jason said, handing up Johnny's saddlebags. “I think you'll see that Aunt Teresa added a few things.” He grinned.

“That’s my girl,” Johnny said with a gentle smile as he slung the bag over his shoulder. Then he grabbed the rail and made his way up the steps, pausing at the top. “I’ll wire you when I’m due back, then,” he said to his son, and then released a nervous breath. Jason threw him a quick wave.

Johnny made his way down the aisle, finding an empty seat near the back. He was well aware of the eyes that inspected him and the shushing noise one mother gave her small child as he passed. Sinking into the padded seat, he put the saddlebags next to him to discourage company. It was going to be a long trip alone with his thoughts.

They departed Cross Creek on time. Johnny looked out the window and saw Jason on the road out of town. His words to his son played back in his head – “*We’ll call the tune together.*” In his mind, the phrase was in Murdoch’s voice. It wasn’t what the old man had said that first day, but there was a time when he spoke those very words.

May 1, 1875 – Twenty-one years ago

“Boys!”

Murdoch’s voice carried across the barnyard easily.

“What do you supposed he wants?” Scott asked as they unsaddled. The horses’ heads were low, the animals tired from their day rounding up strays. Scott’s voice had a tinge of annoyance.

“Couldn’t tell ya,” Johnny replied, pulling off Barranca’s saddle and tossing it over a stall door. “When my house is done, it’ll be you alone answerin’ the tune this time a day.”

Scott’s eyes sprang alive with amusement, the corners crinkling as he grinned.

“Scott? Johnny?” Murdoch wasn’t to be put off.

“Be right there!” Johnny hollered back, causing Scott to wince. “Just give us a darn minute, for pity’s sake.” The last part he muttered under his breath. He caught his brother’s smiling eyes and felt his own smile in return. “Yup, all yours at the day’s end, Brother.”

“Maybe for a little while, Brother,” Scott responded, untying Charlie. “I may be joining you in the back forty sooner than you think.”

Johnny’s face brightened with realization. “You asked Trish, didn’t ya? You gettin’ married? That’s great!”

“Haven’t done it yet,” Scott replied as he turned his horse into its stall. “Soon, though. Can’t let you get too far ahead with those Lancer heirs, you know.”

Johnny laughed. His child’s impending birth had given Scott plenty of ammo for teasing but he knew his brother was both pleased and proud.

Finished with the horses, the pair made their way to the house brushing as much dust from them as they could along the way. Laurie, her belly huge, greeted them at the kitchen door. "You two better get in there quick," she said after receiving a quick kiss from her husband. "He's waiting for you."

The brothers passed a look between them. Scott rolled his eyes and Johnny laughed.

"Get going, will you? His bellowing will scare the baby into never coming out and he needs to come out soon before my swollen feet explode," Laurie groused while drying her hands.

The two of them hustled from the kitchen and hung their hats and gun belts by the front door before entering the great room. Murdoch turned from the massive window that framed their land, drink in hand. Johnny relaxed; the amused glint in his father's eyes foretold good news.

"I poured drinks for you two." Murdoch indicated the side boy with a flick of his finger. "We have something to discuss."

They obediently walked over to pick up their drinks. Scott glanced at Johnny, his eyebrows raised, and tilted his head toward the bottle from which their drinks came.

"The good stuff," Johnny said lowly, turning back to Scott, who shrugged his shoulders. They walked side by side and joined their father at the window, both of them now extremely curious.

Murdoch faced them, rocking slightly back and forth on his feet. "I've got a proposition and I need your approval."

The boys waited a beat. "Well, here we are," Scott said warily.

Murdoch cleared his throat and took a few moments to look over each son, one at a time. They both stood fast under the scrutiny. "I'm sure you both remember that first day you stood here in front of me like this. We were strangers. None of us had any idea what the future would bring. I'll admit now that I had my doubts, even after you earned your right to stay here. I know that each of you had your doubts at one time or another since then, too."

Johnny nodded and dropped his gaze to the amber liquid in his glass as he swirled it. In his peripheral sight, he saw Scott doing the same thing, the cut pattern of the crystal flashing in the light. Then his brother flicked his eyes his way. They both grinned. "Yeah," Johnny admitted for the both of them. "There was a time or two."

"Since then you two have completely erased those doubts. You both have come a remarkably long way. You are men any father would be proud to call his sons, but I'm lucky enough to be the one." He tipped his drink toward Johnny. "Recent events have caused me to rethink the deal we made that day, the one where I would be calling the tune?"

The brothers grew still, their eyes drawn to their father, drinks forgotten. Finally, Scott

spoke. *“What, exactly, do you mean?”*

“This: We are equal partners with equal say. Johnny, that horse enterprise you’ve always wanted? There’s room enough for barns and corrals out by your new house for them. Scott, I want you to stake out your home site. That bit just east of Johnny’s place would be perfect for that vineyard you’ve nagged me to start. The Lancer family is growing and we need to diversify and start sharing the load equally. Well?” he asked his astonished sons. “What do you say? We’ll call the tune together.”

Johnny was the first to reply. “It’s about time, old man,” he grinned, raising his glass.

Scott followed his brother’s lead and raised his own glass. “Sounds like a good deal to me.”

“Great!” Murdoch’s glass joined those of his sons and they clinked the edges, the ring of crystal wonderfully clear. “To Lancer, then.”

“To Lancer!”

They threw back their drinks to seal the deal. With such a pact, Johnny couldn’t help but feel completely secure about his growing family’s future.

Johnny jerked awake utterly surprised that he fell asleep so easily. Somewhat chagrined, he recalled a time when he could never sleep in a crowd like this. A time when he always on the alert, always on guard. Even his time at Lancer before the accident, he was never completely relaxed in public. When he became a father, his alertness was to protect his family. After all, he had something valuable to protect – a family name and legacy.

“To Lancer!”

He remembered his father’s voice clearly. His missed him. Murdoch deserved better than to die without seeing his first-born again. Perhaps if Johnny would have pushed more to find his brother or if he hadn’t walked that long path of fire . . . so many ‘ifs’.

Johnny thought again about what it had been like after the family “deal” was changed. Murdoch had been amazingly fair. Both Scott and Johnny expected him to have a hard time adjusting to their new roles but he never wavered and never questioned the pact. Murdoch was a man of his word and because of it, Johnny and Laurie had a beautiful year after that. The corrals were built before summer’s end and in his spare time, when he wasn’t with his newborn son, Johnny hunted for the base of his horse stock.

In the fall, Scott finally proposed to Patricia Allan and they staked out the land of their future home.

Murdoch gave them more and more duties dealing directly with the running of the ranch until evenly divided on all fronts. It was a heady time of growth and prosperity and of building their dreams – exactly what they were doing at the time of the accident. Along with

closing a beef contract, Scott had negotiated a deal to obtain some vines from an established grower and Johnny went along to look at some mares in the same area. He remembered feeling that the whole trip was actually a ruse for Murdoch to get alone time with his grandson.

Looking out the train window, Johnny reveled in the memory. It was such a good time for the family, what with little Jason and Scott's upcoming nuptials. They spoke of house plans and other ranch dealings. Johnny felt truly blessed; coming home each night to his wife and son on his own land was more than he could ever have wished for.

With a small sigh, Johnny reached over and flipped open one side of his saddlebags, reveling in the feelings of the time. As he dug around inside the leather vessel looking for the train schedule, his fingers bumped an unfamiliar package. Curious, he pulled it out. "*One of Teresa's additions,*" he realized with a grin. The package was small, wrapped with string and felt like . . . he brought it to his nose and grinned. "*Peppermint sticks. . .*"

December 2, 1873 – Twenty-three years ago

It was bitterly cold. It was a good but unneeded excuse to pull Laurie snugly against him as they hurried down Stockton's boardwalk. His nose stung from inhaling the frigid air and the tips of his ears felt numb. She slipped her hands into his coat pocket, and even through her gloves could feel icy fingers. He instantly realized that her wrap wasn't nearly as heavy as his coat, and that she must be uncomfortably cold. Johnny glanced up and maneuvered her to the first business doorway.

"Come on," he urged. "Let's go inside for a minute."

He opened the door and guided her inside with his hand on the small of her back. The smell of pickles and smoke immediately hit his nose – they had entered a mercantile, pleasantly warmed by a stout pot-bellied stove in one corner. He directed Laurie toward it and then glanced around. A small man with a pinched face watched them from behind the counter with narrow eyes.

"Afternoon," Johnny greeted.

"Afternoon," the man responded, his tentative face telling Johnny the proprietor was unsure why they were there.

"Ooo, this feels good." Laurie had pulled off her gloves and was rubbing her hands close to the stove.

Johnny, trying to put the merchant at ease, looked around for something to buy. His gaze fell on an eye level shelf lined with jars within his reach. He immediately snatched an item from the closest jar. Laurie looked at it and giggled. Johnny couldn't help but notice how red her cheeks and lips were from the cold wind.

"You have the worst sweet tooth of any man I've known." Laurie's laugh warmed his heart as

she tucked her hands between his elbows and his sides. "Mmm... warm."

It was one of many Stockton trips Johnny arranged since that fateful horse sale. His brother and father acted begrudged at his frequent visits but Johnny could tell that they were both delighted and amused that someone had sparked such interest in their seemingly untamable family member.

"It's for Barranca," Johnny explained. "He likes peppermints."

Laurie rolled her eyes. "Sure, Johnny. I'll pretend I believe that!"

He popped the sweet into her mouth and she inadvertently rolled it with her tongue. Johnny watched the way her lips closed over the treat, reminded of a rosebud. Laurie pulled one hand from his side and tried to remove the offering but Johnny captured her hand in his.

"Laurie!" he chastised, keeping her hands trapped. "You haven't paid for that yet!" He saw the clerk's frown deepen.

Giggling, Laurie moved the sweet aside with her tongue and tried to talk.

"Ain't polite to talk with your mouth full, lady," he teased. "Ain't you got no manners?" He pulled her hands together and drew them up to his chest.

Laurie finally adjusted the peppermint firmly aside and spoke, but her words were garbled. "You're th' one 'tealing!" she was able to accuse before giggling again.

"Me?" he claimed innocently. "Look who's eatin' it!"

Laurie disengaged her hands and pushed him back, and then smartly plucked the stick from her mouth. She used the sweet as a pointer at his nose. "I'm not buying snacks for that spoiled horse of yours. I have enough spoiled horses of my own."

"Two," Johnny said. "You only have two horses. And if you marry me, you'd have a lot more."

The thought had been tickling his mind of late and the phrase had slipped out as easily as their courtship had been. Johnny looked down at her incredibly blue eyes and tried to convey with a gaze the depth of his feelings for her.

Laurie held that gaze, the initial reflection of shock from the implied question quickly changing to deep passion. As if in a dream, he saw his own hand slowly reach up and take her chin between his thumb and forefinger. Her moist lips parted and he found them with his own, the peppermint making the kiss impossibly sweeter.

He bought the entire jar of peppermint sticks. When they left the store, it didn't seem nearly as cold outside. They went directly to the train station and bought another ticket to Cross Creek. It was the last time she saw Stockton as Laurie Kinkade.

Laurie. She made his life complete at the time. He fell hard and fast for her, and this time, the object of his affection didn't run away. He remembered being so afraid that she would leave him when she learned his history, or would find some other reason to break it off as others in his past had done. Now, those others seemed like signs on a path of destiny – he was meant to find Laurie and as soon as she said 'yes' to his odd proposal, he knew she would never leave.

That is, until he drove her away. Jason had been right about that - he had driven her away. He did not remember many of those first awful years after his accident. The only things that were painfully clear were his self-centered feelings of pain, misery, and loathing, and his desire to be left alone.

Johnny shifted in his seat and pushed the negative thoughts aside. He hoped that some way of approaching her would come to him on this ride. As he stared out the window, all he could see was her face – her beautiful, fair face and how she looked behind the delicate lace veil at their wedding. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes bright and locked on his; and her lips . . . Johnny smiled to himself. He thought of peppermint when they kissed. He was the luckiest man in the world at that moment. The following handful of years had been perfect bliss.

Then things changed. Johnny frowned as evening turned into night outside the train's window, the wrapped candy forgotten in his hand. "*What was the last straw?*" he wondered. She stayed for almost six years after his accident. He never asked Murdoch why she left. At the time, Johnny wanted her gone, true, but when did it finally become too much? Did he need to know that before facing her? Would she expect him to know? In the recent past, it had been futile to try to remember things – he had been so full of drugs or alcohol it was impossible to determine truth from fantasy.

"*I remember Scott leaving.*" Well, not the exact day, he admitted, but the time frame. His big brother just never came to help Murdoch anymore. Jelly left just after that. Johnny bit his lip at the term, the feelings of shame flushing his face. "Left" wasn't the correct word – the gentle old man had died right under his nose and all Johnny remembered was Laurie holding his hand and telling him the news, crying softly as she did so. Johnny's response was to go on an angry bender that lasted . . . Johnny shook his head, ashamed. It had lasted a long time. Jelly Hoskins deserved a better memorial than that.

Again, he pushed the morose thoughts aside and looked at the candy in his hand. He felt his mood lift – thanks to Teresa he knew what to bring to Laurie's house as a peace offering.

Now he just had to figure out what to say in the one, long night he had to prepare.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Johnny was still at a loss as to what to say when the train pulled into Newhall the next morning. He was only able to sleep a little during the night and felt disjointed. He snorted, recalling his comment to Teresa about a gunfight. Madrid had faced innumerable foes with much more confidence than he felt at this moment.

Johnny waited until the car was mostly empty before standing. Stiff, he rolled his head to loosen his neck and torso before throwing the saddlebags over his shoulder and placing his crutch. He slowly moved down the aisle toward the exit.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Johnny eyed the uniformed conductor, reading his posture, concluding that he wasn't sure how he could help. Johnny shook his head, giving the small man a reprieve. “Nah,” he said. “I can do it.”

The conductor's relief was obvious. “Yes, sir.”

Johnny hopped down the steps to the platform and took a moment to adjust the saddlebags. When he moved to the edge of the platform, Johnny was surprised when someone called his name.

“Mr. Lancer?” Looking to his left, Johnny saw a cowhand standing beside a surrey. “John Lancer?”

“That's me,” Johnny answered, immediately realizing where this person had come from. “Teresa sent you?”

The man nodded. “We got the wire last night. I was sent to look for ya and take you where you wanted to go.”

Johnny's stomach grumbled as he nodded. “I guess the first thing I'll need is some breakfast. Got any ideas?” Descending from the platform, the cowboy took the saddlebags and tossed in on the rear seat.

“Sure do,” the cowboy said with a grin. “There's a good place a couple blocks away. The best chorizo in town.”

“That’ll do, then,” Johnny nodded. “Join me . . .?”

“Ace,” the cowboy said, extending his hand. “Ace Seger. Nice to meet ya, Mr. Lancer.”

They shook hands. “Call me Johnny.”

Ace stood back as Johnny hopped into the surrey. On their way to the restaurant, Johnny looked around and marveled at how Newhall had grown. The half-dozen businesses he remembered had expanded substantially. Now, the main street stretched as far as the eye could see with buildings on both sides. Ranches and fruit trees surrounding the town nestled amongst the foothills that embraced the city. Johnny looked north, knowing that the Newhall family holdings started just at the edge of the town and extended from there for many, many miles. The Newhall Land Company was on its way to being the largest ranch in the state.

Ace pulled up in front of a small place where the smell of Mexican food made Johnny’s mouth water. They barely settled in a corner table when a stout woman with a huge smile greeted them. They ordered and quietly talked over coffee while they waited.

“So, Ace, how’s Teresa’s place?” he asked with a grin.

“Busy, as usual. She ‘n Daniel should be back next week, right?” Johnny nodded. “Sure sorry to hear about your pa. He was quite a man, so I hear.”

“Yeah, he was,” Johnny agreed, sipping the hot drink with caution. The two of them talked about ranching and horses through the meal. When finished, Johnny still was not ready to face Laurie, but there was no excuse not to. “So,” he said as they sat in the surrey. “You know where I’m goin’, I take it?”

Ace gathered the reins. “Miss Laurie’s, right? She’s been workin’ at Miss Nellie’s dress shop but it doesn’t open for another two hours so I’ll take you to her house.” He glanced at Johnny and quirked one brow. “That’ll be all right with her, won’t it?”

Ace’s tone had turned flat. Johnny looked up at the protective tone of the question. Johnny could only imagine the stories Ace must have heard about him over the years and didn’t blame him a bit for the inquiry. In fact, it was strangely comforting knowing his wife was well thought of and protected.

“Yeah,” Johnny replied softly, surprised at the butterflies that came alive in his stomach at the thought of her being so close. “Teresa tells me it would be fine with Laurie.” Ace’s eyes narrowed a bit then he nodded shortly and snapped the reins, obviously satisfied. Johnny felt like he just passed some kind of test.

They went south to the edge of the town proper and made a few turns before coming to an oak-lined road edged with well-kept houses. The air was touched with the smell of baking bread and honeysuckle; it was a nice place to call home, he realized, and he was glad Laurie came here. It was peaceful.

As the surrey bumped down the road, Johnny recognized her house immediately from Jason's description. "Stop here," he said suddenly, a house short of his goal. "I'll walk from here. Thanks, Ace." The cowboy nodded and as soon as Johnny found his footing on the road, the surrey turned around and disappeared.

Johnny moved slowly, the hard-packed dirt under him rough and uneven. When he was abreast of the front window of her house, he stopped and looked across the small yard. An enormous oak stood at the edge of the property, its branches arching over the street and yard, ending with its tips gently tickling the roof.

The house was neat, the plants around it trimmed and healthy. The exterior was a dark blue with white trim and a porch graced the front. When he started down it, the stone path leading to the front steps seemed much longer than it really was. His heart pounded louder with each step. He silently cursed himself a coward and set his eyes on the front door, commanding his body to follow his gaze.

Reaching the first step, Johnny paused when he noticed the curtain in the front window move – he didn't see anyone, so he again focused on the steps. He made it up the second stair and glanced at the window again where he saw a cat staring at him with wide, brown eyes from between the lace curtains. Its tail twitched, causing the material to flutter. Johnny felt strangely relieved and relaxed. He topped the third and final step to the front porch and glanced at a pair of rocking chairs on the far side, a small table between them.

"We'll grow old together and sit in rocking chairs, side by side. You'll grouse about the price of beef and I'll be darning your socks."

They lay on their backs, Laurie using Johnny's muscular shoulder as a pillow. Skin to skin, she wriggled in closer and twisted to her side. He could feel her bare breasts against his chest, her heartbeat strong against his. With his other hand, he traced circles against her back as he nestled his cheek against her soft hair. She smelled like wildflowers.

"I sound like a grouch," Johnny said softly, nuzzling the curve of her ear. "And here I thought I married a good woman. Ain't a good woman supposed to make a happy man?"

"Well, I guess it depends on what the woman has to work with," she said huskily as the palm of her hand worked its way down the flatness of his stomach...

A door slammed across the street and Johnny jerked into awareness. He threw a glance at the offending party, an older woman and man descending their porch stairs side by side. Once on the walkway, she slowed and studied Johnny carefully, but the man tugged on her arm and they continued down the street toward town.

Turning back to the front door, Johnny cleared his throat nervously and tried to banish the distracting thought of Laurie's breasts against his body. Finally, he was at the door, staring at the etched glass oval set in the heavy oak panel. A lace curtain blocked his view of the inside. Johnny steadied himself and then raised his hand to knock when he realized that he still had no idea what to say. His fist, hot with nervous perspiration, hovered over the smooth wood. Johnny chewed his lip a moment, then set his jaw and ordered his hand to

knock.

Johnny startled when the door swung open before his knuckles met oak, and there stood Laurie.

She gasped; her hand flew to her throat.

They both stood, frozen. Laurie's eyes were wide, round and bright with surprise, her mouth slightly agape. Her lips were still a perfect rose, her hair still the color of golden wheat. Johnny felt a flicker of disappointment that it was pinned up; in its mind's eye, Laurie's hair was always loose and free. Their eyes locked.

Johnny realized his hand was still in the air and he dropped it to the crutch, suddenly all too aware of where he was. He tried to speak once, then twice, and then finally managed a weak smile. "Hi," he breathed.

"Johnny," she squeaked in reply. Her hand left her throat to quickly touch her hair while her other hand remained on the doorknob. She blinked and took a step back, obviously stunned. Her upraised hand dropped to her stomach in a loose fist. Johnny noticed she still wore her wedding ring.

"Oh, Johnny . . . I . . ." she stopped abruptly and snapped her mouth shut. Her petal soft lips pressed into a thin line and her forehead furrowed as she frowned. She bit her lower lip for a second and then struggled to speak. "I . . . come in, I guess . . . I don't . . ." She dropped her chin, breaking their stare, and took a deep breath as she took a step back, allowing Johnny to cross the threshold.

He turned away from her in the direction she indicated with a sweep of her hand and found himself in a small parlor. The cat in the window, now wrapped seductively against the corner a chair, meowed softly. The curtain twitched again as the cat's tail brushed it in its undulations. He heard the door snick closed, but did not hear Laurie's footsteps behind him. When he got to the center of the room, he turned to face her.

Laurie remained at the door, her left hand flat on her stomach, the other hanging at her side. She managed to smooth the frown lines from her face and Johnny drank in the sight of her. Tiny lines shadowed the corners of her eyes and some gray intermingled with the gold at her temples, but Laurie was still just as beautiful as the day he first saw her. Pale blue eyes studied him uncertainly. Her dress was a smoky gray with powder blue stripes.

"Light blue and gray," he said evenly, "were always your best colors."

Laurie's fingers hesitantly plucked the fabric under her fingers. She looked away for a few moments and seemed to come to a decision. Lifting her chin to face him, Laurie crossed her arms defensively against her stomach and walked slowly into the parlor. She stopped a few feet from him. The cat padded to her and brushed against her ankles. Not getting any response, the animal wandered to a corner and began to groom itself.

Johnny glanced at the cat before meeting his wife's gaze. Laurie's eyes were sadly veiled and

guarded.

“I’m so sorry about Murdoch,” she said in a trembling voice. “I wanted to come . . . I sent Jason . . .” Her eyes glittered with tears, and for a moment, she tried to stop them by clenching her jaw, but failed. “Oh, Johnny . . .” Teardrops traced a glistening trail down her cheek. She dropped her chin and quickly wiped them with the heel of one hand.

In a motion as natural as the sunrise, Johnny let the saddlebags slip to the floor, moved forward and drew her into a firm embrace. Laurie clutched his shirtfront and sobbed against his chest. He rested his cheek on the silver and gold crown of her head and shut his eyes, the intimate contact overwhelming his voice.

Instead, Johnny simply let the moment exist and, for the first time in a long time, remembered what it felt like to be a whole man.



She had a well-rehearsed speech in her head. Laurie dreamed countless dreams about this very scenario. She had it all laid out how she would handle Johnny Lancer when she came face-to-face with him again.

Every carefully orchestrated plan fled from Laurie Kinkade Lancer’s mind the second she saw him. All that was clear and real in that moment was the surge of emotions she thought had dulled with time.

When she finally gathered her wits, Laurie realized that none of the scenarios took into account the power of Johnny Lancer’s eyes. As soon as she saw them, clear and bright and emotive, she was lost because they were the eyes she remembered studying her over a stall door in Stockton, drinking her in through the veil at her wedding and misting over Jason’s newborn swaddling. These were the eyes of the man who kissed her goodbye all those years ago; indigo beacons that looked directly into your heart and saw who you really were, accepting all of it with love and devotion. They were the eyes of a person you could depend on. Eyes she had not seen in twenty years. The very same eyes that reflected so much pain for so long that Laurie was sure they could ever recover.

But they did.

The small ember of hope that always burned inside stoked alive and she felt the barriers built up for so long crumble away. Finally cried out, Laurie didn’t push away immediately – she was afraid that maybe she only saw what she wanted to see. Maybe he hadn’t changed. Instead, Laurie relished the feel of him, the smell of him and the solidness of his body. Johnny Lancer had finally come to her and she fell apart in less time than a pair of heartbeats. She knew she needed to get some control in order to protect her heart.

Straightening, Laurie gently pushed off, careful not to disrupt his balance or look in his eyes. She pulled a handkerchief from the patch pocket of her dress and dabbed her cheeks, and then rustled up a weak smile. “How long . . . I mean, when did you get here? In Newhall?”

“About an hour ago. I had something to eat and then came right here.”

His voice was exactly how she remembered it. It was gentle, warm and earthy and made her knees turn to mush. Laurie shook herself back into awareness – between his eyes and his voice, she would be in trouble if she didn’t pull herself together. She cleared her throat and motioned toward the sofa with a hand, still avoiding those eyes. “Please, sit. Can I get you anything?”

“Some water would be good.” She allowed her eyes to creep upward. “And an outhouse, perhaps?” His shy smile and hesitant manner told her that this was as difficult for him as it was for her. Probably more so.

“Of course.” She indicated the direction with a nod and led the way. “Come through here. . .” Laurie led him down a short hall and through the small kitchen, and opened the back door for him. He negotiated the two steps down and started along the short path through the backyard. Laurie closed the door and sagged against it with a groan.

She realized she had to regain composure before Johnny returned, so she started to put together some drinks and fresh fruit, carrying it to the parlor table with shaky hands. Automatically, she moved the saddlebags aside to clear the path. She let out a long breath to settle her nerves. The cat meowed. Laurie turned to it, briefly thankful for the distraction. “Oh, Rebel, this is completely unexpected,” she said. “What a way to start the day.”

The cat flicked its tail with indifference before strolling from the room. Laurie’s short laugh was nervously shaky. “Traitor,” she muttered, turning to the parlor mirror. Trembling, she patted her hair. “You can do this,” she told her reflection in an effort to slow her racing heart and quiet her hands. “I know I have a backbone in there, somewhere.” Then she thought of Johnny’s eyes and she felt that familiar race of excitement that started between her legs and spread like lightning.

Laurie hissed, frozen in place, one hand pressed to her breast. She shut her eyes and rode with the long-lost feeling – Johnny’s eyes and voice always did that to her; that is, the Johnny before the accident. A giddy laugh escaped, then her eyes shot open and she quickly glanced around. “*I’m acting like a lunatic!*” she mentally scolded herself with a snort – and then she remembered her husband’s ability to manipulate and sobered immediately.

This was too good to be true. She had to make sure he wasn’t fooling her somehow. She ordered her head to keep her heart in line.

With the sound of the kitchen door opening, Laurie smoothed her skirts and told herself to tread carefully – very carefully. “*Read your adversary,*” she remembered her husband telling her once. “*And trust your instincts.*”

November 22, 1873 – Twenty-three years ago

Johnny never let her forget the last horse sale they attended together – the one where they first met over a new foal. It was her first sale – her father had recently died, her mother had still been sick and not far behind him and Laurie needed money. Badly. And with the foal

coming unexpectedly early, she was overwhelmed. She normally wasn't so unfocused. She was the strong one in her family, the reliable one, the one that carried through and filled her father's shoes. She was the one that promised her mother that everything would be all right, and that's what weighed on her back then and derailed her thoughts – it was too much pressure. She needed to concentrate on the sale alone, but the problem was that she could not concentrate as long as Johnny was around.

“Read ‘em,” Johnny said lowly in her ear at that first sale. She shivered at his nearness, but listened, her eyes locked on a potential buyer. “Get a feel for what they want without givin’ anything away. Read your adversary, trust your instincts, and then go in for the kill.”

She puffed a short laugh. “Heavens, Johnny, you make it sound like life and death,” she remembered muttering, partly scared, partly annoyed and wholly off kilter.

Johnny, though, became strangely still. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I do, don’t I?”

A month later at a second sale in Stockton, Laurie felt ready. Strangely, she was not surprised when Johnny found her again and again fell into the role of her coach. He stood behind her again and whispered, “Remember, Laurie, know what you want before you even start this.”

Johnny’s voice brought back everything about that first sale – and their first meeting. Since then, she mourned both parents and stood on her own two feet. This time, she stood tall, sure and confident. She turned to face him, their bodies so close she could feel his heat. Growing very serious, she looked deep in his eyes and commanded his attention even as her loins tingled with the power of his musk. She stood her ground.

Noticing the chance, Johnny’s eyebrows rose in surprise but he did not retreat. “Don’t worry, Johnny,” she said with suggestive huskiness. “I know exactly what I want.”

It was the first time she saw Johnny speechless. As he gaped, she then turned her attention back to the corrals and closed a successful deal.

When Johnny returned to the parlor, Laurie was ready for him. Something in her posture must have warned him because he hesitated and raised an eyebrow. She directed him to the divan and he sat on one end, his position suggesting that she sit next to him. Instead, she stooped, picked up the saddlebag and dropped it in the inviting space as she continued past to the wingback chair sitting at a right angle to the divan. Johnny tilted his head to one side and re-positioned to face her. His expression a picture of amused patience – the game was afoot.

She smiled pleasantly, hoping the nervousness she felt didn’t show. “So,” she started, her hands folded primly in her lap. “You look good, Johnny.”

“Thanks,” he said softly. “So do you.” He smiled crookedly. “I was nervous about comin’. Jason told me about your place . . . it’s nice.”

“Thank you,” she said, her heart beating furiously. She knew what she wanted, but she wasn’t yet sure that’s what was sitting in front of her now. She also knew that her judgment was suspect when he was around, and she should wisely ignore her first impressions and use her head. “I hope you weren’t mad about me sending Jason. I thought he should be there.”

“I was glad to see him. You were right to send him. We seem to be doing all right. You’ve done well by him, Laurie.”

Laurie welcomed the warmth that ran through her at his words and her spine relaxed.

“He’s not the only one that should be there,” Johnny continued. He tried to catch her eyes, but Laurie avoided them and studied her entwined fingers instead. “I’ve come to ask if you’ll have me back. I don’t know how else to say it, Laurie.” Johnny reached over with his hand and laid it on top of hers. “I need to apologize.”

Laurie felt the tremor of his hand along with the nervous dampness. Flicking her eyes up, she stared at his face and tried to look beyond the physical and into his heart. All she saw was peace. The words he spoke were the words she had waited for all these years, and she felt a thrill at the sound of them. Nevertheless, she also felt caution, knowing she couldn’t go through all of it again.

It took her a moment to find her voice. “Johnny,” Laurie choked. Her gaze dropped to study his hand, where her thumb automatically traced his rough knuckles – she always loved his incredibly strong hands as well as the expressive way he used them. Johnny’s words rolled around in her mind as she considered them and watched her thumb rub small circles on the back of his hand. Laurie couldn’t remember the last time he let her do this when he was awake and aware. “I’ve wanted to hear that for so long, but I’m scared. You were so hurtful – I never imagined . . .”

Try as she did, the suppressed memories of her final months at Lancer flooded her mind.

January 21, 1882 – Fourteen years ago

“Why don’t you just leave?” Johnny’s voice was slurred and loud – very loud. There was no doubt everyone in the hacienda heard it.

Warm, soapy water sloshed from the bowl Laurie held when she startled at his tone. She was here to bathe him; usually a chore more easily done when Johnny was passed out, but delayed due to a few distractions in the kitchen, Johnny was coming around. Her hands shook as she put the bowl down next to the bed.

“Are you so stupid you can’t see I don’t want you here? Haven’t I made that clear enough for you?” His breath reeked of booze and he smelled of foul sweat and old alcohol. The sheets were a stained, crumpled mess. Nothing breakable remained in the room, which made it stark. His voice echoed in the emptiness.

“Johnny, let me help you up . . .” When she touched him, he exploded into graceless motion and pushed her roughly away. Shirtless, his body was slick and pocked with scars, old and new.

“I don’t need you! Can’t you hear me, you stupid bitch?” With his awakening, Johnny became agitated as the withdrawals started. His rough-whiskered face held remnants of vomit and spit. His body started to tremble from its demanding emptiness.

“Please,” Laurie said calmly, standing still just out of his reach. “Let me change the sheets. They need washing.”

“What will it take for you to leave me alone?” he roared as he hitched up on his shaky elbow. “What? Tell me! What?”

Knowing better than trying to reason with him, Laurie simply stood, quietly, hands clutched together in front of her. Her ears rang from the verbal thrashing. Her nose stung from the sharp and unpleasant smells. Her eyes watered from the heavy atmosphere of the barricaded room. She could feel grit on her fingers from his body – and for the first time Laurie seriously thought, “Nothing more. It would take not a thing more for me to leave.”

At that moment, the door opened behind her and she felt a pulse of fresh air that carried the scent of Murdoch’s tobacco. His big hand set gently on her shoulder just before his calm voice spoke in her ear.

“It’s all right, Laurie. I’ve got him.”

It wasn’t the first time her father-in-law had rescued her, but it would be close to the last.

“I don’t know what to say about all that,” Johnny admitted. “I have no excuse. All I can tell you is that the person you remember from that time is gone. Long gone. I’m a different person now.”

Finally, Laurie was able to raise her eyes again and find his. “I loved the old one,” she whispered. “The one before. Not his physical body but what he was in here.” She pulled one hand free and leaned forward, placing her palm to his chest. She could feel the flutter of his heart and hoped it covered her trembling. “I need to know that man is still there.”

Johnny took her hand from his chest and raised it to his lips. He kissed her fingers softly, then clutched her hand in his and brought them back to his chest. “I could tell you everything you want to hear, querida, but only your heart will see the truth. I’m asking for that chance, that’s all. I want you to trust me and I know that it will take time. I need you to trust me. I need *you*.”

A flash of color tucked under the edge of Johnny’s cuff drew her attention and she recognized the familiar string of beads that encircled his wrist. She drew his hand out and down, allowing the adornment to drop lower on his arm. The twin beads at the ends of the dangling tails tickled the back of her thumb. She knew both the story and the meaning behind the bracelet, and the fact that he wore it now pushed her heart over the line. She glanced up, saw that spark in his eyes that always stripped her of all her defenses and knew there was no way she could deny him. Not now, not ever.

Johnny must have read something in her eyes because he released her hand and turned to the saddlebags next to him. He flipped open one side and pulled out a small package. Laurie frowned in puzzlement; he quickly undid the string and worked the paper edges aside. She was about to ask what it was, but the query stalled on her lips when Johnny pulled out the candy stick. She started to laugh, but with a speed she remembered from so long ago, she instead found the peppermint between her lips before she could utter a sound. Then she heard the music of his chuckle as he plucked the sweet treat from her lips. The kiss that followed was simply the next step and she would not have stopped it even if she had the power to do so.

Her heart sang.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Johnny intended to temper the kiss; he didn't want to frighten her away by forcing the issue. As soon as their lips met, hers as soft and supple as he remembered, he knew he was lost. He was incapable of fighting the tide that engulfed him and it intensified when he felt Laurie carried away with him. They plunged the depths together, heart to heart, soul to soul, with that first moment of intimate contact.

Somehow, they found their way to her bed. Intoxicated with the scent of honeysuckle, peppermint and each other, they collapsed onto the rough, crochet bedspread. Laurie's room was awash in sunlight, bright and inviting. He kissed her repeatedly, tracing her jaw with his lips and angling down her delicate neck to the fluttering hollow at its base. He started up the other side, his mouth anxious to taste every part of her. He brought his hand up and deftly undid the buttons at the front of her dress, revealing the swell of her bosom. She gasped when he cupped a breast and rubbed the sensitive nipple through her thin chemise.

Laurie pulled his shirt free and slid her hands underneath. The feel of his long back muscles flexing under her hands pulled her into a deeper pool of want and she groaned. Laurie's hands slipped downward, under his loosened pants and kneaded firm, rounded muscles beneath. Johnny's tongue and lips worked a sizzling line down between her breasts, and in response, he pulled his hips in tight against her – skin to skin still not close enough.

Somehow, she wriggled from the cloth that remained and helped him free of his shirt and pants. They kissed hungrily, their contact stoking an engulfing fire. The soft mounds of her breasts pressed into his broad, firm chest and their kisses began an exploration every hot inch of skin. Laurie wrapped arms and legs around him, pulling him close. His groan warned that he was near release.

Johnny backed off taking a moment to drink her in with the light of the morning sun. In his eyes, she was still flawless – especially with her skin pink with the flush of their lovemaking. Lying on his left side he pushed his hand to the back of her neck and drew her in again, pressing his aching need firmly against her. She captured him with her legs, encouraging, demanding.

“Oh, Johnny!” she moaned as he found what he sought, wet and ready. He penetrated her quickly, deeply and her back arched to receive him. They moved together as they always had, in perfect rhythm. The years between them vanished with their union. When they exploded in their finale, together, Johnny shuddered and clutched her to him, swearing to never, never

let her go again.

Laurie cried and he kissed the salty trail away.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she wept. “It’s all I’ve dreamed since I left, Johnny. I never wanted to leave.”

“I know, I know, sweetheart. I promise I will never make you leave again. I promise.” Johnny gently kissed her eyelids, cheeks and neck, finding her willing mouth only when her tears subsided.

Weak and drained, they rested and explored each other with renewed wonder, working into exuberant frenzy twice more before noon. Only then did they doze, entwined, entangled and exhausted, fraught with the scent of love. The world outside was forgotten, each of them afraid to let go of the other in case it was only a fantasy.

In the golden light of those hours, Laurie’s fingers traced every inch of Johnny’s naked body. As horrible as the scars were, she was amazed at how the rest of his body healed from the abuses her husband forced it to endure. Where his skin was once pasty, rough and stretched tightly across bone, it was now smooth and healthy as well as tanned from working outside. Middle age thickened his waist and neck but he was solidly in shape. The numerous scars were softer and less vivid than she recalled.

Johnny’s exploration of her body had the same intensity and was sweetly familiar.

Mid afternoon is when they finally gave in to the physical need of nourishment. Laurie threw on a light robe and disappeared, ordering Johnny not to move. He tried to straighten the bedclothes at least; their vigorous activity had heaped most of them on the floor. When she returned with a tray filled with sustenance, he moved aside to make room. They spoke of the immediate future, their worries and hopes, and fed each other cheese, bread and fruit wearing nothing more than their reestablished belief in each other.

“You’re going to get Scott next, aren’t you?” Laurie said, her fingertips brushing Johnny’s cheek; the intimacy of the motion topped a long empty gulf.

“That was my plan. I was hoping Jason would go with me,” Johnny answered, his voice hesitant. His hand traced her hip. “But I don’t want to leave you.”

She smiled. “You never left me, husband, and you never will. I know you have to go and it’s a perfect opportunity for both you and Jason. He needs you so much, Johnny. ”

Johnny nodded. “I found my father when I was his age. I know what’s at stake. I just wish Murdoch could have seen him again.”

Laurie’s hand covered his. “Teresa told me about his first stroke. I almost went up there but Teresa told me he was well taken care of. Still, I almost . . .” she paused. “He didn’t suffer at the end, did he?”

"I don't think so," Johnny answered softly. "With the first stroke he was unconscious for about a day. After, he didn't really suffer from pain but from physical weakness. Hard to imagine Murdoch weak that way, isn't it?" Laurie nodded and sniffed, unable to speak. Her fingers traced Johnny's body as he spoke. "After the second stroke - over a year later - he didn't wake up until the very end, several days later. He was so weak." Johnny paused and swallowed hard. Laurie held his hand. "The only words he spoke were 'Bring him home.' He stayed awake for a while after that and seemed to be at peace. He smiled at me just before he died." His voice hitched and he took a breath. "I honestly don't think he was in any pain." Johnny studied their hands as if afraid to look in her eyes. "I should have had the confidence to look for Scott sooner."

"Things unfold the way they should, Johnny, you know that. People find their path when they're ready." Laurie fingered the hanging tails of Johnny's bracelet as she spoke. "I'm glad you found your confidence again, Johnny."

He picked up her hand and kissed her fingers, and then fixed a soulful gaze that burned right down to her toes. "I didn't have it until you gave it to me, querida, and for that, I thank you. And you're right. I should have come sooner. Much sooner."

Laurie left her hand in Johnny's and laid back, pillowing her head with her other arm. "Murdoch meant the world to me. He was a good man. He kept me focused in those years. I could have easily hated you." When Laurie said those words, her voice became husky as tears threatened. "He was my life line and I owe him so much. You have no idea, Johnny. He was a rock. A rock."

Johnny kept silent. Visions of his father crossed his mind in a mixed, chaotic parade. He clearly remembered his turning point - that point when he knew he couldn't go any lower and had to make a choice. Murdoch was his first anchor. The man had always been there - he took the foul fits Johnny threw at him with quiet grace and never backed down. Johnny had hated him and his perfect strength for so long but at that critical time, Johnny realized it was what he needed, what he had always needed, to go on and was thankful it was still there.

"I still can't believe how he stood by me," Johnny whispered. "I tried so hard to drive him away, too."

Laura's forehead furrowed in thought. "I think he knew exactly what he was doing, and I think he figured it out after Scott left. Something was different after that; he became calmer, stronger and surer. I . . . I think he knew I had to leave. It was the only way to get you to, I don't know, focus? That's why he told me it was all right to go. It was right after Jelly died . . ." Her voice caught for a moment and Johnny squeezed her hand. "He encouraged me after that, and he told me it wouldn't be forever. He knew exactly what he was doing, Johnny, I believe that. Giving me permission to go saved what we had."

February 3, 1882 - Fourteen years ago

She sat staring at the fire. The great room was dark, the sun long gone and not a single lamp lit. The light of the flames in the stone fireplace was enough. The way the flames themselves danced and changed colors and undulated in the darkness within the hearth comforted her.

“So much power and energy right there, contained in one safe spot,” she thought. It could easily get out of control, but it didn’t - it simply stayed there, flickering, asking nothing but still demanding in its own way.

Laurie was drained. Stunned, weary, numb and drained. She wished for the energy of the fire inside her again, not sure where or when it left. “I’m just tired,” she thought reasonably. “So tired.”

She didn’t jump when she felt the big hands settle gently on her shoulders from behind the couch. If not for Murdoch, Laurie felt she would have collapsed into a frazzled pile of nerves long ago.

“Quite a day,” he said softly.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Where’s Jason?”

Laurie blinked and tilted her head to one side as she tried to think. Confounded, she turned and looked up at the mountain of a man that was her father-in-law; she remembered her eyes feeling huge and dry.

“I . . . I have no idea!” She said, suddenly alarmed as she shot to her feet and glanced around the room. “Jason . . . I saw him . . .” She found Murdoch’s eyes as feelings of horror, shame and complete panic began to take root. “I don’t know!”

Murdoch held up his hands. “It’s all right, Laurie. He’s around here, I’m sure. Come on, let’s look.” He walked around the couch and held out his hand. “Come on.” She took it, grateful for the touch, and he led her slowly around the room. After a moment, her eyes adjusted to the dark and she could discern shapes in the shadows.

“He’s not in here,” Murdoch said calmly. “Let’s look in the kitchen.” He led her through the empty kitchen where they found the remains of a purloined snack of cookies. Maria had gone home long ago, Laurie realized. Murdoch then led her down the hall toward the bedrooms there.

Laurie remembered her throat tightening as they passed Johnny’s closed door. Stopping short between another pair of doors beyond, Murdoch stuck his head in the guest room, across from where Laurie stayed on those nights she didn’t get home.

“Here he is.”

Jason was curled up on the bed, fully clothed, very dirty, and sound asleep. Laurie stared at him, seeing nothing else but the vision of her little boy - a smaller version of her husband - embraced in the small oval of yellow light thrown by one lone lamp. “Captured fire,” she thought. Her eyes started to burn and the tears she thought she could never cry again slowly

trailed down her cheeks. Her breath hitched painfully.

“It’s all right, Laurie. He’s fine.”

She turned to Murdoch’s broad chest and cried harder and longer than she ever had before. He encircled her with his arms and they swayed gently.

“Shhh, shhh. He’s safe,” he said calmly. “Always remember that he’ll be safe under my roof, even when you aren’t here.”

The next morning was the first time he suggested she get away for Jason’s sake. Later, when she realized Murdoch’s words about Jason being safe under his roof did not only apply to her son, she took the suggestion to heart and acted.

Johnny’s voice warmed her. “Well, it sure made me realize what was at stake. If you and Scott hadn’t left, I don’t think a thing would have changed.” He raised her fingers and kissed them again. “Murdoch set you both free and now I’m asking you back.”

She reached over and cupped his chin. “The love was always there. You just had to see it again. I’m so happy, Johnny.”

Muted growling sounded from Johnny’s stomach and interrupted the moment. “I’m ready for some real food,” he said with that dazzling smile that was hers only. “There a place in town we can go to? Guess we’d best get out of this house for awhile before your neighbors talk.”

“Let ‘em talk,” Laurie said, flinging the sheet aside as she stood. “I won’t be around to hear it anyway, will I?” She started to gather her hair back as she stepped around the discarded clothes on the floor. She could feel Johnny’s eyes on her and enjoyed every second. Abandoning her hair, she instead poured water from the pitcher on the washstand into a bowl and rinsed out a cloth. After quickly wiping herself down, she rinsed the cloth, returned to her husband, and lovingly wiped him down. He turned it into a game, trying to snatch the cloth and redirect the efforts. They laughed, teased, and enjoyed every moment.

Johnny ran his fingers through her hair. “Leave it down,” he requested softly and with a smile. “Always.”

“Always,” Laurie answered. Then she paused and frowned, and her eyes opened wide. “Oh, no! I bet Nellie is wondering where I am! I’m surprised she didn’t stop by to check on me.”

Johnny sat up. “I have a feeling Ace took care ‘a that. I’m sure he knows why I’m here.”

Laurie smiled. “I bet he did. Ace and Nellie are very close, if you know what I mean. I see a wedding in the near future.” She stooped to pick up their clothes.

Johnny sat on the edge of the bed and caught his pants when she tossed them his way. He worked them on and stood, looking around. “Uh, where’s my boot?” Laurie giggled and started to dress. He hopped out of the room and down the short hall, using the wall as support and wondering with great amusement where his crutch ended up. He found both

his crutch and his boot on the floor by the couch and shook his head at his forgetfulness. “*She could always do that to me,*” he reminded himself.

He pulled a clean shirt from his saddlebags and finished dressing away from the front windows. The cat glared at him from the corner. “I bet you’re feeling a little ignored, huh, gato?” he said as he finished buttoning his shirt. He continued to talk to the animal until it lost some of its animosity and strolled to him. Johnny sat to pull on his boot and the cat jumped on his lap.

“Oh, that’s Rebel. He does a very good job of keeping the mice out of the kitchen and the squirrels out of the yard. And I bet he needs to go outside.” Laurie, redressed, brushed out her hair at the parlor mirror and then found her bag. “You ready? I usually walk to town. I used to keep a horse, but it was just too much work after awhile.”

“I’d be happy to walk long as it ain’t too fast.” Johnny smiled and stood, dislodging Rebel to the floor. The cat raced to the door where Laurie let him out. Johnny followed next, waiting at the top of the porch steps until his wife closed the door. They descended the steps together and he recalled the couple earlier that morning. Johnny looked across the street. “Looks to be about four o’clock,” he said with a glance skyward. “Your neighbors across the street saw me this mornin’. Think they’re watchin’ us leave?”

“You can bet on it,” Laurie said as she placed her right hand gently on Johnny’s lower back. “Mr. Nelson could give a hoot, but I bet Caroline is more than interested.” She leaned over and pecked Johnny’s cheek. “And I know she’s watchin’ because I just saw the curtain move.”

“You’ll be branded a hussy, you know.”

“Not for long and I don’t care. I’m too happy right now.”

They walked in silence for several minutes before Johnny broke it with a heavy request. “Tell me how Jelly died,” he said quietly. “Murdoch said it was pneumonia but I never really asked . . .”

Laurie nodded, suddenly serious. “Yes, it was. He was such a dear man. He loved you so much.”

Johnny’s throat tightened. “Yeah, I know.”

Laurie rested a hand low on his back as she spoke. “He’d heard about some herb that would ease the pain of withdrawal. He had this plan to get you to take this concoction . . .” Her short laugh sounded sad. She shook her head slowly. “I don’t think he ever figured out how to get you to take this stuff, but he inquired all over about this herb. Some Indian plant, I don’t know. Anyway, he took off for a couple of days just before an early cold snap. By the time he got back, he was chilled to the bone.” Laurie took a breath and cleared her throat. Johnny concentrated on the path ahead, not daring to speak. “He got very weak,” she continued, “and then fell one day and broke his hip. That’s when the pneumonia took hold and he never recovered. He fought hard, Johnny, he didn’t want to go . . .”

October 28, 1886 – Fifteen years ago

The room was heavy with the smell of mustard and onion, the air damp with steam. Jelly's ragged breathing was both the background and focus of the room. Cluttered with the man's various finds and collections, the shelves hung on the walls reflected the curious nature of the bedridden man, none of it able to help him. Laurie settled on the chair next to the bed and rinsed out the cloth in the bowl on the nearby table. She carefully wiped down Jelly's face. His bright eyes watched her intently as he fought for breath.

"How're you doin', Jelly?" she asked. "We need to change this plaster soon."

He nodded, unable to speak. He had lost so much weight that his face was made up of hollow planes, pale and waxy. His iron gray and brittle beard now dominated his face.

"Dr. Sam should be here soon. He's keeping close watch on you." Jelly's glazed eyes watched Laurie's as she wiped his face and arms.

"Johnny," he breathed, the word barely heard.

Laurie's pulse jumped. "We haven't told him you're sick, Jelly. He hasn't been . . . with us lately." She rinsed the hot cloth. "I know he'd want to come and see you." The lie came out easy. It had become easier to lie in the last few years about Johnny's wants. "But he's just not up to it."

The sorrow in the old man's eyes was very clear. It wasn't her lie, but the truth that lay behind it; Johnny Lancer was gone in the minds of many people, but not in Jelly's. He didn't harbor his hope as Laurie did. He'd always let everyone know the boy would come back to them and nearly blistered Scott's skin with his words they day the elder son left. Jelly still hadn't forgiven him for leaving and let everyone know in his own less-than-subtle way.

By the time Sam arrived, Jelly was unconscious, his lips and fingernails tinged blue. His breathing became rattled. The doctor carefully removed the nose tube they had been using to hydrate him.

"There's nothing more I can do, Laurie. His heart's giving out."

"Impossible," Laurie choked, her eyes tearing. "He has the biggest heart I've ever seen."

Sam put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "I know exactly what you mean. Do you want to get Murdoch or shall I?"

"You, please. I want to stay." She took Jelly's limp hand, the unnatural heat still alarming. She heard Sam leave and started to talk. "I want to thank you, Jelly, for everything you've done for us and especially for Johnny. You have a special place in our hearts and always will. I'm so happy you found this place. I'm so happy you found Johnny. You are a remarkable man, Jellifer Hoskins, and we all love you."

Sam Jenkins returned in just a few minutes with Murdoch, but it was already too late.

Johnny and Laurie were at the edge of town when she finished her recollection. Johnny was unable to speak at first and he pulled Laurie to a stop before stepping onto the main street. "Thank you," he said huskily. "That's how I always imagined it, how I wanted it to be. I should have been there."

"You were, Johnny. Not physically, but you were there in his mind. And now I know he's watching over you and thrilled to pieces."

"And taking delight in telling Murdoch how right he was."

"Undoubtedly," Laurie laughed, wiping away a final tear.

Johnny smiled at her, unable to resist kissing her damp cheek right there in the middle of the street. "Come on," he said after. "I'm hungry and I need your help to plan a trip."

They started planning as they turned onto the main street of Newhall. Curious looks followed Laurie and Johnny all the way down the boardwalk, right up to when they stepped into the small, homey restaurant. It didn't bother Johnny, but he could see Laurie keeping a close eye on him. Once seated, he took her hand and mentioned his sudden realization.

"Will it be difficult to get used to?" he asked. "Being out with me like this? I'm sure it wasn't too enjoyable before."

Laurie flushed and nervously squeezed his fingers. "I'll get used to it. And you're right - you were a lot more difficult, to say the least. Scott used to . . ." she paused when the waitress arrived to take their order. Laurie greeted her by name and introduced Becky to Johnny.

"Yes, I've heard about you," Becky said with a polite smile. "Pleased to meet you."

Johnny raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Always a pleasure to meet a friend of Laurie's, and I hope what you've heard can be overcome."

Becky looked at him a moment, confused, and then she broke out in a huge grin. "Oh, yes, she said you were a silver tongued one," she laughed. "Let me get you some coffee."

"Oh, Johnny," Laurie said excitedly, "Look, it's Vicky Lynn." She pointed out the window at a beautiful young girl. "I think Jason's got his eye on her."

"That right?" He took a closer look at the girl as she walked with her mother, chatting gaily. He nodded his approval. "She's certainly a beauty."

"And a very nice girl, too."

That comment resulted in another train of thought. "Laurie, what happened to Trish? Was it Scott's idea to break off the engagement or hers?"

Laurie didn't respond immediately and Johnny didn't miss the hesitation. It didn't take much to figure out who was the cause of the breakup. Johnny ducked his head.

“Trish and Scott grew apart,” Laurie started, her words measured. “I could see it in both of their eyes. I confess that during that first year I wasn’t as involved with them as I maybe should have been. Watching over you and Teresa’s wedding that following spring kept us all very busy. I think Trish felt neglected. I’m not sure, though. She started backing away just before Teresa’s wedding; that much I did notice. Scott was gone a lot.” Laurie picked at the napkin on the table as she spoke. “I think they were trying to figure out what their future would look like. I don’t think Trish liked what she saw.”

Becky returned with their coffee and Johnny ordered their dinners. When they were alone again, Johnny spoke his thoughts.

“Sounds like she gave him the choice of her or Lancer. And being around me, no doubt.” Johnny tried to remember Trish’s face but found he could not. “I really don’t remember her very clearly.”

Laurie smoothed out the napkin. “Scott made his choice, Johnny. I don’t think he regretted it. He was quiet for awhile.” Laurie frowned. “What I don’t understand is what I saw when he left. He seemed relieved. Not angry - relieved. And sad. Like it was the way it had to be.”

“I imagine living at Lancer under the circumstances would be more than anyone bargained for,” Johnny reasoned.

Laurie shook her head. “No, that’s not it. There was something else, I’m sure. I remember being completely surprised by the decision. And he left immediately after making it. He gave absolutely no clue to what he was thinking.” She looked up at Johnny. “But then again, I was so tired all the time I could be wrong. Maybe he gave off lots of clues but I just missed them.”

“I doubt it. You read people very well, querida. That’s not something you can ignore.” She smiled and took his hand. “I guess you can’t give me anything to start with when I see him face to face, then?”

“No, I honestly can’t.” She grinned mischievously. “Did you have something to start with when you came here?”

Johnny chuckled. “No. Only peppermint sticks and a lot of encouragement.”

“Well, I don’t know if the candy will help again but I can help with the encouragement.”

When their meal came, the pair began to discuss Johnny’s next steps.



The day was like a dream.

As Laurie lay in the quiet darkness of her bedroom, the steady breathing of her husband next to her allowed the reality of his being there to sink in. She turned on her side, one hand tucked away under her pillow. The other instinctively reached out and came to rest on Johnny’s bare chest. His skin was warm and real; she remembered they always touched when they were in bed together, neither of them wanting to lose their connection, even in sleep.

Her hand rose and fell with his breaths. In the meager moonlight from the window, she watched him, studying his profile with grateful awe. Her Johnny was still there, still intact, even through all his trials. Laurie felt her eyes burn. She'd prayed so long for this moment to come to pass, this peace, this feeling of wholeness that eluded her for so long. Who was she to be so lucky?

Laurie felt the familiar and long-missed thrill begin deep inside her, the one that always preceded her rush of heat. Slowly, her fingertips circled his chest and wandered to his left shoulder. The old scars felt soft and bumpy under her hand. So many times, she washed his damaged skin; each time while her husband was unaware because that was the only time he would not fight. Laurie remembered wondering what making love with him again would be like, or if it would ever happen again.

Then she thought back to the morning and his sweet kiss. Laurie smiled to herself, the thrill growing and making her wiggle closer. Their love was beyond the physical, she realized. What ever made her think the physical part would be so different?

Johnny's breathing hitched and his head rolled toward her. In the forgiving darkness, the scars and lines that told the story of his life smoothed away, once again exposing her young man from so long ago. Gently, she traced his cheek with her fingers as tepid tears tickled a path down her cheek. Laurie let them fall, refusing to release her touch.

She sniffed. It was enough to cause Johnny's eyelids to flicker. Laurie watched as he slowly came awake, she being the first thing in his sight. He smiled in the darkness.

"Hey," he sighed.

"Hey," she replied, her heart beginning to thunder at his voice.

Johnny laid still, eyes locked with hers, allowing Laurie's fingers to continue tracing his face. After a few moments he moved his hand to the small of her back; the beads at his wrist were cool against her skin. She quivered. "I'll never leave you again," she whispered. "I couldn't."

He answered by drawing her in close. Laurie snuggled in until they shared the same pillow. Johnny's eyes glittered in the shadows of his face. "And I won't let you," he promised. Laurie's hand trailed from his face, through his hair and down the back of his neck. Their lips met and their pact sealed.

They arose early the next morning, eager to renew their life together. They planned Johnny and Jason's trip the evening before and were the first to arrive at the train station to buy tickets and make inquiries and arrangements. After a quick breakfast, they were back at the station to meet the first train north.

"I'll be back when I'm done up north. You need to start packing. You can ship your things to Cross Creek as you get them packed." Johnny stopped at the base of the train steps and took Laurie's hand. "Are you all right doing this yourself? I mean, you can wait until Jason and I are back . . ."

"Hardly," Laurie said. "I want to get home as fast as I can. No delays. I have plenty of help, believe me." She smiled, eyes sparking. "I'll make do, you know that."

Johnny liked the way 'home' sounded coming from her lips. Then again, anything sounded good coming from her lips. He grinned and kissed her gently. "Te amo, mi corazon."

"Te amo, tambien." Laurie placed her palm over his heart. "Estare con ti aqui. You'll never be alone again."

He raised her hand and kissed her fingers. "I'm beginning to see that I never was," he smiled. "I won't be long."

Johnny released her and, with her help, mounted the first step that would take him on his next journey.

CHAPTER NINE

Johnny wasn't home more than a day before announcing his and Jason's departure for Scotia. Any details on the "whens" and "hows" of Scott's current location had to wait for the meeting with the Pinkertons in San Francisco. Teresa was beside herself with curiosity and worry. She couldn't give her acquired brother any assurances on this trip as she had on his trip south.

Johnny and Jason planned to ride their horses to the train station in Cross Creek, load up their mounts and get to Oakland. From there, they would take the ferry across the bay to the big city. After the Pinkerton meeting, they would take another ferry north, across the bay again to catch the train to Scotia - or as close to Scotia as they could get. The terrain there was rugged so they would have to figure out how to get to the town itself from the station once they arrived. It couldn't be far from the tracks, they reasoned; a lumber mill had to ship its goods by rail.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Teresa's voice carried deep-seated concern.

Johnny shook his head and continued to pack. "If you ask me that one more time, I'll . . ."

"You'll what?" she inquired, her smile dimming the wariness.

Johnny checked the saddlebag a final time and then reached over and pulled the rein loose from the hitching rail. He turned to face Teresa and pecked her on the forehead. "I'll push you in the horse trough."

Her short laugh was from the heart and her eyes shined with pressing emotion. "You'd have to catch me first, mister," she teased.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of yourself," he shot back with a grin. "I get around better than you know."

"I have no doubt," Teresa responded affectionately. She took his work-worn hand in hers and turned serious. "Be careful, Johnny. It's a long trip."

Johnny's teasing grin shifted into a sincere smile. "I know. Pray I don't come back without him."

They embraced, holding the hug for long seconds and relishing the connection.

“Daniel and I will be gone when you get back,” she said quietly. “But I’ll be helping Laurie get home again. Johnny, I’m so happy for you and Jason.” They pulled back. Teresa’s brown eyes shimmered with tears. “Vaya con Dios,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Y con usted en mi corazon,” replied Johnny. “I don’t know what I did to deserve having you in my life,” he said quietly. “But I’m thankful for every second, querida.” He kissed her forehead again and then turned to his mount. Johnny grabbed the saddle horn of the custom saddle in a firm grip and hopped up, stabbing his right foot into the stirrup with a smoothness that belied his physical state.

Jason, leaning on arms crossed over the horn of his saddle, felt contented warmth as he watched the exchange. Even though they weren’t blood relatives, Teresa and Johnny’s bond was undeniable. Then his thoughts turned to his mother - there was a hint there of why she missed Johnny Lancer.

“Day dreamin’ already?” Johnny’s voice brought him back to the here and now.

Jason looked to his father who had reined up next to him. He straightened, and then tipped his hand. The red horse neatly spun about and the pair walked from the yard side by side. With one final nod and wave back at Teresa and her family standing under the stucco arch of the courtyard, the two Lancers transitioned into a smooth jog. The quest had begun.

It would be a long trip. The plans took into account speed and Johnny’s comfort. It also gave father and son time to talk; they both knew that there was plenty to talk about. Although that particular aspect of the trip was not mentioned aloud, it started as soon as the Lancer arch disappeared from sight behind them.

Jason studied the buckskin his father rode very closely. Physically, the horse was a close match to his bay; they had to be related, he realized. He heard his mother and Teresa talk about what a wonder Johnny was with horses but now he had reason to believe it. His father and Sierra had an obvious connection based on respect and trust. They were so in tune with each other that the animal seemed to respond to mental commands.

“That’s some horse,” Jason stated as they jogged abreast. “Where did you find him?”

“He was in a bunch that was rounded up in the south mesa. He was a yearling at the time and I knew the bloodlines of the stallion that had been runnin’ with ‘em.”

“How old is he?”

“He’s ten.”

“Did you break ‘im?”

Johnny shifted slightly in the saddle. “No, no. I’ve been able to do a lot with him, but that part’s long behind me. I took him over when he was about six. Up until then, Rafe was

workin' with him for me. Rafe deserves most of the credit; I wasn't . . . too helpful at first."

A few long moments of uncomfortable silence fat with unsaid words hung in the air. "They're related, aren't they? Sierra and Solano?" Jason reached down and gave his horse a pat on the neck. "Save their color, they could be twins, the way they're built."

Johnny nodded. "They're from the same stock, all right. They share the same dam. That mare was from the same bloodlines as Barranca. She was the start of a line of good cow ponies with lots of smarts. They'll take care of us."

"Solano has always done that," Jason agreed. "Ma and Aunt Teresa said you had an eye for horseflesh. They said I was lucky to get it from ya."

Johnny ducked his head. Jason could see his jaw working and wondered if he said something irreparably wrong so early in the trip.

"Well," his father finally said, obviously struggling for a comment. "Better that than other things."

So the miles gathered behind them at a satisfying pace, their progress steady. It was on the long side of noon before Jason knew it. Now, although the well-trained Sierra was flawless in his performance, Jason could tell that the unaccustomed time in the saddle was wearing on his father. Lines of weariness deepened on his face and Jason noticed an occasional wince if Johnny shifted in the saddle too suddenly. His hand, however, remained rock steady in guiding the obedient buckskin.

Jason suggested a break amongst a tempting copse of trees sighing with the winds. He saw his father's eyes take in the peaceful looking spot for a moment before nodding acceptance of Jason's idea.

"I ain't dismountin', though. Not sure I could get back up." Although Jason knew that he was probably serious, the elder Lancer's eyes danced with humor and he spoke with a chuckle. His mouth had quirked into a pained grin when he thought Jason looked aside.

They reined over and stopped beneath the canopy, taking in the coolness with pleasure. Jason unlashed his canteen and offered it to Johnny. With a soft word and a motion unseen by the younger man's eyes, Sierra sidestepped next to the red horse and stopped within easy reach.

"Amazing," Jason uttered at the precise movement, shaking his head slowly in admiration and handing over the water after uncorking the canteen.

Johnny chuffed dryly, dropping the reins across the black mane before accepting the vessel. "It's not amazing, really; just the result of a whole lot of practice." He took a generous drink.

Jason accepted the canteen back, swiped at a small cloud of gnats hovering by his ear, and took his turn at the cool water. The horses' tails swished and he felt his mount shift under him as the horse stomped his leg. As he capped the canteen, Jason unobtrusively studied his

father for any more signs of distress. He wondered if this was such a good idea after all - if the aura of sadness that hung over his father would ever lift. When Johnny had returned from his trip south, there was a certain kind of lightness in his being. Now, it seemed to have disappeared or worn away. The man was almost unapproachable, but Jason swore to himself to get some long avoided answers.

Eventually, he heard a sigh followed soon after by Johnny clearing his throat. "Let's get going," his father hoarsely said. "We'll be in Cross Creek by nightfall at this pace. There a creek a little bit ahead of us. The horses can have a drink there."

Nodding, Jason touched Solano's sides and the pair of horses moved out. His mind was awhirl with thoughts as they pressed onward. His father had fallen into a tense silence that Jason attributed to pain, both physical and otherwise. This trip certainly didn't have the positive outlook of the first trip. A sideways glance revealed to Jason lines that had grown subtly deeper in the older man's face. A twinge of guilt struck him; was his underlying anger outwardly obvious? Was he adding to the stress of the situation instead of helping? It was at that moment he realized just how long this trip was going to be and how far his father had gone to get to this point. Physically, this trip would only be a matter of days. Mentally, it would cover decades. Moreover, in the end, would it all work out?

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw his father shift in the saddle. He knew it was going to be a lot more uncomfortable for his father and there was not one thing he could - or would - do about that. This whole trip was about clearing the air, after all, both between him and his father, and between his father and Uncle Scott. Surely the old man would call it if things became too much. Jason wondered briefly how much he himself would contribute to that load.

The younger man rolled that idea through his mind and his thoughts picked up a trail. When do things become too much for a person? Each individual had a limit, surely. How is that limit determined? Would knowing his father's limits reveal his own?

That line of thought started Johnny's son on a path he steadfastly refused to travel in the past, a path called the history of Johnny Madrid Lancer. True, he heard the stories about his infamous father's past but he never asked him about it directly; he never had the chance. How bad off was he that he turned to a gun for survival? Did making that decision have any bearing on his decision to drive his mother away?

"Can I ask you something?" Jason said suddenly, his thoughts driving him on as he reined in Solano so Sierra could catch up. "Why did you become a gunfighter?"

Arched eyebrows and the tilt of his father's head told Jason the question was unexpected. After a few seconds, Johnny's chin dipped. Jason got the distinct impression that if he had his other hand, the man would tug the brim of his hat low over his eyes. Johnny Lancer wanted to be unreadable.

'Why?' Jason thought instantly.

"Are you sure you want to know?" Johnny said quietly. "It's pretty ugly. You have a right to

know, but I'm not sure you *need* to know."

Jason sat up a little straighter, annoyed for a moment at being questioned, but then he realized that his request could look just like plain old curiosity. Is that all there was to it? "No," he told himself. "*I need to know why he's the way he is; I'm his son. What does that mean? How much of him was formed by circumstance and how much was predetermined? Will I be him in thirty years?*" He found himself nodding at the question Johnny posed. "Yes," he said softly. Then he held his tongue as his father sighed, worked his lips for a moment, and then allowed his soft voice to part the air.

"First, I'll tell you the part I don't remember; I was too young so it's what I have been told. My mother left Lancer when I was two years old and took me with her. Mama always told me that my father had kicked us out, that my father didn't want a half-breed kid around. From what I've pieced together, we went to San Francisco.

"From there, we went south to Mexico when I was around four and that's where my earliest memories begin. It wasn't until much later that I found out that mama had run off with a gambler named Dueno, and the reason we ran from San Francisco was that Dueno had racked up some gambling debts with the wrong people. He and my mother escaped to Mexico for a fresh start.

"Since the end of the war, the area south of the border was changing. The ranchers lost control of their holdings and people started settling on the old Ranchos' land. It was wide open and lawless - it was a perfect place for them to disappear.

"My mother and Dueno started a gambling house, I'm guessing with the money he brought from San Francisco. Dueno either ran off or was killed shortly after; I don't really know which because my mother wouldn't talk about it. Somewhere along the line, she hooked up with another man - Angeles Seguin - who I came to consider my stepfather.

"He and my mother kept the gambling house going with lots of hard work - mostly mine. My earliest memories are of working in the place - sweeping the floor, cleaning up and the like, and watching my mother entertain the gamblers." Johnny chuckled softly and slowly shook his head. "She was a piece of work, I tell ya. She could charm the boots off those gamblers when she wanted and really enjoyed doing it. She's what kept that place open. She loved every second of it."

Johnny paused and set his jaw, obviously drawing a line as to exactly how far his mother's entertaining went. The innuendo was clear to Jason.

"Seguin tended bar and ran the place behind the scenes leaving my mother free during the busy times to interact with the customers. He was a strict disciplinarian with me; I remember getting the belt when I got out of line, which was probably more often than not. He made it clear that I couldn't be around during the busy hours of the evening and night. I was on my own when I wasn't sleeping, I was cleaning the place for the next day's activities. My time with my mother was very limited. The growth of the area was staggering and there was no lack of business.

"What was once Rancho Tia Juana was fast becoming the city of Tia Juana. People started

coming in and staying. It became easier and easier for me to get lost in the crowd and keep out of Seguin's hair. I took care of myself most of the time."

"How old were you?" Jason asked quietly, his curiosity overriding the feeling to not interrupt. He was mentally trying to put himself in his father's situation, wondering if he would have done the same things, made the same decisions.

Johnny frowned in thought. "My first real clear memories start when I was around six or seven," he said softly. "I remember running to warn my mother whenever the rurales came to town. They were a group of outlaw soldiers that banded together after the war and claimed the area as theirs. They had a field day collecting 'security payments' - graft the townspeople paid for their own safety. No one really thought to fight back; the townsfolk were mostly displaced cowhands and farmers that were happy to have a roof over their heads. The business owners were the ones that got hit the hardest, my mother and Seguin among them. The rurales visited my mother often.

"I remember my mother always goin' on about making their place as grand as anything in San Francisco. She always talked about San Francisco." Johnny's chin lifted and a faraway cast fell over his eyes as the memory pushed to the forefront. "She always wanted to go back. She and Seguin fought about that constantly. He was happy where we were and promised he'd fix up the place like she wanted, but the rurales' payments made that impossible.

"Somewhere along the line in my mother's professional flirtations, she started to plant the seeds of revolution. She wanted to keep her money. That was one thing about mama - when she got a notion, she was relentless. Things were pretty tense between her and Seguin then. I spent most of my time in the streets to stay out of the crossfire. Didn't take me long to figure that one out."

Jason realized the results his father must have faced when he got in the pair's way. Even if it was unintentional, the physical abuse Johnny received was probably worse than Jason could imagine given what he'd heard about the emotional intensity of Maria Lancer.

"In my wanderings through the growing city of Tia Juana I'd seen the gunfighters and heard the talk about them. They were so different and so confident - everyone treated them with respect and I admired that. You have to remember that with my blue eyes, the fact that I was *mestizo* was impossible to hide. Outside the gambling hall, I was a target for any Mexican that felt I was a disgrace to the country, and there were a lot of them. I was less than a dog. I didn't have many friends, and, looking back, my well-being came in second to - well, to most everything in my mother's life."

"Did you ever think to run away and find your real father? Did you know where he was?" Jason asked.

Johnny nodded. "I knew where he lived. Whenever I asked about him, my mother always told me he threw us out. She never spoke about Murdoch unless I asked, and she always said the same thing and nothing more. I grew up with the understanding I could never go back to Lancer. I think she did that to keep me from running away." Johnny's eyes sparked with an odd light as a lopsided grin twisted his face. Then he tipped his head and caught Jason's eyes,

a mischievous glint shining in the indigo blue. “Mama was very, very good at manipulatin’ people with words. It was a skill I later found to be essential to a gunfighter.” He turned his attention back to the trail before them. “I guess I do have that to thank her for. It’s probably one reason why I survived so long in that profession.”

He dropped his head for a moment. Sierra snorted and bobbed his head, then calmed. Johnny continued, the story coming out in carefully chosen words.

“When I was working in the gambling hall I was safe as I could be, I guess, but like I said, outside was a different story. I learned to how to fight, how to use a knife and how to read people very quickly. I had to; outside those walls, I was nothing and I was outside a lot. My mother had to know what was going on; I came home bloodied and bruised often, but I never told her anything because she never asked. She wanted me to disappear during business hours and expected me to be there come cleaning time.

“I was around eight or nine when I saw my first gunfight. I still remember it clearly. It was so clean - quick and final and a lot less bloody than the knife fights that were more common. It was elegant. I’m not saying there wasn’t blood, there was plenty, but the idea of killing and not touching them was appealing. The idea of a fair fight was appealing. It was honorable.

“Like I said, I was on my own a lot and mostly ignored. Gaining respect from the rest of the world meant I was someone. I didn’t want to be like the townspeople dominated by the rurales, or like the rurales. The kind of respect that appealed to me was the kind the successful gunfighters commanded; their self-confidence and control was my model. I planned to leave some day - San Francisco sure as hell didn’t interest me and I knew I didn’t want a life looking after drunk gamblers, either. Tia Juana didn’t want me, that was clear, and I was pretty sure the rest of the world probably felt the same way. I was destined to stand on my own two feet and because of that, my choices were limited.

“Seguin had a gunfighter friend that often hung around the place. His name was Blanco because of a patch of gray in his brown hair. He had it since he was a kid and been called Blanco since he was small. I never knew his real name. Blanco was decent to me compared to everyone else. I used to watch him practice and set up his targets for him. I wanted to be like him. One time he let me shoot his gun. I remember how patient he was, showing me how to hold it and aim. I don’t know why he took to me. I was a pretty insolent kid. . .”

Jason barked a short laugh. Johnny glanced his way with a tiny grin. “You find that hard to believe?”

Jason’s grin disappeared. “I . . . ah . . . no, I mean yes . . .”

“It’s all right,” the older man said gently. “Just teasin’. I know how I can be.”

“*I remember how you can be, too,*” Jason thought bitterly, setting his jaw.

Johnny cleared his throat, and then continued. “Anyway, one day - I was eleven - the rurales rode in. They came through often, but on this day, they came with a vengeance. Looking back, I suppose mama’s words of dissent had finally spread around enough to get their

attention. Mama talked Seguin into finding some guns for hire and Blanco was sent to round 'em up. He hadn't returned, so the town was defenseless when they rode in."

Johnny's eyes grew hard as he stared straight ahead, lost in the memory, his voice almost a whisper. Jason found he had to rein in a bit closer to hear. "I've never told anyone else this story; not Scott, Murdoch or your mother. It just needs to see the light of day, I guess. It needs to be told." Then he blinked, and with a deep breath, continued in a stronger voice, but still unable to meet his son's eyes.

Something in his father's voice stoked a feeling of fear in Jason's gut and he fleetingly wondered if he should stop the story right here. His lips, however, remained a hard line. Jason felt vaguely ashamed of wanting to know, but he did want to know. He had to know. He just was not sure why anymore.

"I was mid August and hotter 'n hell. The rurales came in from the south, fast and shootin'. Everyone scattered. There was screamin' and some return gunfire but the townsfolk were caught completely off guard."

Deep in his memory, Johnny paused to collect himself from a disturbingly clear vision of the past that refused to fade with the years. He shut his eyes for a long moment as if to gather strength, then swallowed hard and spoke again.

"I remember hiding in the storage room with my mother. I heard Seguin shouting in the main hall. The sounds of fighting got louder and closer. My mother shoved me behind a bunch of boxes under a shelf and told me to be quiet. . ."

August 22, 1859 – Thirty - seven years ago

The darkness of the storage room pressed heavily against Johnny's eyes. The hard packed dirt floor smelled musty and tickled his nose. His mother's words, whispered quickly, were tickled his cheek. She said it would be over soon, that this was all a show to scare them. She told Johnny to stay put no matter what. Her attention surprised him and he thought that if he obeyed she would be proud of him. He latched on to that small hope as she got to her feet and put an ear to the door.

Johnny could barely see her in the dark of the small room. The light that marked the edges of the door outlined her delicate profile. He could see the proud set of her chin and admired her defiance. A few seconds of quiet ticked by then the storeroom door burst open. His mother didn't scream when they grabbed her, but she swore a blue streak as they took her, scolding them but good. Johnny had to hold back a nervous snicker - her fighting made him proud which helped dispel some of the fear in his heart.

He did as she asked, managing to resist the urge to save her. He knew she could hold her own and that it would soon be over. After all, these were the very men that she entertained on a regular basis. Johnny was comforted by the thought that when Blanco and his partners returned, those rurales would be real sorry. Johnny couldn't wait to see their faces then.

Johnny imagined that scenario over and over in his mind as he waited, sometimes seeing himself as one of the skilled gunfighters that would save the town. As sounds of destruction came from the main hall, the visions helped keep him calm. The sounds moved to the street, augmented by screaming, shouting and sporadic gunfire. He formulated a plan to leave with the gunfighters - that was his future, he decided then and there. He would never hide like this again. Keeping this town safe as a gunfighter would make her proud.

Eventually, it grew quiet. Then it was too quiet for too long, the only sound touching the young boy's ears being that of his own breathing. Johnny's body began to feel stiff and sore from his cramped position so he slowly extricated himself and cautiously cracked open the storage room door. Seeing no one, he crept slowly into the main room, well aware that his mama would probably whip him good for disobeying. Getting bravado from the vision of himself as a gunfighter, Johnny straightened and set his jaw in determination. Cautiously, he peered into the main hall and made the decision to leave the building.

The gambling hall was empty. The hall was never empty and it was eerie. Broken liquor bottles were scattered all over the floor, the smell so strong it made his eyes sting. The tables and chairs had suffered the same fate, their remains strewn across the length and width of the floor. The huge mirror behind the bar - his mother's favorite acquisition - was now a spider web pattern of circular cracks, interspersed with bare patches of exposed backboard. Johnny grabbed a tattered tablecloth from the floor, ripped it into sections and wrapped his feet to avoid cutting himself as he picked a path to the door. Mostly successful, there were only a few spots of blood on the cloth when he reached his goal. He realized then that it had grown quiet outside. Where was everyone?

With his heart beating loudly in his ears, Johnny peeked out the open door and saw that the narrow, dusty street was strangely empty. His gut rolled with anxiety. Finally, he heard faint voices and a series of single gunshots from the north end of the town. Emboldened, he decided to head that way and find his mother. He took a moment to pull off the makeshift shoes from his bare feet.

Slipping out from the splintered doorframe, Johnny quickly made his way across the front of the building, around the corner and down the all too familiar back alley. It was long in the afternoon, the sun dropped low in the sky, and the day's heat was starting to release itself to the cool of growing shadows. Well practiced at keeping out of sight, the boy listened to pinpoint his destination at the edge of the town and used the buildings and trash piles to conceal his movement. Just outside the collection of buildings, he knew a line of trees marked the path of a lazy creek whose banks held thick brush. It was excellent hiding, and one of Johnny's favorite places to be by himself.

As he broke from the town's edge and the shade the buildings offered, the dirt beneath his bare, scratched feet became hot. Hardened, calloused soles handled the heat, but the tiny cuts stung and began to bleed again. He was concentrating on finding the smoothest path when a hand suddenly wrapped around his mouth and an arm around his chest lifted him up. He wiggled violently as he was hauled into the brush where a familiar voice quieted him.

“Settle down, boy, and keep quiet,” Blanco’s voice was rough. When Johnny stopped fighting the gunfighter set him down behind the thick growth of chaparral and creosote. The gunfighter released his grip from the boy’s mouth and the thick, tarry smell of the foliage baked by the setting sun hit Johnny’s nose. Blanco squatted down next to him, the older man’s face blank of any readable emotion. “You have to be quiet or you’ll give away our position,” he said with a low, even voice. “We’re outgunned and there’s nothing we can do about it right now, understand?”

Johnny stared, assuming the ‘we’ he spoke of were the townsfolk, which included his mother and Seguin.

“Where is everybody?” Johnny whispered.

“Probably in their homes, hiding. There are still rurales about and there will be for a while longer. You shouldn’t be out here, boy. It’s dangerous.”

“I need to find mama,” Johnny whispered with a determined tone. “Then I’ll go home.

“You need to go now, boy, and definitely not home. You got relatives somewhere?”

The question struck Johnny odd and stoked the anxiety in his gut. Not wanting the gunfighter to see his fear, the boy clenched his jaw even harder and stood his ground, toe to toe with the gunfighter. “You don’t tell me what to do,” he said, full of bravado. Before Blanco could grab him, Johnny darted out of the brush and to the trees, instinct directing his course.

He heard curses spat on his heels but did not dare look back. Weaving between the thinning shrubs Johnny headed to the common area by the river where the women gathered to collect water, wash clothes and trade stories. It was a wide, sandy patch hugging the creek bank and was the closest thing to a public park the town had. As Johnny broke from the cover of the brush, the sun dropped to a point below the canopy of the trees and hovered just above the western hills behind him. Yellow rays warmed his back and spilled over his shoulders directly onto four still figures slumped against four tightly grouped trees.

Their stance was unnatural. For a fraction of a second as Johnny skidded to a stop they reminded him of puppets he saw on strings once - they were eerie in the awkward, unbalanced way they moved and Johnny remembered being bothered by that. In fact, it had scared him a little. Now, here in front of him, the same unbalanced feeling made his gut roil.

He forced his feet to move closer, not noticing the burn of the hot sand on fresh wounds anymore. The figures seemed to float in their unnatural slump. The rays of jaundiced light fell over the four still figures like a poisonous stain; Johnny saw Seguin’s face first, but did not recognize it. The rope around his neck had made his features bloat and his eyes bulge. His torso was a polka-dot pattern of red bullet holes. There was little blood.

Shocked, Johnny somehow ordered his eyes to look at the other bodies - the two closest to him were recognizable only by their clothing, even spattered with blood and riddled with holes.

Johnny knew the colorful fabric of the storekeeper and his wife very well. Feeling evaporated from his body Johnny forced his eyes to settle on the last hanging figure.

Her hair was still glossy in the dying light and a silver earring sparkled with the same touch of the setting sun. Her arms had frozen into a graceful downward arc making her look like a macabre dancer readying for music Johnny knew she would never hear. Her toes brushed a figure eight in the sand as she swung ever so slightly. Her face...

Johnny felt bile rising in his throat alongside a feral scream and choked. Before he could erupt in either way, he was swept from his feet in a paralyzing grasp. The next frames of time were jumbled and confused, Johnny's vision spinning crazily. It took him awhile to begin to fight, but he had no real heart in the effort. He wanted to die.

"Stop fighting me, boy!" Blanco's voice bit in his ear. The man's vice-like grip on Johnny's mouth was painful and debilitating. Johnny realized he was on a fast moving horse and in the smothering clutch of the gunfighter. He stopped trying to break free and instead, concentrated on the voice that was just beginning to make sense through his shock.

"It was the rurales - Captain Diaz and his crew. You would have been next, boy. Hold still - I know a place where you'll be safe."

As his tears dried with the wind of the galloping horse, Johnny faded into numb oblivion, the vision of his dead mother and her silent dance forever etched in his mind's eye.

That was the last Johnny remembered of Blanco. When he was next aware, Johnny was in an orphanage far from Tia Juana. He stayed until he heard the news about Blanco's arrest and execution by the rurales a mere six months later. By then, his inner scars were concealed by a well-used mask and his outer skin toughened by the regular beatings by the orphanage staff.

He was in a perfect frame of mind for revenge, his path set.

CHAPTER TEN

Jason was stunned, unable to respond to the terrible scene painted by his father's words. Maria Lancer was his grandmother; the idea of such a brutal murder within his family sickened him. And to see your own mother like that . . .

Jason saw the tense set of his father's jaw and realized how painful that memory was. Part of him felt honored to be the recipient of such a personal revelation, but another part wished he never heard it. "*Are these the kind of memories that haunt him?*" he thought, silently horrified.

"So . . . so you became a gunfighter for revenge?" the younger man asked, trying to drag Johnny back from a dark abyss of memory as well as banish the sickening picture that flashed in his mind of his own mother in that scene.

"Maybe at first. I also knew it was the only path I could follow. I was destined to be a loner; that's what I thought." A tragic smile shaped Johnny's mouth with that statement.

"Did you get it? The revenge you wanted?" Jason hoped he had; revenge boiled in his own mind as well.

"Yeah, I got it. It was a lot cleaner than he deserved but Diaz got his, along with the rest of his bunch, one at a time, and not all by me. Once I cut off the snake's head, the others were easily picked off. It didn't help dispel the nightmares, though. Those lasted a very long time. Nor did it stop the town's harassment - others filled the void Diaz left behind."

Jason tried to imagine the world of his father - never calling anywhere home, nightmare-laden sleep and having to watch your back at every second. He shook his head. It sounded impossible. A niggling of appreciation for the privileges he, himself enjoyed started to take root. It was a sad notion to look at a home, a mother and a caring extended family as "privileges".

"When did the nightmares stop?" he asked softly.

Johnny answered within a heartbeat. "When I came to the end of my path of ice."

Jason's head snapped up and he frowned. Johnny looked at him with a weary smile and then nodded to the trail ahead. "I'll explain that one, too. For now, we're here."

Jason looked ahead to the end of the long valley below them. A town jutted up from the horizon backed by the late afternoon sun. "Cross Creek," he uttered.

"And none too soon," the elder said roughly as he shifted in the saddle. "I'm ready to get off this horse for awhile. I've gotten soft." Johnny's face reflected his discomfort as he moved.

"And I'm ready for a decent meal," Jason replied. They both relaxed the reins, compelling the striking pair of horses' strides to lengthen toward the end of the first part of their journey.

Cross Creek milled with activity. The streets were much more crowded than on their previous visit and Jason was glad to be mounted. Wagons choked most of the streets by the station as they unloaded their wares onto the northbound train.

"Are they ready for us?" Jason asked as they neared the livestock boarding area of the station. "You haven't had much time to arrange this trip."

Stiffly, Johnny lowered himself to the ground. He kept a firm grip on the saddle horn and swallowed any utterance of pain that demanded release. After a slight pause and a deep breath, he felt steady enough to balance on his leg and tug out the crutch from the rifle sheath. He covered a pending groan with a sharp laugh and raised his eyes to meet Jason's concerned look. "I've found that throwin' money around can fix lots of problems. Not all of 'em, mind ya," he added. "Just some. The Lancer name does come in handy at times, thanks to Murdoch."

Jason frowned in thought. "Ain't never had the opportunity to throw it, I guess," he said quietly. The younger man reached for Sierra's reins. "I'll get the horses set up and take care of the saddlebags. We have an hour or so before we leave, right?"

Johnny nodded and tried to ignore the callings of dismay from various parts of his body. A padded train seat began to sound pretty good right about now. Slowly, he hitched his way into the station to pick up their tickets. Each minute would be a pain-filled stretch of time until he was ready to board. He made it by taking each part of the task one at a time: Get inside, get to the ticket window, then get to the platform.

After getting the tickets, Johnny neared the custom, first class car and part of him acknowledged that manners dictated he should wait for Jason before boarding. "*I've never claimed to be a gentleman before; why start now?*" Chuckling through his various aches and pains, he began the trial of mounting the steps into the coach, each step more agonizing than the last. Once he reached the top, the attendant was quick to show him their private quarters for the night. There was a large parlor, furnished with small couches instead of benches along with a washstand and a tiny bath area. It was tight, but plush and comfortable, and best of all, they were alone.

Wearily, he settled in a settee next to the window and waited for his son. A satisfied smile softened his face as he turned the words over in his mind. "My son." Unnoticed, Johnny's physical pains faded as he examined the feeling those two, short words gave him. That, along with the joy of finally moving forward in his life again made him feel good - very good. Even the unease of exposing yet another hidden part of his life to Jason seemed less daunting and

his aches less bothersome.

He was tired. Johnny leaned his head back in the padded chair and watched the people on the train platform through the dusty window. Blurry and indistinct, the hurrying forms had their own stories and history. Johnny wondered for a moment that, in the entirety of the world, if his story was very special.

Then he spied his son. Even as a dusty blur in a mass of dusty blurs, Jason's way of moving and natural grace was easy to discern. Suddenly, the descriptions he'd heard about himself prior to the accident made sense, like a circle closing. Special? Perhaps - the proof was there before him. Johnny watched his son until he disappeared near the car's entry. It wasn't long before Jason stepped into the private cabin behind the stoic conductor, his eyes wide as he took in the custom comforts. Johnny handed the uniformed conductor Jason's ticket, which he punched and handed back, then left with efficient practicality.

Johnny watched his son prowl the space until the last whistle blew. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Haven't you ever been in a private cabin?"

Looking a bit chastised, Jason settled in the seat across from his father. "Yeah, well, I've had the opportunity but chose to go a different route."

Johnny nodded knowingly. "You buy the cheapest fare so you could apply more cash to a good time at the other end."

Jason shifted uneasily and raised both eyebrows as if caught sneaking in the back door after hours. "Well, it was only a couple 'a times. When I went to Stockton for the horse sales."

Johnny chuckled shortly. "Like father like son. I never told Murdoch, either."

A comfortable silence enveloped them as Jason settled in his seat and gazed out the window at the emptying platform. Soon, there was a shout and a whistle and the train jolted forward. Johnny watched the world outside pick up speed as the train headed north and west. The peace he felt at this moment was soothing, its cloying embrace easing physical aches and pains. Soon, his eyelids became too heavy to deal with.



Johnny jolted awake with the train's whistle. It was dark outside the window.

"Joyous," Jason said without preamble.

Still muzzy from sleep, Johnny looked at his son in confusion.

"We're stopping in Joyous," Jason clarified with a tired grin.

"Oh," Johnny replied as he rubbed his eyes. "Guess I haven't been very good company. Sorry."

"No problema." Jason handed him a canteen.

“We should reach Oakland soon,” Johnny said, well aware of his son’s eyes on him as he maneuvered the canteen’s cap off with one hand. It had been awhile since he had been under such scrutiny; those at Lancer were used to seeing him handle things. He was satisfied to note that it didn’t bother him like it used to. Taking a long drink, Johnny mentally took stock of his various aches and pains; there were more than he cared to admit to. “I sure didn’t mean to fall asleep on this seat, but I guess I needed it,” Johnny admitted.

“I’m pretty tired, too,” Jason said.

The train wheezed to an eventual stop at a dimly lit platform. Since there weren’t many customers waiting, the train soon departed.

“So we take a boat next?”

“Ferry. They call it a ferry, but a boat’s a boat to me,” Johnny said with a yawn. “Across the bay to San Francisco. We’ll meet with the Pinks around nine, and then be on our way.”

Jason frowned. “After we take another boat. I mean, ferry.”

Johnny chuckled. “Right. Donahue’s across the bay, too. North.”

“Great,” Jason mumbled. “Not too fond ‘a boats. Ferries. Whatever.”

“You ‘n me both.”

The pair lapsed into silence as the train gathered speed. Johnny felt his son’s gaze on him and looked up, catching a glint in the darkness that marked Jason’s eyes in his shadowed face. “Tell me,” Jason said softly. “How are you, really? Are you able to do this without hurting yourself more? Physically, I mean. You ain’t movin’ too smooth at the moment.”

Johnny winced as he shifted, but still smiled a lopsided smile. “I will do this, son. I have to. It’s my fault that things are the way they are and it’s time to fix it. Or try to fix it, at least.” He slowly shook his head. “I only hope it’s not too late.”

“Ain’t it enough you got ma to come back?”

“I could be. It may have to be. But it’s not the way it should be.” He cocked his head toward Jason. “Can you see that?”

Jason looked unsure. “I guess,” he replied with hesitation. “I mean, if you’re worried about Lancer going under after you’re gone or something like that . . .”

Johnny shook his head. “No, no. I’m sure the place would keep on.” He looked knowingly at his son. “It’s a matter of birthright, of what’s right. Scott has to know that he can come back, that our deal with Murdoch never changed. I have to make sure he knows that door is still open to him no matter what he . . . and I . . . have done.”

“So this isn’t just to clear your conscience?”

"I have to admit that's part of it, sure. I know it was my fault he left, directly or indirectly. I'm fulfilling a promise to Murdoch. I have to make Scott's path clear again so he can come home." Johnny caught Jason's eyes. "Like I have with your mother, and hope to do with you by the end of this trip. It's the right thing to do."

Jason's forearms rested on his knees, his fingertips touching. The set of index fingers tapped together as he sat; Johnny could tell there was more he wanted to say, but, instead, chose to bide his time and sat back with a soft sigh. Johnny followed Jason's gaze out of the train window where dawn made the ash tones of the sky lighten ever so slightly. By the time it was full morning, the cloud cover still claimed the heavens, making the air thick with humidity.

"Cloudy day. There's probably still fog on the water," Johnny noted.

His prediction was correct. When they entered the Oakland station, thick clouds hovered over the water, hiding it from view. Stiffly, the men left the coach and gathered the horses. Jason saddled the pair while Johnny purchased tickets for the ferry. When they arrived at the docks, the fog clung to the barely visible vessel. The horses' footfalls sounded muted on the loading ramp in the heaviness of the atmosphere as they boarded the craft. Johnny felt like they were entering a cloud.

Johnny and Jason decided to stay with the animals, who tolerated the ride calmly. Their ears twitched constantly as they took in new noises and scrambled for footing when the ferry shoved off, but otherwise stood fast. Once on the other side, they disembarked to find that the fog had not retreated from the land. The men quickly found stabling and the horses were soon happily munching on hay in stalls with thick, straw floor.

Outside, Jason hailed a cab. "Breakfast?" he inquired.

Johnny seated his hat firmly and then pulled out his pocket watch. He glanced at it and slipped it back into its place. "Sounds like a plan. The Pinkerton office won't be open for another hour."

Jason hailed a cab and found a small restaurant near the Pinkerton office. The eatery, tucked down a side street, was highly recommended by the cabbie. "My cousin's place," the driver said. "Best coffee in town."

Thanking the driver, the two men entered the cozy establishment and settled down to eat with their saddlebags tucked under the chairs. Johnny discreetly rubbed his very sore muscles but knew his son's sharp eyes didn't miss a thing. They ate slowly and lingered over the hot brew.

"Fog's lifted some," Jason finally noted. "I can see farther up the street. Is it time to go?"

Johnny nodded and pushed himself to a stand. He pulled out his billfold and paid for the meal, working slowly so his muscles had some time to loosen. The place was crowded when they had arrived and hadn't really thinned out by the time they were finished.

“Popular place,” Jason said. “Biscuits weren’t as good as ma’s, though.”

Johnny chuckled. “I agree with you there.” He noticed that his son stayed close, obviously realizing that moving around in a crowd was not too easy for someone with a crutch. Johnny appreciated the gesture.

They had gone about a block and the fog had lifted enough to reveal more of the city. The cobbled roadway was slippery so when they stepped off the boardwalk to cross a street, Johnny slowed. He glanced down a cross street to gauge wagon traffic and was surprised when he saw the familiar façade of the train station a block away, standing out from a light veil of mist. He paused, both to catch his breath and relive the memory of the last time he came to San Francisco. The vision of that time came sickeningly alive, blotting out the here and now with the same raw emotions still so clear in his mind.

May 21, 1882 – Fourteen years ago

“I still don’t see it,” Johnny thought darkly as he surveyed the thick mass of bodies writhing before him on the platform. “I still don’t understand what my mother saw in this Godforsaken city.” The turn of phrase caused him to laugh shortly. “Now there’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

Jumping slightly at the firm hand on his shoulder, Johnny glanced back with irritation. The familiar jittery stomach and trembling of his body became more noticeable under the steady hand of his father. Murdoch’s warm hand was large and strong as he tried to convey his support with the touch, but Johnny just found it a reminder of what he’d become – an emaciated, worthless invalid. He clenched his teeth and vowed to hold on just long enough to complete his plan.

“I’m here, son. Let me help you down...”

“I don’t need no help,” Johnny snapped. He tucked the crutch away under his arm and gripped the provided rail with his hand. The railing was worn and smooth and the underlying tremor that plagued him more noticeable. He ignored it and dropped his eyes to the four steep steps that would take him to the train platform. “Get your hand off me.” Shrugging roughly, Murdoch’s touch withdrew. Johnny managed to hop down to the platform, but he landed hard and the crutch slipped from under his arm and clattered to the ground.

Johnny swayed, his leg threatening to buckle due to the exertion. When he tried to shift his footing to keep his balance, his fatigued leg refused to respond quickly enough and he began to topple. Twisting his upper body, Johnny slapped his hand on the side of the train car at the same time his father grabbed his hips to stop the fall.

“Let go of me!” Johnny snarled. Murdoch’s hands loosened their grip, but remained in contact.

“You were going to fall,” Murdoch said quietly, his even voice bereft of anger.

“So what? I’ve fallen before. Now let go!”

Slowly, the older man released his grip and stooped to pick up the crutch before Johnny could protest. He held it out toward his son.

“I said I don’t need help. Are you deaf?” Johnny could hear the breathy tremble of his voice that took away the edge he wanted on the words. He also knew that with the weakened way his leg felt, he wasn’t long for collapse. His arm trembled as he leaned on the train.

He hated his weakness, his vulnerability, his life. He hated this moment and every moment since the accident. He hated Murdoch’s physical perfection. He hated the fact that at this moment he knew he was going to fall and couldn’t do a damned thing to stop it. Breathing hard as he fought to maintain balance on a shaky leg and tried to will back any strength, a line of obscenities spewed from his mouth in a whisper as he cursed his condition with a bowed head.

“There’s no need for that language, Johnny,” Murdoch said patiently, still offering his son the crutch. “There are ladies about.”

“Well fuck them all to hell,” Johnny spat. He’d discovered that language was a reliable way to distract from his physical state. It also had the added bonus of making people avoid him. He could see his father’s knuckles turn white as he gripped the crutch tighter and Johnny felt a small victory in angering his father. The comment had been way over the line, he knew, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t drive off his father like he had the others.

Teresa left first. Then Scott, followed closely by Jelly, Laurie and Jason.

The old man, however, would not budge no matter how hard Johnny made it for him. At Lancer, Johnny finally came to the realization that the only way his father would leave him would be the same way Jelly had - by dying. Or, he could turn the tables and take Jelly’s way by his own hand. That idea was why he agreed to take this trip - he had a plan to follow through. That idea enabled him to draw strength from somewhere inside and he straightened up, snatching the crutch from Murdoch’s grip.

Murdoch released it, but his hand hovered for a moment before constricting into a fist and dropping to his side. With visible effort, the big man forced himself to turn his back on his son and collect their valises.

“Let’s go, then,” his father said tightly.

Johnny toyed with the idea of needling him further but the shakiness in his gut forced him back into himself. Murdoch took a few tired steps and, eventually, Johnny began to follow him. When they reached the line of cabs, Johnny was in a cold sweat and trembling uncontrollably. All his attention focused on staying upright; he did not even have the energy to protest when Murdoch practically lifted him into the empty cab coach. Inside, he felt trapped and clammy. His breathing became harsh and short.

He could feel Murdoch's stare on him even though Johnny refused to look up. Instead, he tried to concentrate on trying to stop the tremor of his hand.

"Will you make it to the hotel?" Murdoch asked quietly. "I can give you an injection now..."

"NO!" Johnny barked hoarsely. "No - not here, old man. Can't you see I haven't suffered enough yet?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Murdoch turn his attention to the window where downtown San Francisco passed by in a blur of brick and flesh. Johnny could tell by the set of his jaw that the old man was working to stem his frustration. Oddly, Johnny thought that maybe he should feel some inkling of guilt, but found none. It didn't matter anyway; soon he would be free of all emotion.

Murdoch dragged him all this distance to see a doctor, the whole trip thrown together quickly and with foolish hope. Johnny fought the idea at the start. Then, during a moment of clarity, he remembered that San Francisco had what Lancer, or any of the surrounding towns, did not - opium dens.

Johnny was jarred aware again with Jason's touch.

"You all right?" his son asked. "You need to get out of the street."

Johnny shook his head to clear the memory then glanced sheepishly at Jason. He hopped up on the boardwalk with haste as he collected his thoughts. He didn't have a whole lot of clear recollection of that desperate span of years, but that one idea he remembered vividly; he planned to die in one of the opium salons, away from Lancer and from what he'd been. Johnny remembered how perfect it seemed at the time. When he was whole, his distain for those poor souls trapped by that addiction was strong and deep. Then he became one of them. First, it was laudanum and morphine, and then alcohol joined the mix. After discovering his secret, Sam and Murdoch made sure that he had just enough to keep the withdrawals at bay and worked to get him off it completely. At that time, in his physically weakened state, it had been easy for them to control his intake of any of those things.

The trip to San Francisco seemed like certain destiny to him at the time. Looking back now, he knew that both Murdoch and Sam had to be suspicious of his eventual willingness to make the trip. Ol' Murdoch decided that if he made sure his son didn't have any cash on him, he couldn't get it trouble. The old man had underestimated the depth of Johnny's ability to deceive even in his usual intoxicated state and with his obvious physical frailties. He managed to collect quite a stash of cash before they departed.

Johnny sighed, adjusting the saddlebag slung over his shoulder. That day was another life ago; he had been another person. Or had he? The passion he felt for death at that moment was as strong as his passion had been for Laurie - or Jason, or Lancer or even gun fighting - all facets of the same person simply walking different paths. No, that wasn't quite it. It was the same path he'd walked his whole life, it was just the turns in the road that were so very different; some trailed through fire and some through ice, some he'd chosen and some had

been forced on him. All paths, however, eventually led to one of peace, the temperate peace that he carried now, the same peace he hoped for his son.

“You okay?” Jason’s question was soft and filled with concern.

Johnny glanced up at him, a small smile on his face. “Yeah,” he replied. “I’m okay. We’re almost there.”

They reached the doors of the Pinkerton offices at precisely nine o’clock. Still, Johnny felt like he was overdue. The receptionist greeted them.

“Just a moment, Mr. Lancer,” she said briskly. “Agent Dressler will be right with you.” The woman disappeared behind a door.

“Don’t think I’ve ever been on time for an appointment,” Jason quipped, eyeing the office as he sank into a seat. “Sure are some fancy digs.” He adjusted the saddlebags in his lap.

“I think Lancer money alone probably paid for the furniture,” Johnny noted wryly.

Jason laughed shortly but when Johnny’s eyes met those of his son he saw the same apprehension he felt. They fell into an uneasy silence. The receptionist stepped from the office and held the door open as she addressed them.

“Agent Dressler will see you now.”

The two men entered the office with trepidation. A thick man in his early thirties met them just inside the door and shook their hands. Johnny noted that even with the tailored fit of the man’s clothes, his muscular build was quite definite. The calluses of the man’s palm were rough against Johnny’s hand. This was a man used to hard work.

“Please, sit. I know you must be more than a bit anxious to hear what I have. This case has been pending for quite a while.”

Jason and Johnny glanced at each other in confusion. “It has?” Jason finally said. “My father contacted you less than a week ago.”

As Jason spoke, Johnny’s eyes had narrowed and his gaze fell to the folder in front of the agent and the wooden box on one end of the desk. Dressler followed his look and flipped the box latch open, turning the box so Johnny could see the inside. Then he opened the lid. Johnny’s jaw tightened when he saw the stacks of letters within, the envelope faces addressed in a familiar script. He came to the obvious conclusion.

“It takes awhile to collect that many letters. Did Murdoch know this is where his letters ended up?”

In the periphery of his sight, Johnny saw Jason turn to him with wide eyes.

“Eventually. He did contact us, yes, but your brother Scott beat him to it by contacting us in

1882.” He moved his hand and laid his palm on a folder in front of him. “This case has been open for over fourteen years. It will be satisfying to close it.”

“Fourteen years?” Jason said, shocked. His saddlebags slipped to the floor with an unnoticed thud.

Johnny ducked his head for a moment, his fingers caressing the dangling beads of his bracelet. “So where is he?” He asked softly, absorbing the timeline and looking up to direct an icy stare at the agent. “Where in Scotia? And does he know I’m coming?”

Again, in his periphery, he saw Jason turn to him. This time, his eyes showed surprise at his father’s cold tone.

Agent Dressler held the stare that had driven lesser men to their knees. “Your brother opened this file in May of 1882, just before he moved out of the city.” Breaking eye contact with pointed deliberation, Dressler plucked the quill pen from its holder and flipped open the folder. He signed the last page, dated it, and closed the cover. Regaining his eye contact with Johnny, the agent pushed the folder to the end of the desk, just within reach of Johnny’s hand. “This file is a synopsis of the case. The dates each letter arrived and other specific directions from your brother. As of now, Mr. Lancer, this case is closed. I’m sure you want to get on your way. Instructions on how to find him are in this file.”

Johnny felt his emotions begin to thaw the ice of his stare. His head dipped ever so slightly, his attention falling to the file.

Jason looked at Johnny and inquired in a bare whisper. “Should I . . . ?” as he started to reach for the file.

Johnny closed his eyes and nodded. “Tell me how this was set up,” he asked softly, still not touching the papers. As the agent started to speak, Jason put the file in Johnny’s lap. Johnny held it there with his hand, his eyes eventually drawn to the cover as he listened to the story of its beginning.

“On that day in 1882, your brother came to this office with some very specific requests. First, we were instructed to never reveal his location at any time. If anyone was to hire us for that purpose, we were to donate that money to the local hospital and he would reimburse us double. Then we were to tell the hiring customer that we couldn’t find him.”

“Ain’t that kinda unethical?” Johnny growled, his fingers tracing the edge of the file.

“Maybe, but we considered him a client - a very good one, at that. Truth be told, I don’t think we could have found him after he left San Francisco. He changed his name and walked away from his past. Cleanly. He kept us informed of his location, updated the file occasionally and paid us regularly to keep track of all that for him.” The man pointed at the file.

“Did his grandfather try to find him? Harlan Garrett?”

“Oh, yes. He and his lawyers threatened us regularly. I think every Pinkerton office in the

country knows him, but every trail left by Scott Lancer eventually made it to this office where it was stopped.”

Johnny fingered the logo on the file face. “Scott never contacted him at all?” He wasn’t sure why he focused on that point, but then realized that he would be very hurt if Scott had contacted Garrett but not Murdoch.

“Well, that’s not exactly true. When you go through the file, you will see. We acted as Scott Lancer Garrett’s drop point, you might say. He instructed that some letters get to Mr. Garrett and your father, but there were very few of those all within the first year. Additionally, he never wanted to see anything they sent back. There was certain information he wanted to receive: He wanted to know when Harlan Garrett and Murdoch Lancer died, and when you died. Each of those events would start a specific chain of events.”

“I’m not dead. Why are you telling me this, then?”

Agent Dressler leaned back in his chair, crossing his hands on top of his abdomen. “He stated that if Murdoch Lancer died and you were able to come here and get this information without being under the influence of . . . well, just about anything, we were to give it to you.”

“So have you told him I was coming for it?”

“No, of course not. I had to see you first. And here you are.”

“Are you going to wire him as soon as I leave, then?”

The agent smiled. “No.”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Because your brother left very specific instructions as to when we were to contact him. He told us to give you the information, but he never told us to contact him if you got it. I get the distinct feeling after going over this file that he never expected you to be able to get here, pass muster and pick it up.”

By now, Jason had leaned back in his chair with his mouth hanging open. That, and Scott’s exaggerated plans and instructions, made it very hard for Johnny to keep from chuckling. “And I thought I was the devious one,” he said, his palm flat on the file. Johnny shook his head slowly as he continued to chuckle, and eventually Jason’s surprised expression relaxed. His mouth turned up into a crooked smile as he watched his father.

“So, what exactly’s in there, anyway?” Johnny nodded at the box. “Is it all letters?”

“Yes. Letters to your brother from both Mr. Garrett and Mr. Lancer. Instructions on where to find him and what he was doing are in the file. I guess there are things he wanted to say but didn’t want you or anyone to hear them yet. Aside from you, the only other person that could have picked up these things was your father, and that was only if you had passed on or you and he came in together and you were well and able.”

Johnny nodded at the open box. “Those are letter *to* Scott in that box. How did anyone know to send them here?”

“They didn’t. He gave us access to a post office box. Anything sent to him via General Delivery went there. Since none of the letters ever got returned, I assume the senders believe he got them.” Dressler closed the box lid, locked it, and handed the key to Jason.

“He thought of every detail, didn’t he?” Johnny said amusedly. “I didn’t know my brother could be so crafty.”

Agent Dressler continued to lean back in his chair and watch Johnny. Even his mouth was set in a tiny grin, but it eventually disappeared as he got back down to business. He edged forward in his chair and entwined his fingers on the desktop.

“You may want to know that we have informed him of your father’s death. He received my wire the day before I received yours. When we saw the announcement in the papers, we confirmed it, and then notified Scott. We haven’t received any instructions yet. In fact, we haven’t heard from him in about a year, ever since the big fire up there. He’s alive, though. We made sure of that after we heard about the fire.”

“What were you supposed to do after Murdoch died?” Johnny asked. “You said that each death would bring about a certain chain of events.”

“True, but I can’t tell you those details. It’s between us and our client.”

“Then I’ll ask him myself.” Johnny folded the papers lengthwise and tucked them in his coat pocket as Jason stood and took possession of the box. “Thank you for the information.” He shook the agent’s hand and Jason followed suit, then he picked up the box by the handles on the short sides. When they reached the door, Johnny paused, and turned back to the agent. “Did Murdoch know about Scott’s relationship with you?”

Dressler tilted his head. “I don’t know, to tell you the truth. But in my opinion, I think he knew.”

Johnny nodded thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t be surprised, either. Thanks again.”

Outside, Jason immediately hailed a cab.

“Guess we know now why he was found so fast,” Jason said once they settled inside and on their way to the docks. He set the box on the floor between them.

Johnny was strangely quiet, his brows furrowed for the entire ride. Jason helped him down from the cab, threw both saddlebags over his shoulder and picked up the box of letters. As they walked to the Donahue ferry ticket office, Johnny was deep in thought. He paid the fare for them and the horses and then followed Jason back outside. Johnny blinked, finally noticing that the fog had lifted some and it was much brighter outside. They stopped and squinted in the brightness.

“We have about an hour,” Jason said, pointing to a bench. “What’s weighing so heavy on

your mind? We're still headin' north, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," Johnny said distractedly. "I was just thinkin' - I have a feeling I know what part of that 'chain of events' was after Murdoch passed. You know, the things the Pinks were supposed to do after he died?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you think that agent gave me this folder so quick? How did he know I wasn't takin' anything?" Johnny turned to his son. "I'll tell ya how - those bastards have been watchin' me! They were probably at the funeral! Hell, I bet they've been watchin' us since Murdoch fell sick."

"So?" Jason said, obviously perplexed by Johnny's outburst. "Are you mad or somethin'?"

"What do ya mean, 'Or somethin'?" Johnny barked. "Of course I'm mad! I don't like bein' watched!"

"So, then, what are ya gonna do? Punch out Uncle Scott when you see him?"

Quite taken aback by Jason's question, Johnny glared at his son and tried to call the icy stare of Madrid back into his eyes. He wasn't quite prepared to meet a similar glare from his son, the expression so like his own he, at first, could not reply due to surprise. Then the visual picture in his mind of doing exactly what his son suggested made him blink, then crack a smile, and then release a laugh that started from deep within. He nearly doubled over. It took a moment for Jason's glare to fade, then he, too, started laughing.

Several minutes and many odd looks from passersby later, the two men regained control and wiped their eyes. Johnny took a couple of deep breaths to confirm his control before lightly punching his son on the shoulder and rising. "You're right. What the hell. I hope the damn Pinks got an eyeful! It's not like they told Scott anything. Just wait until I tell my know-it-all brother about forgetting the little detail about reporting back."

Both of them chuckled all the way to the stables with the first air of levity between them since Jason's arrival. The aches and pains of travel felt wonderfully dimmed against the hope that more laughter would found at the end of this trail.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

With some rest and feed, the horses were a bit more fractious when time came to load up on the ferry to Donahue. Sierra pulled on the lead rope and nearly knocked Johnny to the ground at one point. Finally on board, Solano pawed the floor lustily and the pair of horses nipped at each other with annoyance. Johnny stayed with them while Jason disembarked to re-fill their saddlebags with provisions and grain to distract the beasts.

“Just what they need,” Johnny noted. “More grain for more energy.”

“Well, sorry, but there wasn’t any grass to stuff in here,” Jason grumped as he dumped the bags.

“Good point,” Johnny sighed. “Sorry for bitin’ you head off.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason replied. Johnny and Jason leaned on the stout railings that made up the ferry stalls. It smelled of sea, hay and briny wood. “We have a little time before the train leaves, right? Maybe we can work ‘em some,” Jason suggested.

“What they need is a hard gallop,” Johnny said. Jason glanced questioningly at him, and Johnny shook his head. “Don’t think for a second that the thought hasn’t crossed my mind. I’m not willing to take that kind of chance now - maybe once, but not now. I’ll hire a rider to race ya.” Johnny felt a challenge rise within him. “Bet Sierra gives Solano some dust to chew on,” he said nonchalantly. He was pleased when his son rose to the challenge.

Jason grinned at the wager. His eyes sparked with youth and vigor, and Johnny felt a surge of pride. It felt good.

“You’re on,” Jason replied.

The ferry ride was longer than either man cared to admit, but in that time the increasingly bodacious descriptions of how badly the other’s horse would lose made the time bearable. By the time they pulled up to the Donahue dock, the sun had broken completely through the high clouds and wide patches of blue sky brightened the day. Also by that time, the horses were feeling their oats and responding to the high spirits of their masters.

Solano burst from the ferry and would have dragged Jason bodily down the ramp if the young man had not been expecting it. Instead, with calming words and an even hand, the

stallion danced by Jason's side, champing at the bit. The sight of the fractious, glossy red horse caused the small crowd at the ramp's end to pause and step back in admiration. Jason tied the horse tightly to the closest hitching rail, a few soft words making the horse stand somewhat still. Solano's neck arched beautifully as he vigorously pawed the earth.

Johnny watched his son from the top of the ramp. Sierra blew warm air on his hand as his nostrils flared in excitement. The horse's eyes burned with desire to run but Johnny's firm voice and hand stilled his feet. Johnny could see the racing pulse at the horse's neck. Obediently, his hooves stayed on the ground but the sound of him working the bit in his mouth was continuous.

"I'll take him, sir." Johnny turned and found a young man standing next to him, recognizing him as the caretaker of the horses in the stall adjacent to theirs on the ferry. Johnny could see a quiet confidence and strength in the boy that stingingly reminded him of Scott when he first took the reins of a certain palomino just broke to saddle. The young man continued to look at Johnny, puzzlement crossing his features. He frowned slightly. "Unless you'd rather . . ."

Johnny smiled and handed the reins over. "You ride as well as you handled those horses of yours from the ground?"

The young man grinned as he took the horse. "Better," he declared as he collected the lengths of leather.

Johnny grinned and clapped the boy's shoulder. "Know of any place nearby to let 'im have his head?"

"Sure do," the kid replied. "I live just outside of town. I know all the good spots."

"What's your name, kid?"

"Frank," he said, shaking Johnny's hand. "Frank Sampson."

"Well, Frank," Johnny said. "My son down there has challenged my old nag to race his spoiled beast. You up to it?"

Frank grinned. "I sure am, mister. I've raced a time or two. Your horse here is in good hands." Frank firmly stroked Sierra's arched neck and the horse calmed under his confident hand. "I'll throw my saddle on him. Won't take but a minute."

Johnny let the pair precede him down the ramp where Jason waited at the bottom. He watched as Frank slowed the horse, said something to his waiting son that made Jason's jaw drop, and then continue by with the prancing horse to another hitch rail.

Jason squinted at his father with suspicious eyes. "That young pup just told me to prepare to eat dust," he said with disdain. "A little cocky, don't ya think?"

"Kinda reminds me of you," Johnny shot back. "Care to wager on the outcome?"

Apparently, Frank had a reputation around the docks because a small crowd assembled at an open field not far from the ferry landing. Johnny, stiff from his previous excursions, was one of the last to make it to the starting line.

Many hooves made the path that cut off the main road. The soft dirt line traveled through brown grass and the rolling hills that made up the bay's northern border. Johnny's eye followed the track and he imagined the feel of a galloping horse under him. He closed his eyes for a few moments, recalling the wind in his face and the surge of rushing motion in hand. The heady feel of pure, muscled power beneath him was as clear to him at this moment as ever before. He gripped his crutch tightly and caught his breath.

"Ready?" The selected started yelled.

Johnny's eyes opened and he turned to see the two magnificent horses dancing side by side. Frank leaned over slightly and whispered something for Sierra only as he stroked the burnished neck. The horse finally stood square, his flank trembling. On the far side, Jason sat deeply, his hand steady. Solano stood obediently, his ears locked back to catch any cues his owner may utter the moment they passed his lips.

The pair stood there for a tense moment, beautifully bundled energy waiting for release. The sun broke from its bonds of gray and threw the scene into brilliance at the same moment the starting cloth dropped. Red and gold broke fast in a breathtaking display of power. The crowd gasped, and then began to cheer.

Eyes locked on the thundering pair, Johnny found he couldn't breathe. There was his son and their equine bond, free and flying for all to see. He found his throat locked, unable to release a cheer at the sight of such rare beauty. Glorious horseflesh and his progeny followed the worn path, rising to the crest of a gentle slope only to disappear for a fleeting moment down the other side. When they appeared again, the horses were neck and neck, heads bobbing, necks stretched and legs pounding. Johnny knew that even though he was estranged from his son for so long, this is what would bring them together - what had brought them together - just as it brought him and Laurie together in the first place.

Jason's path was clear before him. Johnny hoped it would be straight and true, full of blessings and reward, but it would be entirely his son's road to walk. All Johnny could do for Jason was offer up where he came from and hope the boy learned something from his father's experiences.

Johnny realized and accepted that if this trip ended up being a futile venture, he would always have this moment and the knowledge that his blood ran on. He also realized that this trip wasn't for him, but for his father. In return for all that Murdoch did for him, it was his duty to see that the Lancer legacy endured. If Scott decided to stay where he was, at least Johnny had his son and wife, right now, at this moment. All the past hells he survived, all the bad turns of his path he encountered and bad decisions made at least made him appreciate what he possessed right now.

As the race rounded the final, gentle arc that would bring them home, Johnny vowed to remember this as he walked his final path. This realization made him smile hugely and let

out a joyous whoop as the horses pounded past the finish line.

Solano won by a nose.

Jason reined his blowing horse around and walked next to young Frank on Sierra. The boy was grinning ear to ear, his hair and face powdered with dust. They continued to cool the horses, walking side by side.

“Good race, kid,” Jason said with a grin that was just as dirty. He stuck out his hand and the two shook.

“Even though I lost, that’s the best time I’ve ever run that course,” Frank laughed. “Whew!” He stroked Sierra’s sweaty neck. “There’s fast blood in these two.”

It was Jason’s turn to laugh. “Yeah, there is. And now that they got that out of their system, maybe they’ll behave on the train.”

“Headin’ to Santa Rosa? There’s a horse sale there next week. You aren’t . . .” he leaned over and straightened the buckskin’s mane.

“Nope, not for sale. We’re headin’ north. A place called Scotia?”

Frank nodded. “Loggin’ town. Everyone gets lumber from there. You a buyer?”

Jason shook his head. “Nope. Meetin’ someone. We’ll be back this way in a few days, I should think.”

Frank smiled broadly again. “Really? Think you’ll be up to a match against one of my horses?”

“Maybe, maybe. We’ll see, I guess.”

“My dad owns the Bar S just north of here. Horses and cattle. Stop by if you have a chance; I know you’d like what we got.” Frank patted Sierra again. “May even have a match for your stud.”

“We’ll see. Thanks for the invite. Guess you’d best swap out saddles so we can get to the train.”

Frank nodded and they rode side by side to the ferry yard. “Sure is a peculiar saddle your pa’s got. Looks like it’d work great for him.”

“It does.” Jason cocked his head to the boy. “How’d you know he’s my pa?”

Frank threw him a surprised look. “You ever look in the mirror, mister? It’s as obvious as the fact that these two are related.” He indicated the horses with a sweep of his hand.

“Oh. Yeah. Well, thanks again for the exercise.”

Frank slipped from Sierra's back and gave Jason a parting nod before leading the horse away to be unsaddled. Jason reined around to survey the small crowd in search of his father.

"You ever look in the mirror, mister?"

As the phrase rolled around in his mind, he wondered why it stuck there. Pulling Solano to a stop, he watched his father brought up the rear of the crowd, the last one to return to the landing. Johnny moved slowly but steadily, looking a bit stiff. Jason knew he had to be hurting but marveled in the fact that his old man didn't show it much. "He's a tough one," he said quietly aloud.

It was at that moment that he realized he respected him - respected the fact that he'd pulled himself from an abyss and was here today, watching two horses he'd nurtured show their stuff. He wondered if his father thought of him that way, a thought that surprised him.

Jason admitted to himself that he'd come to admire the man in the last few days. He also realized he was proud to be his son. He just hoped the feeling would last, and he swore that he would give Johnny Lancer a chance after all. He wanted - needed - to see the man his mother had known now that he had seen a glimpse of that man himself.



It was a more relaxed pair of horses that boarded the train in Donahue. Johnny stood at the base of the loading ramp with both saddlebags, happily at peace watching his son disappear with the animals. Jason joined him after taking an inordinate amount of time inside the boxcar.

"What'd ya do? Read 'em a bedtime story?" Johnny quipped as Jason retrieved his saddlebag.

"In a way. I tipped the boy in there and instructed him to give 'em special favors," he said lightly. "You know, just throwin' around some Lancer money. Just may include a story, after all!"

That elicited a burst of laughter from Johnny that caused Jason to smile in return. "Come on, son, before you spend us outta house and home."

Jason picked up the box of letters from the luggage area and the lighter atmosphere lasted all the way to their car. Jason held back and helped his father up the steps in a natural way that gave Johnny comfort; in another time, the help would have enraged him as it had fourteen years ago when he and Murdoch had come to San Francisco.

Jason's low whistle pulled Johnny from his thoughts. "Holy Moses, old man, you can't accuse me 'a spendin' all the Lancer holdin's."

Both of them paused just inside the door of the lavish Pullman car, their feet cushioned by thick carpets. The stylish divan and plush chairs matched down to the leaf the gold and green floral pattern of the heavy curtains. The wood furnishings were maple, carved in a French design. A porcelain jug and washbasin stood on a stand next to a screened bath area, and a fully stocked bar was reflected in bevel-edged mirror. In the rearmost section sat a

four-poster bed, velvet curtains hanging from the ceiling pulled aside to make it visible.

Johnny dropped his saddlebags to the floor. It barely made a sound. He pushed his hat back to dangle from the stampede strap. "It's all they had. Sorry if it ain't roomy enough," he said in a teasing tone.

"Roomy? I don't know why you bothered with the stock car, Pa. I think our two horses and half the Lancer stable could cozy up in here and we wouldn't notice." Jason dropped the box by the divan and tossed his bags onto one of the chairs, and then sauntered up to the bar. He poured himself a glass of Scotch and Johnny a soda water. He carried the drinks to where Johnny had settled onto the divan, handed him the water and raised his glass. "Here's to Murdoch Lancer. His fortune has shown us both new worlds."

"That's a fact," Johnny agreed. They tapped rims and settled down to wait to start their last leg while Johnny quietly reveled in the fact that Jason had called him "Pa" for the first time in many years.

The train pulled out of Donahue on time. As soon as San Francisco bay was behind them, Jason volunteered to find some food.

"There's a restaurant car up the line," Johnny said. "Bring back somethin' for now, but we'll be eatin' regular meals in here, if ya don't mind."

Jason nodded and Johnny was glad his son understood his need for privacy.

"Okay, then, I'll be back in a little bit." Jason downed the last of his drink in one swallow and headed for the door. He reached for the doorknob, hesitated, then slowly turned back to Johnny. "When I get back, can I hear the story of that path of fire?" he asked.

"Sure," Johnny said, throwing back his drink just like his son. "I've been talkin' more in the past few days than I have in the last year. Sure you're not bored? We got about a fourteen hour trip ahead of us."

"I'm not bored," Jason replied. "I kinda like it."

Johnny nodded. "Okay, then. When you get back."

The train began its northward journey shortly after Jason left him. Johnny sat on the small couch and pulled the fat file from the saddlebag. He stared at the cover and then slowly opened to the first page. There were a couple of ledger style sheets, dutifully noting the starting date of the file and the date every time someone added to either the file or the box.

Behind the ledger sheets, a letter, the papers' edges yellowed with age and addressed to him, waited for him. Johnny put the ledger sheets aside and picked up the envelope. Scott's handwriting was immediately recognizable; Johnny flipped the envelope over and found it still sealed. He hesitated a moment, his mouth suddenly dry and his stomach alight with butterflies. When he picked at the seal, the envelope flicked open easily.

Johnny slipped the folded papers open and inhaled a bracing breath. Although his hand

shook slightly he was able to read the letter written to him by his brother so long ago.

August 29, 1882

Dear Johnny,

I know you need a reason why I left Lancer – you deserve an explanation. Since you are reading this now, you must be in better control of yourself. For that, I am glad. I guess the only way to try to explain is to start at the beginning.

When we came home six years ago, I was full of guilt. You have no idea how many times I have cursed myself for the way I spoke to you the morning of the accident. I have no doubt that it's the reason why we ended up on that stage. When we finally got home, I was determined to banish my guilt by bringing you back to what you were or as close to it as we could get. What I did not foresee was how far I was driven. I still cannot believe the thoughts I had that last day I was at Lancer.

I made a promise to you that I never intended to keep. Although the guilt about my part in that morning's events has passed, the guilt of lying to you when I made that impossible promise was my undoing. If I did not leave Lancer, I would surely go insane from it.

I was at the brink when I left. I left to keep you safe, Johnny.

Johnny's grip creased the paper and he caught his breath. Scott was in San Francisco that day he stepped from the train with his opium den plan, and Murdoch had never uttered a word about it. He chewed his lower lip. Would it have made a difference at the time? No, he had to admit. Did Murdoch and Scott actually meet? There was only one way to find out. He relaxed his grip and continued to read.

I was nearly swayed to return a year ago when Murdoch found me, but events unfolded and I realized that things had not changed. You were still out of control and as

manipulative as ever. I could see in Murdoch's eyes that he was devastated, and that old promise crashed down on me once again. I remembered why I had left in the first place. I could only hurt Murdoch more if I returned.

I cannot go back and I cannot go forward. I have to start over. I know that if I return, that promise would overwhelm me one day and I would follow through. I cannot allow that to happen.

Therefore, I am leaving to start a new life outside of Lancaster or Boston. I need to be my own man with my own life. It is the only way we can both survive. I hope you understand that - this is survival at its most basic level.

I never expect you to be able to read this. The Johnny Lancaster I knew is forever gone - I have finally had to admit to myself, and I confess it is strange writing it down. I've started this file on the very slight chance that the brother I remember and love might someday return. I hope so, but hope has been a futile exercise for me so far.

I know how much I have hurt everyone with my decision, but I know I would hurt everyone even more if I had stayed. I plan to let our father know how I am doing because he doesn't deserve to wonder like he did for the twenty-odd years we were separated from him before. I do not intend, however, to accept communication from anyone I knew before today. I am truly starting over. I have to; I do not like the person I am right now.

I hope you understand, Johnny. I have accepted that I'll never see any of you again and that is more painful than you could ever imagine, but it must be done. Even with that, I still remain,

Your brother,
Scott

With those last words Johnny's hand drooped, the letter crumpling noisily. He worked his

jaw to stop a gathering of tears. He inhaled sharply, forcing his mind to work for a distraction.

What was the promise Scott mentioned? That time was still a blur to him. He had no recollection of what he actually said or done, but there were suspicions, but for the last pair of years Johnny had lived day to day and didn't dwell in the past. There were constant reminders of what had been, but their affect on him eventually faded. This one, though, felt like a fresh slap. Although his father always said that the past didn't matter, Johnny knew that was not true. It did matter, especially now, and whatever had passed between him and Scott needed to be addressed.

Turning his attention from the file to the box, Johnny slipped the small key into the lock, opened the lid and curiously leafed through the contents. Some of it was unopened mail addressed to Scott from Harlan himself along with Garrett's lawyers, Teresa and even Jelly. Johnny stared at his old friend's simple printing, which brought a pang of sadness. Surprisingly, there was even a letter from Val, which made him grin. Val hated writing letters.

A major portion of the missives came from Murdoch. It was disquieting to see his familiar script, knowing there were words and thoughts inside that would be new to him, but felt he could not open any of them. These letters belonged to his brother and he intended to hand them over personally. He piled them neatly, placed the folder inside and closed the lid.

Jason chose that moment to make a blustery entrance. "Whew!" he said as he shut the door. "It's tough to keep your balance with your hands full." Both hands carried wrapped packages. "I found cookies and chicken."

Johnny shoved the small chest aside, amused at the bottomless pit that was his son. "Think that'll hold ya 'till dinner?"

Jason sank into a chair. "Hope so. Guess we'll see." He toed the chair across from him closer and slipped off his boots before putting his feet up. "Okay, I'm ready now." He settled back expectantly, retrieving a chicken leg from one of the packages.

"Ready?" Johnny asked.

"For the story? You know, the path of fire and all?"

"Oh, sure." Johnny was grateful his son hadn't asked about the box and was glad to have the distraction himself. "I've told you this story before, you know."

Jason paused mid-chew and thought a moment. "Really? When?" he asked, his voice garbled by food.

"Yup," Johnny said softly. "Had to tell ya somethin' when you got colicky and I was walkin' ya. Took several nights - seemed like lots of nights! - but you heard it all." He recalled the small house near the hacienda. "The cool air outside seemed to help you on those nights when nothin' else would. I'd have you on my shoulder, over my heart, and we'd walk and I'd

talk. Those colicky spells only lasted a few months.”

Jason swallowed thoughtfully. “Ma never told me that,” he said softly.

“That’s because she never knew. She managed to get some sleep then. She needed it. You kept her awfully busy.” Jason smiled at that. Taking a deep breath, Johnny realized that his fingertips tickled the aqua beads dangling at his wrist. He regarded the bracelet for a moment, then stilled his fingers and began to speak.

“I’d been working as a gunfighter for about three years. I was just shy eighteen years old and my reputation was established. I only got the best jobs, if you want to call ‘em that. They were bigger, more complicated and the chance of failure much greater. I never had any time to take a step back and relax from it all; it was constant. When I wasn’t hiring out, I was defending my reputation. It was endless. Three straight years of being on guard day in and day out. I earned good money and spent most of it on pleasurable pursuits - in one hand and out the other - I was young.” He chuckled and shook his head slowly. “Boy, I was young. Sure, I went toe to toe with men much older than me and held my own with no problem, but there were times where I just felt like a stupid kid and acted like one. It was an exhilarating time - I was very good at my chosen craft, but I was tired.”

Johnny paused a moment and looked at his son. Then he cocked his head slightly and pursed his lips. “I was tired of life at seventeen,” he said in muted amazement. “If I’d have known how long I would actually live. . . Did you know Scott once told me I’d be dead before I was thirty?” Jason shook his head. Johnny suspected he didn’t want to speak in the chance that it would stop this flow of history.

And Johnny found that he didn’t want to stop. With each word, he felt a catharsis; a feeling of freedom he never anticipated. He continued “I needed a break and found that to be more difficult than I ever imagined. My reputation was pretty wide spread. So I chose to get away, far away, by going north.” Johnny’s eyes fell to the beads on his wrist as he continued his tale.

“Looking back, maybe I went north with some crazy idea of finding my father. It certainly wasn’t foremost in my mind, but maybe there’s something to that idea.” He sighed as he settled back and cast his gaze through the window to the land racing by. “I kept to the inland valleys as far as Santa Barbara. There’s an isolated stage stop there and I stopped to water my horse and grab a meal. The couple that ran the place was nice enough and they filled me in on the local news. I remember ‘em mentioning mercenaries in the area.” A glance at Jason’s confused expression told Johnny that his son didn’t grasp the meaning of what he said.

“The government hired out-of-work soldiers to clear out the Indians from California. Specifically, the good farming areas and transport corridors. ‘Clear out’ usually meant slaughter.” Johnny paused again and reclaimed his view outside the window, eyes unseeing the physical. “I thought I’d left all that at the border. Still, I didn’t have the heart to turn back so I decided to follow the coast instead and headed west until I hit water. I thought I could avoid all that . . .”

CHAPTER TWELVE

August 1865 – Thirty-one years ago

Johnny had been to the coastline of Mexico before. It amazed him then that the dry, arid land could come to such an abrupt and rugged end at the foot of such a mass of water. The waves crashed against the rocks endlessly with little chance of the young man being able to dip his toes in the swirling brown and blue. He felt no desire to do such a thing at the time and the sheer rock cliffs made it impossible anyway. Nowhere had he seen such a raw representation of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object.

Here, many miles north of Santa Barbara, it was different. Johnny saw how the mountains ended right at the water's edge and how great forests of unimaginably huge trees grew right up to cliffs' precipice. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before and he found himself drawn in and completely awed. Every now and again, he found a sheltered and sandy cove hugging a cliff base, wrapping around the ruggedness like a delicate shawl washed ashore. This beauty was unlike the stark cliffs of Mexico.

Unable to resist, he climbed down to one of the beaches and let his toes soak up the warmth of the sand. It was late summer. Johnny knew he would have to move inland as the weather grew colder, but for now, this was what he needed.

As he traveled north, Johnny felt strangely drawn to the area. Each curve of the coast brought a new vista and a new surprise. His respect of the tides grew with his observations of the jagged coastline. So much power and yet so much beauty surviving side by side; in a peculiar way, it was soothing.

One day, he saw an offshore storm approaching. The bank of clouds was huge and black. The wind preceding it whipped the ocean into an endless field of whitecaps. Johnny knew to head inland and seek shelter for the night, as it would no doubt be a wet and wild one.

He followed a valley inland, the offshore wind at his back fading with each turn he took. It was not long before he felt a prickling along his spine - a feeling he managed to avoid for the past several weeks. Something was amiss and his senses were telling him to tread cautiously. Johnny pressed onward with his hand resting on his gun and his eyes in constant motion.

Then he heard a noise and pulled up his horse. The animal's head rose abruptly and its ears shot forward, large eyes focused on something which lay ahead. Quietly, Johnny dismounted and ground tied the animal near a stand of ancient trees before moving silently onward.

The vague noise separated into the clear sound of voices - men's voices speaking English intermixed with masculine laughter and the screams of a woman. Although she wasn't speaking English - or Spanish, exactly - Johnny recognized pleading when he heard it. The vicious crack of skin against skin silenced her words and now all he heard was pitiful crying. Johnny's blood boiled. His grip tightened on his weapon and he crept closer, hugging the wall of the valley. He came to a large boulder and carefully peered around it, squinting through blowing dust.

There was a group of five men. They wore bedraggled clothing with haggard military appointments - mercenaries. Two men held a weeping Indian woman slouched in their grip, her hair windblown and awry. "Where are they?" Another man asked, slapping her hard. "Donde estan?" he demanded again, raising his hand. The woman cringed. Two others stood behind him, thumbs hooked in their belts. One said something too softly for Johnny to hear. The others agreed heartily. Johnny didn't have to hear the words to understand the suggestion. His eyes narrowed, judging the distance. He had to move closer.

Meanwhile, one of the men shed his jacket and started to follow suit with his pants. The two holding the woman began to force her to the ground. Johnny was able to get much closer because of their distraction and the storm driven gusts of wind. He ducked into a deep curve of the valley wall and surprised a group of five horses tied to a variety of trees and shrubs. They startled when Johnny rounded the point, and then warily watched him approach, nostrils flaring and ears twitching. They were already edgy due to the coming storm.

"Easy, boys, easy," Johnny crooned, a plan coming to him as he spoke. It was a perfect set up - this niche opened directly in line with the men. Johnny untied the animals and secured the reins loosely to the saddles. He led them as close as he dared. Between the muffled screams of the woman and his rising fury, Johnny had to fight for self-control. As his plan solidified in his mind, he felt the cool demeanor of Madrid settle over him like a cloak against a tempest.

He released the horses and moved quickly behind them as he drew his gun. Slapping the biggest horse on the rump, he fired into the air twice and yelled. The horses took off, heading directly toward the group. Johnny ran low behind them, reloading as he moved. Vaguely, through the clouds of blowing dust, he saw the men scatter. Johnny ran right up to the woman lying on the ground, planted his feet and easily picked off three of the men.

In the ensuing madness, Johnny hauled the woman - girl, actually - to her feet. He snapped off another round and dragged her back down the valley toward the sea using the blowing dust and leaves for pitiful concealment.

Bullets pinged off the rocks by his head. Johnny whistled and his horse trotted nervously into view. Johnny threw the woman onto the saddle and then swung up behind. He wheeled the animal around and snapped off two more shots as they leaped away into the woods. With his

horse's second powerful lunge, Johnny felt a fiery bite in his shoulder that drove him into the woman. He could feel her fighting to keep her seat. He grabbed the saddle horn and she tore the reins from his hand, slowing their mad dash through the trees. Somehow, he managed to stay aboard.

Reload. He needed to reload. Sitting up stoked burning fingers of pain in his shoulder but he functioned on muscle memory at this point. Through the pain, Johnny reloaded as the woman weaved the horse through the dizzying maze of enormous tree trunks. He looked back and could not hear any signs of pursuit. Holstering his gun, Johnny noticed the silence of their movement and looked down - a thick bed of leaves and needles not only covered their tracks but also muffled the sound of their passing. It was then he realized it was growing darker and looked up. The tree canopy grew so thick and broad that the small patch of sky above eventually disappeared. The trees themselves were so tall he couldn't see the top, and he was dumbly amazed at that fact. The branches he did see swayed in the building wind. Then Johnny became vaguely aware of his wandering concentration.

He listed to one side and jerked to keep upright. The horse sidestepped for balance and the woman whispered frantically, but he couldn't hold on. Johnny slipped to the ground with a musty thump, blinded by searing pain stabbing from all quarters. The last things he remembered were the woman dragging him, his circle of sight closing down to blackness and the smell of coming rain.

"Who was she?" Jason asked, pulling Johnny from his sensory memory. "What tribe?"

"Chumash," Johnny replied. "She was the daughter of one of the elders. I don't remember being taken to their camp. I was out for a while." Unconsciously, he flexed his right shoulder.

"Is she the one who gave you that?" Jason pointed at the bracelet.

Johnny smirked. "Patience, boy. I'll get there. No, it wasn't Chaia, but this dark red bead is from her." He twisted his wrist to the nearly black bead that marked the center of the bracelet. "It stands for her blood, her life. It's in the center to signify the start of it all, of my relationship with them." With much effort, Johnny went back to that time, lifted his eyes and continued. "When I finally came around, I was inside a hut . . ."

"I can make it." Johnny forced the words out through clenched teeth because the stubborn pain refusing to abate.

The Indian ignored the attempt to shrug his hand away and maintained his grip on the stranger's upper arm to help him sit up. Once settled, Johnny worked to even his breathing and assess his surroundings. Ever so slowly, he managed to control the pain, forcing it to a manageable level. Panting harder than he liked, Johnny looked around.

He was in a thatch hut and had apparently been there for a while. Other than the fact that he felt incredibly weak, vague memories of the comings and goings of different people, different voices and different smells came to him in a jumble. There was chanting at one point. And

smoke. Johnny found his right arm wrapped firmly to his chest.

Then he noticed that he had on well-worn buckskins that were soft and supple. "Where's my clothes?" he asked immediately. The Indian with him frowned. Johnny realized that his overseer was barely a man. "My clothes?" he mumbled, fingering the buckskins clumsily for a moment. As his senses awakened, he looked around and felt more out-of-sorts. "My gun? My horse?" he continued, reaching rather unsteadily to look under a pile of skins next to him. The effort made him sway alarmingly and the world narrowed to a black tunnel.

The young man was at his side in a blink and steadied him with a strong hand. He spoke rapidly in his own language as the world began to right itself again in Johnny's eyes. Eventually drawn into full awareness by the voice, Johnny saw the deer hide door pushed aside and two older men entered. The lead man's head was a crown of silver hair. Beads adorned two braided strands that framed his face. The second man had similar braids, but the effect was a less dramatic with the younger man's dark hair. After a moment, a third person entered - a girl that Johnny guessed to be about his own age.

The silver-haired man spoke softly and evenly, his eyes never leaving Johnny's face. Not knowing if he was friend or foe, Johnny fell into the persona that was becoming a lifesaver and made sure his face and body language were completely neutral. The man directed his words to Johnny and the young woman translated quietly into broken Spanish.

"You are problem," she said softly, the old man's soliloquy a rhythmic song leading the way. "You saved one of us but look like hunters of our people. Who are you?"

Although his face was quiet, Johnny's pains roared and his mind swirled. What did he remember last? A storm, the smell of rain. Nothing much. "My name's Johnny," he decided to start. He saved someone? "I don't remember..."

The girl translated Johnny's words and then shadowed the elder's voice with her own. "White hunters seek us. Killed many brethren. We keep moving but safe here for two seasons."

Vaguely, Johnny recalled hearing about the mercenaries. He snorted and shook his head. They managed to stay in one area for two years now; Johnny realized his presence would be alarming to some tribe member, so why was he here? "I saved someone?"

"Chaia was gathering. Hunters found her, hurt her..."

The incident came in a flash, the anger rising in Johnny's heart. "They were torturing her to tell them something. I remember now. That was..." he realized he lost complete track of time since he had no idea how long he had been here. "When? How long ago?"

The girl spoke rapidly and the elder replied, his gaze still latched with Johnny's. "Ten nights."

Johnny blinked, his mask slipping for a moment. Over a week ago? Shakily rubbing his pounding head, he asked, "The girl. Is she all right?"

The man spoke rapidly, his hands making short gestures in the air. A few seconds after he began, the girl continued the translation in her soft, clear voice. "We found you in the valley to the sea. Chaia showed us. She was unhurt."

Things started to come in bits and pieces to Johnny's muddled mind -his ride north, the huge trees and powerful sea, his weariness. The throb of his shoulder was relentless and he pressed against the wrappings with this left hand. A zing of fear cleared his mind - this was his shooting arm. He scratched at the bandages, releasing his right hand. The old man spoke rapidly.

"You must not move your arm yet. The wound still seeps. You are not hot any longer but there is still a lot of healing needing to be done."

Johnny wasn't listening. He was busy flexing his hand, alarmed at the weakness of his grip. He started to peel the rest of the cloth and the young man next to him tried to stop him. Johnny pushed him aside and the rest of them moved toward him at the elder's order. Johnny scrambled sideways, his head spinning. He pushed away another body and had to lean on his good hand to keep from pitching sideways. It was the girl's touch on his forearm that finally calmed him. Her hand was cool and soft.

"Be still," she gently demanded. "You are well guarded. We know you are a man of the gun, but there is no reason to have fear at this moment. Here is your gun." The girl flipped back a small skin next to Johnny and revealed his Colt. He calmed immediately and picked it up with his left hand, still feeling incredibly vulnerable with his injury. "You will get better. For now, the wound must close."

Nodding shortly and trying to still his rolling stomach, Johnny settled back against the side of the small shelter. "We'll be square, then," Johnny replied. "When I'm healed. We'll be even." He felt his energy seeping away.

"Rest," the girl said, frowning at his words. She didn't understand. "Safe here. Loki sees you on Path of Ice and since you saved one us, we must help you to the river."

Johnny shook his head with her confusing words. Path of ice? As he tried to piece it together, Johnny felt himself falling into beckoning darkness. What she said didn't make any sense at all. "What the hell. . ." he thought tiredly as his surroundings slipped away.

"Path of ice," Jason repeated.

Johnny nodded, his focus again on the beads and how they had worn over time. "Old Chumash saying one of the elder taught me. 'Between paths of fire and ice runs a river of temperate peace.'" He paused, remembering. "A path of ice is a life lived in controlled emotion. No one is emotionless, but some are better at hiding them."

"Like Madrid."

“Exactly.” Johnny breathed softly.

“So, a path of fire is what?”

Johnny sighed, the subject still a little tender to cross. “A man on a path of fire is the opposite. His emotions are unchecked and unfocused. He strikes out blindly . . .” With that admission, Johnny lifted his eyes to meet those of his son. Johnny’s eyes glistened. “I’m sorry, Jason. If I could change things I would, but I can’t. None of us can. We can only look for that temperate river in the middle that is a mix of both. I think I’ve finally found it. I only thought I was there before.”

Johnny could tell that the statement raised more questions in his son’s eyes.

“So you wear that as a reminder of these paths?” Jason asked.

“Yes.” Johnny held up his hand, the worn beads falling back from his wrist. “And they didn’t actually give this to me. I had to earn it, bead by bead.”

“How?”

Johnny’s eyes sparkled. “Good thing I rested some because this may take a bit.”

“We got the time,” Jason said, settling back with determination on his features.

The wounds never seemed to heal. Johnny’s cautious nature screamed that he should be moving on, that he was showing too much weakness and that it would eventually be his downfall. Another part of him, though, craved the warmth of . . . what? What was it exactly that was here and seemed to make the black pit inside of him seem less cavernous? It wasn’t the physical comforts - he’d had the best and the worst of that before without this feeling. Was it something he could not see? Was this some kind of spirituality, a kind other than that of a priest and congregation? Was it that mysterious and unknown sense of family he had heard about? What did it all mean and how did he fit in?

The young woman and man were constant entities. Strangely, Johnny didn’t feel crowded in their presence. Usually, when wounded, he withdrew to a place alone, not trusting those that initially patched him up. Be it a doc or a kindly Samaritan, Johnny soon felt the pressure to leave and heal; it was a gunfighter’s lot to lack trust. Here, though, it was different.

And that’s what both perplexed him and filled him with wonder.

Safe. He felt safe.

Here was a group of hunted people and he was smack in the middle of them, wounded to near total incapacitation. Yet he felt safe. It went against all his sensibilities. Could it be the girl? True, she was kind, gentle and most definitely attractive. He noticed her shy smile and other attributes, and there was a certain kind of attraction between them but Johnny felt an unknown restraint he couldn’t figure. Johnny was far from innocent in those ways. He

learned very early on about the powers of a woman, and learned to think of them as a tool; it was the only way he would survive. He lost track of the number of men he'd seen whose downfall was caused by feminine flesh. There were those women made for touching and those made for watching. It was as simple as that and there were plenty of each.

He knew that Ha'ali fell firmly into the "watching" category but she aroused feelings he never experienced before. It unnerved him and at the same time made him feel more alive. She brightened places inside where he didn't realize were in darkness. He cursed his wounds for healing too slowly one minute, then too fast the next. The conflict was distracting and he was not used to distraction. Distraction killed but here, he tolerated it.

Ha'ali's father was one of the elder council. When Johnny's cracked ribs healed and the persistent infection in his shoulder came under control, he was able to wander farther and farther from the cozy hut. The young brave, Taya, was always near by, taking his charge very seriously. Johnny noticed how the young man acquiesced to Ha'ali's father and some of the other elders so Johnny was able to figure out the hierarchy of the camp. Even though he was followed constantly on the elders' orders Johnny felt that it was for his own good and not because they did not trust him. They even let him keep his gun, although he couldn't hold it in his right hand.

"You have proven that you are trustworthy," Ha'ali said in her broken Spanish as she tended him.

There were two wounds high in the shoulder resulting in a broken collarbone and severe damage to the joint. He wasn't sure he would ever heal completely. Even his horse had scars marking the encounter with the mercenaries; a shot to the hip left him with a lingering lameness that made Johnny wonder if he was done for good as well. They both looked at a long lay up and for once, he found he didn't mind.

Johnny integrated himself into the tribe as he healed. His usual restless nature calmed with the feeling of belonging and the mere sight of Ha'ali. The border conflicts and small wars he had been a part of for most of his life seemed so dirty now. What had they really proven? In the long run, what good was winning? For once, the young gunfighter was contemplating the meaning of his life. For once, he had the chance to.

Weeks led to months and the season shifted to fall. Johnny had taken to wearing the soft buckskins of the tribe as opposed to his stiff trousers and difficult to button shirt. He still practiced with his gun almost daily and helped where he could around the camp. Both Ha'ali and Taya kept him busy and by the start of winter, they were very close and his right arm showed signs that it would heal completely. The gentle chores he assumed helped to work the joint back into flexibility.

Communication became easier. Spanish was a common language in most of California and the tribe became quite adept at it thanks to Johnny. He, too, picked up phrases from the Chumash, but it was a difficult mix of sounds he couldn't quite master. Ha'ali and Taya laughed at most of Johnny's attempts to speak it correctly and it was soon a running joke.

“Father calls you ‘he who trips on tongue’,” Ha’ali told him once.

It was now as cold as it would get for the coastal range. There was no snow, but it was colder than winters in Mexico. Johnny used work to keep warm. As soon as his shoulder could function with minimal pain, he joined the others in their journeys to gather food and learned about the flora and fauna, as well as how he fit into the scheme of things according to the Chumash.

When Loki, the tribal medicine man, finally deemed Johnny’s shoulder completely healed, he was offered the opportunity to learn a skill the tribe was known for and discovered a whole new world - that of the shore fisherman.

The Chumash had the ability to read a coastline like a book. The water’s color and presence of whitecaps determined the best spots for their catch. Winter along the coast was wild waves and brutal tides. It was wind-whipped spray that veiled everything with a thin, salty layer. It was cold fingers that never warmed and brown swirls of churned up ocean floor. It was unmitigated power and a somber reminder that nature was a force to consider, always.

It was entirely invigorating, body and soul.

The first time Johnny observed a brave time the waves and tide, and then leap into the turbulent surf, he was astounded. He didn’t think the young man would come up again, but he did, and with a large rock-like shape in his hands - abalone, which yielded delicious meat along with beautiful, iridescent shells for jewelry and adornment.

The peace of the lifestyle was intoxicating, rewarding and completely fulfilling. Johnny found that as winter wended into spring, his shoulder was back to its original flexibility. It still ached now and again if he overworked it, but he knew that would pass. He was nearly up to speed with his draw and his horse, under his now shedding winter coat, was sleek, shiny and sound once again. He knew it was time for him to leave but he could not bear the thought.

Ha’ali had gotten under his skin. Johnny felt love and deep friendship, both evoking a trust he never known with a woman before. Her brother Taya was always there, always nearby as Uskal, her father, was no fool. It was also a first for young Madrid to become so involved with a girl yet have never touched her. The idea of it is what kept him going and kept him learning. If he thought about her too long - her soft skin, her smoky eyes, her glossy hair - he knew he would go mad, so he simply kept busy until he collapsed at night. By mid spring, Johnny was at the peak of condition, a willing worker and skilled hunter. Although he preferred the game of the woods, he also practiced the way of the shore fisherman.

The summer equinox was near when Uskal and Loki called Johnny to them. By now, the gunfighter had a good grip on the odd Spanish/Chumash language and did not need a translator anymore, but, on this day when the elders asked him a question, he didn’t quite understand what he was hearing; it had to be a mistake. They summoned Ha’ali and her father asked him again.

“He asks you to join up with us. Become Chumash,” she explained with a rosy flush to her cheeks. They both knew the implications of the request.

Nearly speechless with the honor, Johnny did not hesitate. “Yes,” he managed to reply. He came to relish the peace and spirituality of the tribe; he felt he truly belonged.

“You will be tested,” Uskal explained, handing him a leather thong with a half-dozen beads on it. Johnny already noticed that most of the men wore a similar piece of jewelry. “Each test will show if you are on the right journey; that you’re not on the paths of fire or ice, but that you walk along the river with peace.”

The center bead of the bracelet was black-red. “This is where you started, with saving Chaia’s blood. Here, beads indicating your hunting skill on land, and in the sea.” These beads were the dark green of the trees and the brown/blue of the swirling sea. Orange beads indicated his reliability, gray his trustworthiness. He would earn the rest of the beads by completing tests of his skills. Uskal tied it to his wrist where it hung loosely.

The final beads, he explained, were the rare color of aquamarine embraced between beads of gleaming white - the colors of the River of Temperate Peace. When the bracelet was complete, those two beads closed it and sat atop the pulse point of the wrist on the dominant hand. There, atop the blood’s flowing course, they kept the heart serene.

Ultimate peace, enduring love and family; how could Johnny turn away?

By this time, Jason was slack jawed and completely drawn in. He looked at the bracelet with new respect in his eyes. Johnny paused with the arrival of their early dinner, his voice a bit hoarse, and he appreciated the break not only to rest his throat but, also, to prepare himself for the inevitable end of the story - the way all his stories seemed to end.

Closing off the sudden negativity that threatened to overtake him, Johnny concentrated on his meal. As he used his fork, the dual tails of the bracelet swung freely. He knew his astute son would notice the extension of rawhide added to make the two ends from which the aqua beads hung far away from his pulse. Johnny wasn’t sure when the time came if he would be able to explain it; he only knew that now, when he was able to actually feel the beads under his fingers, was he able to undertake any of the accomplishments he’d made these past few years.

Would he ever, in his mind, have the right wear them close to his heart’s blood that again? Completing this new set of tests would be the only way, he decided.

Jason could tell that his father was tired. Although he wanted to hear the rest, he suggested a siesta after dinner. He offered the bed, and after a little convincing, Johnny finally went back and lay down, falling asleep within minutes.

Stretching his legs out on the divan, Jason tried to relax but found that his mind was too alive with visions of his family; Maria, irresistible Maria ending up on the end of a rope, his bright and sunny mother living alone and pining away for this man with him - his father.

There certainly was much more to Johnny Madrid Lancer than he ever realized. From his experiences in Los Angeles, there were two kinds of addicts: Those that never recovered and those that ended up dead in the streets. His father was an enigma.

He began to think about the girl he'd been seeing in Newhall. Victoria Lynn was the most beautiful thing he knew, which made him determined to get his life together before he asked for her hand. Before now, he wondered if he would ever be able to do that. He felt lost, unconnected. Now that he knew what his father had started with and yet accomplished, success didn't seem impossible after all. In addition, he was beginning to feel a connection with family that was missing for so long. True, Aunt Teresa and his mother had always been around, but the feeling of having roots always an elusive thing.

He sat up straight with a realization. Had he not felt rooted before because, deep inside, he believed his parents would reunite someday? That he wasn't really lost, but merely waiting? That he knew all along that his path would eventually lead back to Lancer, where his roots began? That thought put Victoria Lynn in an entirely different light - an obtainable light. Jason smiled to himself, now able to imagine how much he could accomplish at Lancer. Not Aunt Teresa's Lancer, but a place soaked in his bloodlines. Once settled, Victoria Lynn would have to say yes. He grinned, thinking of her smile and her tawny hair . . . and fell asleep to find her in his dreams.

He had no feeling for time, and then he jerked awake. Sitting up abruptly, it took a few seconds to figure out what awakened him; then he heard a moan from the sleeping area.

Jason rolled off the couch and made his way across the gently rocking train car to the curtained bed where his father rolled his head back and forth, mumbling. As Jason watched, his father's thrashing undressed the bed in a matter of seconds. Jason puzzled if, or how, to interfere, and chose to first see if it would get any worse. He felt slightly guilty for being a witness to Johnny's distress, and then his father spoke in a hoarse voice as he dreamed.

"Please, Murdoch, let me go. Just let me go . . . I can't do it anymore . . . come back . . . please . . . he won't come back . . . I'm sorry, lo siento . . . it's too much . . ."

With each plaintive statement, Johnny grew quieter. Even though he was asleep, worry lines pinched his forehead and his breathing became ragged. It was not a restful sleep. Jason thought about the nightmares his father admitted to and how they finally vanished when he found Lancer. Jason wondered if those same nightmares had returned or if his infamous father had created new ones.

"It's all right, Pa," Jason said quietly. "Even if Uncle Scott doesn't come back, you'll still have me and Ma."

Johnny Madrid Lancer had won him over.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was still early in the evening when Johnny rose from bed. He worked his way to the sitting area, pleased to note that a majority of his aches had faded to a tolerable level. "Guess I just needed some sleep," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

A glance around the car told him Jason was not there. Johnny the time to splash some water on his face, finding that standing at the washbasin was a little tricky with the rocking of the car, but not impossible. He rubbed his chin and felt roughness - a shave would be nice, but he'd be damned stupid to try it on a moving train. Maybe at the next stop.

Feeling much better, Johnny dried his face and claimed a chair close to the window. Peering out, he tried to figure out where they were. When he consulted his watch, he realized that he'd slept right through the long stop at Santa Rosa.

A thump and a bump announced Jason's return to the car. The door opened slowly and his son started to creep in.

"No need. I'm up," Johnny said, yawning. "I slept right through Santa Rosa, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you sure did." Jason slammed the door and winced. "Sorry."

Johnny snorted. "See any of the stock going to the sale?"

Jason headed to the bar and poured a short drink. "Sure did. Nice lookin' bunch. Water?" he asked. Johnny shook his head so Jason dropped down on a chair across from his father. After a few sips in companionable silence, he leaned back and studied the glass in his hand. "How long did it take you to complete these tests? You know, for the beads?"

Releasing his gaze from the passing countryside, Johnny looked at his son and grinned. "Over two months," he replied.

"Ready to tell me about it? Your throat doin' okay?"

"Yeah, I'm ready. Not bored to tears yet?"

"Far from it. We got time now that you're rested, right?" Johnny nodded. "And I got fortification, too." Jason pulled a small, wrapped parcel. "From Aunt Teresa. Cookies - and not even broken!"

Johnny shook his head amiably at his son's appetite. Jason finished his drink and set the glass aside as Johnny continued his story.

"The tests were supposed to prove I was able to provide for the tribe and show the trueness of my heart, I guess you'd say. Once I passed I would not only be allowed to live with them, I could have a Chumash wife and start my own family if I desired."

Jason raised an eyebrow at that. "You were what, eighteen? Did you . . . I mean, were you . . . you know. With Ha'ali?"

Johnny chuckled. He held Jason's questioning gaze when he replied. "It was the first time ever in my life I felt wanted and comfortable. I had no reason to believe it would ever change. I wanted to stay there forever. And yes, I had my eye on her, but I never crossed the line. It was the first time I wanted to follow the rules. I didn't want to take any chances. It was easy, actually. Easier than I ever thought it would be. I didn't feel constrained or smothered or trapped . . . it was freeing."

At this point, he dropped his eyes and focused on the bracelet in his lap. "The first tests were to provide food for a banquet. It had to have all the elements - meat from land and sea, berries, acorns from oaks that were days away. I had to provide needles and other material for their basket weavers. I had to know what plants produced which colors to dye materials. Skins for clothing - things like that. That was the first phase and it lasted weeks. Next, I had to live apart from the tribe - sort of a reminder of what it would be like without them. I remember how lonely I felt but I knew it would be over soon. Then I had to fast and sweat out all impurities from my system in a special hut. All this took nearly two months.

"Finally, it was time for the final test." Johnny tilted his head and frowned. "No, it wasn't really a test - more like ritual. The elders took me to a secret spot on the coast. A sacred spot in a secluded cove. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen . . ."

They walked in a solemn line, forbidden to speak. They traveled slowly at the oldest Elder's shuffling pace. It took nearly a day to get there. Johnny walked in rhythm with the men, his mind calm and at ease. They entered a forest of the huge trees Johnny had become familiar with, keeping a straight path between the pungent giants. Each step released a musky perfume unique to those woods. It was shaded and dark under the green canopy high above them. Wildflowers grew in isolated bunches of purple and yellow, taking advantage of the filtered light. Vines crept along the ground like fingers, searching for a dash of sunlight.

Johnny could hear the ocean before he saw it. The salty aroma intertwined with the earthy musk, proving a bond between sea and land. Finally, when he could clearly hear the crashing surf, their path turned south and the trees fell back. The trail led to a sheer cliff that curved sharply and almost back upon itself, protecting this cove from the relentless waves.

Johnny saw that they had walked out on a finger of land protruding into the center of the small cove. To his right, where the finger left the mainland, he saw that a

waterfall spilled from a perfectly round hole in the cliff face. When Johnny and the Elders came to a stop, Johnny looked down and realized that the finger of land on which they stood was in reality the top of an arch. Over time, the tides had washed away the earth to make a natural bridge that lead to the sea.

As astonishing as the architecture of the land was, what stole Johnny's breath were the colors below. The swirling water below was a translucent green he'd never seen before in nature. It was the same aquamarine of the final beads adorning the tribe's bracelets. The cliff face encircling the cove was bright white, the tiny bit of sand beach on the opposite side also white - pure, dazzling white. The two colors together were startling and soothing at the same time. Wildflowers crowned the edge of the opposite cliff top, bright in the high noon sun. It was complete harmony of land and sea.

"This is a representation of the Temperate River which we seek - the peace where the Fire of the sea meets the Ice of the earth." As the elder spoke, the two men flanking Johnny began to remove his tunic. Then, they indicated that he remove the leggings and moccasins, and release his hair from the binding tie that kept it from his face. He was completely naked. The offshore wind made his skin tingle and he felt a prickle of cold for before the sun warmed it away. His hair rolled off his shoulders with the breeze; the rock beneath his feet was weatherworn smooth. He stepped to the edge and hung his toes over, and then closed his eyes.

Two warm hands, one on each shoulder, held him steady. Johnny felt bound to this place, bound to the earth, the sea and the Chumash. He could hear the waterfall and the waves, the trees whispering in the breeze and the murmurings of the Elder as he prayed.

The peace that settled within was incredible.

He was instructed to open his eyes. The elders' hands withdrew. When Uskal told him to jump, he did not hesitate, such was his trust.

Johnny dove from the cliff without question, the feeling glorious. He hit the water, surprised at its warmth. In his plunge under the surface, he opened his eyes and marveled at the clearness of the water. The bottom of the cove was a blanket of virgin white sand. Golden fish darted in surprise. When his descent ended, he looked up and could see the Elders lined up atop the natural arch. Johnny kicked his feet and his head popped from the water and he floated, relishing the cold wash of wind on his exposed skin. Then he kicked toward the tiny beach and pulled himself out.

Johnny paused; the memory of the place rendered him speechless. It had been so long since he had thought of that place, that day, that feeling. It was real - it had to be with the overwhelming strength of the memory. He'd shoved the event so far back in his mind, he doubted he could ever bring it forth again, but here it was. He longed to feel that way once again.

The train's whistle brought him back. Johnny blinked and was startled to find his son staring at him with a look of astonishment.

"You jumped off a cliff?" Jason sputtered. "You weren't afraid of dyin'? Did you know it was deep enough?"

Seconds later, the query sunk in and he responded. "Let's see . . . Yes, no and no again. That's how much I trusted them. That was the whole idea. With trust comes peace." He rubbed his temple and frowned, then added in a quieter voice, "and loss of peace destroys trust."

"How'd you get out?" Jason asked curiously. "Of the cove, I mean. Was there a trail out?"

Johnny smiled crookedly. "Nope. Had to scale the cliff face." He shifted in his seat. "It was an uncomfortable experience, to say the least," he grouched good-naturedly. He did not want the feeling of the experience to fade, but it was doing just that. Johnny knew he would have to earn the feeling back again and could only hope that this quest would do that for him. It was another plunge in different circumstance.

Jason shook his head. "I don't know if I could have done that. I mean I've done some stupid things, but . . ."

That statement brought Johnny back to earth and he burst out laughing. ". . . but you're not stupid enough to jump off a cliff, huh?"

Jason flushed. "I didn't mean it that way, Pa. Really."

"It's all right, Jason. I guess you just had to be there."

"So what happened next? I mean, you obviously left. There was more of Johnny Madrid after that, right?"

Immediately, Johnny turned to gaze out the window, blind to the glory of the setting sun and blur of beautiful country. He clenched the trailing beads in his palm. "Yeah, I left." Chewing on his lower lip for a moment he silently vowed to make it through the next part unscathed. "They gave me the last beads at an elaborate ceremony that night. The rest of the tribe had been preparing since we left. They knew without question that I would pass the final test. Trust . . ."

The walk back was in complete silence and he was kept separate from the tribe until the feast. Each of the elders painted part of a design on his chest and face that represented his trials. The entire night was became a blur. When finally introduced to the tribe as Chumash, he only had eyes for Ha'ali, and she for him. What had been forbidden before was now possible.

The next day he went directly to Uskal and asked for his daughter's hand. He agreed at the price of a pronged stag, a dozen abalone, some owl feathers, and his horse.

Johnny didn't blink at any of it and began gathering the items the next day. The

abalone took two days to collect because the tides were not cooperative. The owl feathers were easy enough after he located an owl's nest, but the stag was proving to be tough. It was near summer's end and their hunting was taking place farther and farther from the camp. Johnny ended up taking his horse out for two days before finding suitable prey. It was a magnificent six-pointer and Johnny was glad to have a horse to pack it back.

Four days later, he smelled the fires of the camp. Johnny picked up his pace, anxious to be with family again. A feeling of warmth grew with the thought and he felt a surge of joy when he entered the final valley that would lead him home.

He found the first body before the camp was in sight. It was an elder's wife, shot in the back. Suddenly, smoke that welcomed him home offered a different story - it carried death.

In a daze, Johnny left the horse and ran toward the encampment. The closer he got the more bodies forced him into a weaving path. They were mostly children.

When he made the final turn where his home lay spread out before him, all he saw were piles of smoldering black scattered to the horizon. Plunged into shock, Johnny at first stood rooted, unable to move. Finally, his stomach heaved and he fell to his knees and vomited. He roughly wiped his mouth and pushed to his feet, forcing them to move. Slowly, his pace increased as he mapped the lay of the camp by the remains.

Finally, he found Uskal's hut. Two charred bodies were on the far side, one topped with wisps of gray and the other smaller with an arm thrust out to the side in a defiant manner. The other arm entwined the burned mass that was Uskal. Ha'ali's abalone bracelet, one she fashioned out of the shells Johnny had given her, still glowed with iridescent color from the soot entombing it on her out thrust wrist.

Johnny remembered standing there next to her, looking down on her charred body and felt himself withdraw back into a dark place in his mind as the persona of Madrid settled around him like a shroud. The last time he saw this kind of horror, a gunfighter carried him away. It was no different this time. Only this time, the gunfighter came from within.

Turning on his heel, Johnny pinpointed the remains of the hut that he shared with Taya and other young men. Ignoring the burning of his feet, he walked to where he kept his things and began to dig. Hot coals burned through the soles of his moccasins and blistered his hands and still he dug until he found the tightly wrapped bundle he sought. Using both hands to lift it clear of the debris, he tossed it to a clear area where it smoldered like all the rest of the camp.

Subverting the pains he felt both physical and mental, Johnny slipped his hunting knife from his belt and cut through the layers of hide. Deep within, safe from the flames, was Madrid's gun belt and clothing rolled tightly together. He never thought

he would have to use them again and now snorted at his foolish dream. How could he possibly believe he deserved serenity? With all he had done so far in his life, he deserved to burn in Hell. Still, a very tiny part of him desired redemption. The short time he had with these people proved it could happen.

His internal conflict had begun.

When Johnny stopped speaking, he found he was still looking out the train window. The sun was gone and the farms, ranches and characteristic oaks swallowed by blackness. The stars above glittered as they always did, oblivious to the turmoil below.

The silence suddenly struck him and he turned to find his son. Jason sat forward in his chair, forearms resting on his knees and his hands dangling between them, still. His shoulders slumped and his head bowed with eyes cast toward the floor. As Johnny studied the form, not knowing what else to say, Jason shifted to one side and raised a hand to rub his eyes.

“My God,” he said so softly it barely reached Johnny’s ears. “My God, the things you’ve seen. I never imagined . . . you said you had nightmares. Now I see why.” He sat up and ran his fingers through his hair. When he met Johnny’s gaze, his eyes shimmered. “Yet here you are.”

Johnny nodded. “Yup, here I am. Battered and beaten but still here. I swore to remember them. I swore to never forget what I had, how close I was to . . .”

“That temperate peace. I get it now. You were on a path of ice before you met them. Did you go back?”

“I had to,” Johnny said, shaking his head slowly. He held out his arm so the beads were clear. “I didn’t mean to; it was just too hard to keep off that path. I became more controlled, more focused, a lot less open and trusting. More serious. I picked my battles carefully from then on, looking for any little piece of good in a bad situation. Like angels and devils constantly bickered inside me.”

“Did you find out who did it? Was it the mercenaries?”

“Yup. I tracked ‘em down. I gave ‘em a chance, one by one. It took me well into the following winter, but I found ‘em all. If I slaughtered them all at once, it would have put me on their level and I couldn’t stomach that. I called ‘em out one at a time and made sure they knew who I was. When I killed the last one, I cut my hair short again and burned the clippings. I stayed on that path for quite awhile.”

“Until Lancer?”

“Until Lancer. It took some time, but it all came back. I had it again, that peace. And then . . .” he glanced down to the remains of his leg and quirked his mouth. “For a long time I thought I just wasn’t meant to dwell on that path. I had it twice, and it was taken away both times. Now here I’m going for a third time.”

“They say third time’s a charm,” Jason said lightly, and Johnny had to smile. “Have you told anyone else this story? I mean, besides when you used it to cure my colic?”

“Well, I never told you that last part. Didn’t seem like the kind of thing for a baby to hear.” Johnny’s smile was sad. “I told Scott most of it, and some to your mother and eventually Murdoch - told him just last year, as a matter of fact. You’re the first to hear all of it.”

“I’m glad,” Jason admitted. “It had to be told.”

“True, true. I just don’t think I need to tell that story anymore, that’s all. I’m done with it.” Johnny leaned back. “It’s time to work on the future.”

Jason nodded in agreement, his eyes on the circle of beads at his father’s wrist. As they talked into the night, Johnny felt that he had helped his son to start down a right path. Where it went from here was up to him, but at least he had an idea on where to aim. It was a father’s gift to his son. Several hours later, when their plan for the next morning had been discussed and decided, they settled down for some needed sleep. With Johnny on the bed and Jason on the couch, the gentle rocking of the train soon soothed both of them into deep, well needed sleep.

Tomorrow, they would each start on a new path.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The muted smell of damp redwood still brought fourth an odd mixture of comfort and sorrow each time he inhaled. Scott had come to connect the scent with the feeling of escape. By coming here, that is exactly what he'd done - escaped - but he fooled himself into believing it was for his family's sake. After closing the door of the company-supplied house with a quiet snick, Scott stood on the small porch for a moment to pull his jacket tighter around his body. Feeling fortified, he stepped down and began his morning walk to the mill office. The trail trickled down a gentle slope, the well-worn path clear of any obstructions over time. The leaves and needles collected over the seasons were soft under his feet and burst forth a complex explosion of musty woodiness with each step.

Coastal fog netted the trees in a ghostly manner this time of morning. Scott knew that it would soon burn off by noon. The seasonal chill bit his exposed skin. Automatically, he thought about checking his wood supply; since his son was gone, he reacquired many of the boy's duties. William, at ten years old, had been an unusually responsible child. After a year, the hurt was as fresh as that first day he left them. The little reminders of William - like the woodpile - didn't help to ease their memories. Scott toyed with the idea of moving into town to ease their pain; along with the constant reminders, Nancy was getting older and this reclusive lifestyle would become too difficult for her at some point in the future.

He snorted. Whom was he kidding? They were both getting older. He shoved his hands deeper in his coat pockets and moved on, the house disappearing in fog and forest as he walked farther along the path. Where it started its gentle downhill slope Scott usually paused for a moment to take in the view of Scotia - the church spire only visible from his house on clear days, the cluster of employee housing across from the main mill and the mill itself, perched solidly alongside the foaming river. Towering trees far as the eye could see surrounded the town. This morning, however, the fog sat deep and he could only see for a handful of yards around him. He had to concentrate on where the trail turned.

Scott paused and hunched his shoulders to keep the clinging mist from kissing his neck. Just as he dropped his eyes back to the familiar path, the motion of something dark and solid registered in his mind. His head snapped up and he peered into the suddenly seductive mist. To his left, just at the edge of the woods, a shadow shifted. Scott squinted, realizing at the same time that he didn't have his gun. Bears often passed through this area but something about the shape of this shadow made that thought dwindle. A tingle of anticipation lingered.

It was someone on horseback. Even in the undulating vapor Scott could make out the vague

outline of a trim horse trained to carry itself in a precise way - it was a far cry from the shaggy, rough, mixed breed draft horses so common in Scotia. Scott cocked his head aside and took another collection of steps, strangely drawn to the silent figure.

“Can I help you?” he asked, his words dampened by the fog. The figure remained still as Scott approached. When he finally discerned the distinct outline of both horse and rider from the trees’ shadows, Scott’s feet froze in his tracks and his heart leaped in his chest. “*It can’t be...*”

Scott’s eyes trailed along the figure, the posture and implied manner of the man heart-sickeningly familiar, but it couldn’t be so - it was impossible. Scott locked his eyes on the area where the rider’s face should be. All he saw was bottomless blackness sheathed with a gray veil.

“What’s the matter, brother?” a soft voice sounded. “Seein’ a ghost?” The horse took an obedient pair of steps that moved the face from the darkness.

Scott’s head suddenly swam with contradicting emotions. He staggered back a step. His hands jerked from his pockets and arced in the effort to keep his balance. “Johnny?” he croaked through his constricted throat.

Johnny reined in his mount. From this side, Scott saw the intact body of his brother just as he chose to remember him. Several long seconds passed before the fantasy of what he wanted to see gave way to the reality of what stood just a few feet from him. It was Johnny - older, just like himself - but clearly still Johnny, the cocky grin exactly right.

“Yeah, it’s me. Surprised?”

“Ah,” Scott swallowed hard. “Surprised doesn’t begin to cover it,” he managed to choke. Shock was fading and replaced by nausea and the all too familiar defensive wall he hadn’t used in years. The impossible was standing right in front of his eyes and he had no idea what to think about it.

“Headin’ to town?” Johnny asked, eyes dancing in a way that made Scott believe his little brother was enjoying this.

Anger flared, dispelling Scott’s nausea. He stood straighter and planted his feet firmly on the trail. “Not now, apparently.”

The brothers regarded each other, everything else around them forgotten. Scott was alarmed at the force of the emotions that had exploded inside him at the sight of Johnny; he knew his anger was hard to hide. He dragged his eyes away from the stare and stepped around to the other side of the horse as it shifted its feet in the soft footing. The shape of the custom saddle and jacket on the far side did little to comfort him. “*Nothing has changed,*” he told himself.

“Can we talk?”

The gentleness of the request added to Scott’s unease; this was not the way it was supposed to be. This was not the future that he’d come to expect. This controlled, calm pulled-

together person before him was not supposed to exist. The long denied anger was still there within, and the sight of Johnny had brought it all to the surface once again. He opened his mouth to answer, but found his throat too dry for words. Suddenly, everything had changed, and Scott wondered if he could adapt.

Johnny grinned lopsidedly. "Don't think I've ever seen you speechless, Boston."

Scott pressed his lips together and ground his teeth, distinctly furious, but he didn't exactly know why. He should be happy. Why wasn't he? Scott forced his thoughts beyond the time he left, beyond the horrendous five years before that and back to a time when he hadn't felt anger. That was the Johnny he preferred to remember and the one he tried to see now. Doing that enabled him to speak with a little more control.

"You still manage to bring out the unexpected in me, I guess." He saw Johnny's grin waver, uncertainty crossing his features. It was an unexpected and foreign sight to see; Scott's heart softened slightly - was this yet another unknown Johnny? Did he want to get to know this incarnation? Scott smiled weakly, knowing the answer immediately. "It's good to see you. And yes, we can talk." He motioned with his arm in the direction of his house. "Let's get inside."

Johnny nodded and moved his hand slightly forward. The glossy buckskin stepped out obediently and began to follow the narrow path uphill. As horse and rider passed him, Scott saw the physical incomplete side of his brother and found he couldn't move right away. This was a definitely a new person - a pleasing mix of the old confidence and something new . . . peace? Did he dare hope?

With a bracing sigh, Scott fell in behind and the odd trio headed up to the remote house on the hillside. His thoughts inadvertently went back and remembered the last time he followed his little brother.

March 10, 1876 - Twenty years ago:

It had been less than an hour since Johnny left, but it was still long enough to raise Scott's ire. Was he dogged by trouble once again? It was a knack he seemed to have, attracting trouble. He hoped the knack would fade once he married Laurie. Scott shook his head as he started his second beer; Johnny settle down? Even the arrival of young Jason hadn't done that. Scott had to grin, though. Laurie said that Johnny's 'liveliness' is what had attracted her. She sure got what she wished for!

The sound of boots on the boardwalk and then the swoosh of the saloon's batwing doors caught Scott's attention. He wasn't surprised that the enthusiastic entrance came from his energetic sibling.

"Hey, Scott, you'll never guess what I've done for us!" Johnny fairly swaggered to his brother and grabbed his shoulder, giving it a hearty shake. "I got us a ride to Cross Creek that'll let us meet up with our ride home tonight!"

Scott raised a dubious eyebrow and lifted his beer to keep it from sloshing over the rim of the

mug. "In handcuffs?" he asked sourly.

Johnny snorted and settled his elbows on the edge of the bar next to his surly brother. "No, no handcuffs. You will need a rifle, though. They have one you can use."

The blond head tilted sideways questioningly and he looked at his brother with narrowed eyes. "They?"

"Yeah. Remember our conversation about earnin' an honest livin' with a gun? I got us a job doing just that. And, it takes us to Cross Creek. We leave in a half hour."

Scott put his half-empty beer down and stood up straight. Then he turned sideways to the bar, leaned on his elbow and looked skeptical. "Go on," he said.

Johnny leaned in and lowered his voice. "Seems there's a payroll and gold bullion shipment leaving here and they need a couple of guards to ride along with it to Cross Creek. There's guards waitin' at the train to take it from there."

"Aren't there guards with it now?"

"Evans got word that someone was gonna rob the stage so he loaded up a decoy stage with some of the guards, and the others - along with some deputies - are settin' up an ambush to get 'em. One guard stayed behind with the real shipment. Mr. Evans wants to sneak the stuff through another way while there's a distraction."

"So, where's the guard he kept behind?"

Johnny shifted a bit, obviously uncomfortable, and chewed his lip a second. "Uh, well, I sorta shot him."

Rolling his eyes as he slumped back on the bar, Scott shook his head. "They hired a gunfighter to guard their payroll?"

"The sheriff checked him out. He wasn't wanted and actually had some experience with this sorta thing, and he volunteered to stay behind an' go with the payroll. Mr. Evans was comfortable with him and now he's comfortable with us."

Scott snorted. "Yeah, especially after checking on you - us - already. The good Lancer name saved the day."

"Yeah, it sure has. It's all worked out." Johnny pulled on Scott's elbow, refusing to sink into his brother's dark mood. "Well, let's go, then!"

Scott sighed and picked up his valise. "Fine. They won't care about one more on the payroll, I suppose?"

"Um..." Johnny bit his lip again. "Not exactly."

Scott glared at his brother. "Don't tell me only you're getting paid."

"Uh... well, let's just say we're getting paid the same. Sorta."

"Sorta?"

Johnny started to fiddle with the dangling tails of his beaded bracelet and shifted his feet. "They said they'd reimburse us for the cost of the tickets we already bought for the stage we missed and then send us the other guy's pay if someone claims the body and pays for the burial." He cleared his throat nervously and hooked his thumbs on his gun belt. He looked expectantly at his older brother, eyes innocently wide.

Scott stared a moment and noted his brother's restless fingers as they drummed his upper thighs. "There's more, isn't there?" he asked directly, easily reading the body language.

Johnny hitched his shoulders back and then one hand quickly swiped across his upper lip. "Uh, yeah. The sheriff said he wouldn't fine me for shootin' in town limits."

The older man looked incredulously at the younger one for a moment, then slowly shook his head and started to the door. "I just want to get out of here."

Slinging his saddlebags over his shoulder, Johnny ducked his head and led the way outside. "Me too."

"You'll be dead before you're thirty."

The statement had jumped into Johnny's mind from some dark recess of his memory the moment he laid eyes on his older brother from the shelter of the fog and trees. Scott's expression at that time was the same as today's with the invitation to talk. John clearly recalled his own efforts to keep his face neutral at that other meeting so long ago and although Scott had tried to do the same then and now, Johnny still felt the same anger emanating from Scott's sense of betrayal.

Did Scott feel betrayed? As he pulled up his mount and slid to the ground, Johnny accepted this possibility and resolved to take it in stride. Now that he found his brother again, he was determined to keep him around.

These thoughts ran through his mind as he looped the reins through the hitching ring and retrieved his crutch from the saddle scabbard. After fitting it under his arm, he turned to find his brother watching his every move. Scott stood on the top stair of the porch, arms crossed on his abdomen and a look of muted surprise on his face.

"Don't look so shocked. I get around just fine," Johnny said flatly, not comfortable with being observed so closely.

"I see that," Scott replied. "But that never was a problem, was it?"

There it was, the warning shot across the bow; a jibe about Johnny's ability to escape the estancia in pursuit of the devils that plagued him those years following the accident. Johnny almost snapped a retort out of embarrassment. Instead, he ducked his head and took a moment to find his peace. His emotions were so close to the surface he couldn't risk total alienation by letting things get out of control now. When he raised his chin, he was the picture of peace. Johnny realized that Scott's soul had to have some significant bruising, too. How could it not? How much battering causes a brother to walk away from his family? Johnny was determined to find out and reminded himself of his reasons for being here.

Topping the steps, Johnny thanked his brother for holding the door open and crossed the threshold into a completely unfamiliar living room. For some reason, he expected to recognize the inside of Scott's house, that Scott would be recognizable from its trappings. This room reflected a total stranger and for the first time Johnny actually felt a small tendrill of fear as to what he may find today.

Scott entered right behind him and closed the door. Soft footfalls sounded on the stairs and a middle-aged woman, her dress a dark, floral pattern, descended into view.

"Scott, why are you . . ." her question stopped when her eyes found on Johnny. "Oh! We have company!"

When she reached the bottom of the stairs and turned into the room, Johnny gauged her to be an elegant woman by the way she carried herself. Trim and neat, her silver and brown pinned up in loose curls, she smiled pleasantly but Johnny could see a shadow of sadness in her eyes.

"This is Nancy, my wife," Scott started. "Nancy, this is . . ."

"John Lancer, isn't it? Scott has your picture upstairs." She glided to Johnny's side and placed her hand lightly on the small of his back. "Please, sit. I've heard all about you."

"*I bet you have,*" Johnny thought nervously. He smiled politely and moved deeper into the room. Nancy motioned for him to sit, and the small, soft sofa was wonderfully welcome. "Thank you."

"I'll get you some coffee. May I take your coats?"

Both brothers skinned their coats and Nancy collected them with a smile. "Get comfortable, Scott. Visit with your brother. I won't intrude."

"It's all right," they both replied nearly simultaneously, then looked at each other with mild exasperation.

Nancy laughed lightly. "I know you two have a lot to talk about. There is no place for me, I know. Go on," with a wave of her free hand, Nancy slipped from the room.

The brothers watched her go and then turned to each other again.

“Smart lady,” Johnny said after a moment.

“That’s why I married her,” Scott replied.

“How long have you been married?”

“Thirteen years,” Scott said without hesitation.

There was a period of silence before Johnny spoke quietly. “How did this happen, Scott? Thirteen years? I always thought we would keep track of each other. I always thought we’d be closer than this.”

“We were,” Scott said just as quietly. “Then things changed, that’s all.”

“My fault, I know,” Johnny acknowledged.

Scott looked at him, frowning. “Is that what you think?”

The question surprised Johnny and it took him a few moments to recover. “Of course,” he replied. “It’s all my fault.”

Scott looked perplexed at that statement. He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again and tilted his head in thought. Finally, he said, “That’s not entirely true, the way I see it.”

Johnny worked to keep his face neutral as his mind raced with that statement. Did Murdoch not tell him something? “Well, maybe you’d best tell me how you see it, then. I would like to know. That’s why I’m here - that, and some other things.”

Nancy interrupted when she returned with the coffee. She lifted two china cups from a shiny silver service then promptly left the room. Johnny was grateful for that as he placed his cup on a small side table next to the sofa. He hadn’t expected to feel this amount of tension so quickly. Scott dipped his head and studied the cup between his hands. Johnny leaned forward and forced Scott to meet his eyes.

“Murdoch died on the 10th.”

“Yes, I know. A stroke, I understand.”

Johnny nodded.

Scott was silent for several long seconds and then he let out a hard breath. “I couldn’t come, you know. He knew that. We had an understanding.”

“I know. You agreed to something in San Francisco, right?”

Scott nodded. “I explained why I left. He understood.”

“Then let’s let ‘er buck, brother. No sense in beatin’ around the bush because neither one of

us has the time so start at the beginning. Tell me why you left.”

Scott’s cerulean eyes sparked and he realized this was the day. Both dreading and praying for this moment for a long time, he eventually accepted the fact that he would never get the opportunity. Now, unexpectedly on this cool, spring day, the chance fell at his feet.

“Time,” he thought just as the memories of when everything changed leaped into his mind. “Time is supposed to heal all wounds but mine still fester.” Scott leaned back and considered where to start. “The reason I left comes from the day of the wreck. I’ve never talked about it with anyone and maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I needed to speak of it before now to get rid of the anger, but you were the only person that I needed to talk with. The problem was, you weren’t around anymore. The Johnny I knew left that day so let’s start on the day the new Johnny was born. Do you remember the wreck?”

Johnny shook his head, his lips pressed together. “Parts of it,” he said softly. “There are holes . . .”

Scott’s finger began to tap the coffee cup and he took a deep breath. “I remember everything with crystal clarity. I wish I didn’t.”

Then he told the tale as it was forever etched in his mind.

The banker had an outrider waiting along with the special coach and driver. One deputy stood on the far side of the coach, eyes constantly in motion. Scott's assignment was to sit up top with the shotgun and Johnny's was to sit inside the coach with the payload.

“Is the deputy going with us?” Scott asked as he settled in next to Thompson, the driver.

“No, just the outrider. His name’s Coulton. Dead shot with that gun ‘o his, too,” Thompson said as he gathered the reins. “The Deputy’s staying in town. The Sheriff and him are chasin’ the decoy coach and helping with the clean up.”

“One outrider? That’s all?”

“These horses are fast and we aren’t expecting any trouble - the decoy coach will be takin’ all that. We’ll be on a completely different road. I was gonna be up here by myself. Good to have ya anyway, Mr. Lancer.”

“So this has been done before? Sneaking around an ambush?”

Thompson nodded. “Yup, twice that I know of. The company takes any robbin’ threats seriously.”

“Ever been held up before?”

“Nope. And I plan on keepin’ it that way. I’ve got good horses here.”

Scott nodded and retrieved the rifle from under the seat feeling a little better about the whole thing. "You, um, work much with the guard that was supposed to be here?" he asked, deciding to see exactly where they stood. He inspected the rifle as Thompson replied.

"Marty? Twice before. Kind of an arrogant bastard, if you ask me. I won't miss him much." Thompson spat a stream of tobacco juice off to the side and wiped his mouth with a stained sleeve. "It true your brother's Johnny Madrid?"

"Lancer," Scott corrected. "He goes by Lancer now."

Thompson's head bobbed again. "Heard that. Marty was good but he don't hold a candle to Madrid. Saw your brother in action once down in Tecate. He's the best."

Irritated, Scott was a bit rougher with the rifle than he really needed to be as his looked it over. "So I've heard," he said lowly. Would his brother's other life ever be forgotten? "Are we leaving soon?"

"Yup. The gold's already on board. We're just waitin' for the strong box with the payroll and manifest. Ah, here it comes."

Scott turned and saw a small, portly, well-dressed man with a thin moustache walking next to a younger man dressed like a cowhand. Scott figured the portly man had to be Evans, the banker. The younger man looked strained because he carried an obviously heavy box made of wood and iron box. The coach rocked slightly as the box was loaded. The young man grunted. Evans reached up and handed Thompson a small ledger.

"Here you go, Mr. Thompson. Off with you now and be sure to wire me from Cross Creek."

Thompson stuffed the ledger inside his shirt pocket and resumed his grip on the reins. The horses began dancing in place. "Sure thing, Mr. Evans." He released the brake and called to the team. "Git up now, let's go!" The coach lurched forward and soon the small town of Barley Creek disappeared in a rising cloud of dust.

The horses were as fast as Thompson promised, and the man seemed to have some kind of mental connection with them. Scott noticed that his hands barely moved and the horses never hesitated at any forks in the road. The Bostonian sat back and relaxed a little, enjoying the silent communication between man and beasts. Thompson said the trip would be a bit shy of three hours. The open road leaving Barley Creek eventually sloped slightly upward as they began to skirt the foothills in a path unfamiliar to Scott.

Scott automatically scanned the area trying to ascertain if there were any obvious ambush areas. Seeing none, he relaxed a bit more. The road straightened out as the foothills fell away. Scott was pleased that the brush that surrounded them was low to the ground and would be difficult concealment for any robbers. He felt his irritation with the whole situation from earlier in the day fade; anxious to get home and tired of hotel rooms and contracts, Scott was now sorry he'd taken his annoyance out on his brother. Knowing how generous Johnny could

be, Scott knew he would be forgiven, but the guilt still made his shoulders slump. Johnny's life had finally taken an upturn when he found his family and he didn't deserve any more grief, especially from his own brother.

It was almost two hours into the trip and the horses were at a breath-catching trot. The outrider, Coulton, changed position often around the coach, sometimes taking lead, sometimes tight to their flank, and occasionally dropping back, depending on the surrounding terrain. Scott saw that he was always looking outward with this hand resting on the butt of his revolver.

After a bit, Thompson let out a short, shrill whistle and Coulton acknowledged it with one of his own.

"What's up?" Scott asked.

"I'm pickin' up the pace. We'll be passing through some hilly forest country for a bit."

Scott looked ahead and saw that the long curve of the road began a downward slope along the edge of a canyon. To their left, a tree-spattered rise began to grow and he recognized this section to be an excellent site for an ambush. He scanned the area with a more critical eye as they drew parallel to the canyon rim.

"Where's that road go?" Scott asked, pointing down to his right to an overgrown road in the valley below.

"Cross Creek, eventually, going west. There's a couple ranches at the east end. It's used more often around shipping time for drives to the railroad. Tends to flood in the winter. It's not very reliable."

A shout from Coulton followed by a gunshot crystallized Scott's senses instantly. He had the rifle up immediately and swayed a jerky moment as Thompson urged the four horses onward.

"Two of 'em!" Johnny's voice carried from below. "Flanking us behind!"

Through the whirl of dust following them, Scott made out Coulton's sorrel and beyond him, two men on horseback riding hard. Coulton twisted around in the saddle and raised his handgun - then flew from the saddle at the crack of a shot somewhere ahead of them. The riderless sorrel peeled off and galloped away.

Scott spun around and scanned the hill ahead but couldn't locate the hidden shooter. Instead, he twisted around and took a bead on the one of the immediate threats behind them riding a black and white pinto. He heard Johnny's gun crack from the coach. Thompson whistled and yelled at the team as he leaned forward to make himself a smaller target. Scott's skin tingled with the knowledge of how close they were to the canyon lip and that there was a concealed sniper somewhere ahead.

Then Thompson yelled something that took Scott's mind a second to process. He swung around and glanced ahead at the same time he heard a flurry of shots. Then, to his horror, one of the lead coach horses went down. There was a wild lurch, a shudder, and the remaining team staggered right and toward the cliff. Out of the corner of his eye, Scott saw the sniper gallop down from the trees ahead just as the coach tipped sideways with a loud crack and a deathly squeal.

Ambushed. Someone else knew the plans for this day.

Then the world became a chaotic, mad jumble. For a heart-stopping handful of seconds, Scott felt like he was floating. After that, his world slammed into darkness

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Scott paused to take a swallow of his now tepid coffee and cleared his throat nervously. "I was out for a while, I think."

Johnny saw the slight tremble of his brother's hands. He could tell Scott wasn't sure how to proceed. Johnny recalled only vague snatches of what Scott relayed, those bits of recall being his last lucid thoughts for a long, long time. To give his brother time to recoup, Johnny filled in the next part. It was the first time he ever spoke the memories aloud. As he spoke, his voice sounded distant to his ears.

"Like I said, I remember parts. I recall speakin' to the banker before we left, then the next thing I know, I hear someone talkin' real close to my ear . . ."

"I'm goin' to get help, son. I can't help ya myself. You hear me?" Thompson's voice was gentle but Johnny heard an edge of panic. Muzzily, Johnny wondered what kind of help the man meant.

It took some time to notice he couldn't move. Johnny puzzled over that dilemma, his thoughts disjointed, when a form splayed on the ground near him caught his waning attention. Scott, he realized. He jerked in response, hoping to free himself and get to his brother's side, but instant and shrieking pain turned his muddled world to night.

The next time he opened his eyes he saw the indistinct form of Thompson moving down on the valley floor below. Johnny could just see him over the tops of the brush around the wrecked coach. The man's distance confused him; wasn't he just whisperin' in my ear?

Johnny blearily watched Thompson trying to put his jumbled thoughts in order when the muted pop of gunfire abruptly focused his attention. He squinted and saw bright muzzle flash from Thompson's gun. Then the man dropped like a stone, twisting in the dirt. Within seconds, three horsemen galloped into view, a black and white pinto vividly clear among them, and came to a dusty stop next to the downed coach driver.

They executed Thompson in cold blood right there on the valley floor.

The suddenness of the action jarred Johnny into painful awareness. As savage as the act was,

it failed to freeze him with shock; instead, it fired adrenalin and awoke Johnny's unusually strong instinct for survival. Although the three riders were fuzzy and doubled in his sight, their actions were as clear as the fact that he and Scott would be their next order of business.

The three horsemen confirmed his prediction when they came together around Thompson, paused, and then moved as one in the direction of the wrecked coach. Through eyes squinted in blossoming pain he tried to ignore, Johnny saw the hunters zero in on their location high on the steep slope of the valley wall. There was little time left.

"Scott!" Johnny's voice sounded weak and breathy. He blinked at the still form an arm's length away on the ground among the rocks and brush. "Scott, wake up!" When there was no motion, Johnny knew it was up to him alone.

The burning sizzle of his left side had turned to frightening numbness. Johnny couldn't feel either arm or leg and didn't know if he had any control over them. The muted pain of his limbs made the pounding in his head and double vision his main obstacles to overcome. His stomach roiled as he made a vain attempt to clear his sight with a swipe of his right hand across his eyes where he only managed to smear sticky blood across his eyelashes and cheek. It was an effort to unstick his eyelashes so he could visually track the horsemen below. Then he realized he was staring, precious time wasted.

Johnny swore and tore his eyes from the approaching death troop, and commanded himself to take stock. He noted that he was in an odd position, nearly sitting with the body of the coach resting on his left limbs, just below his hip and high on his upper arm. His right leg twisted the other way just above the knee and lay at an unnatural angle. It throbbed mercilessly in unison with his head and heart. One explosive shrug of his left shoulder confirmed his helplessness and froze him with blinding pain. The wrecked coach pinned him fast. He wasn't going anywhere.

Casting his eyes outward when the pain ebbed he tried to make sense of the fuzzy, doubled images nearby. Johnny blinked once, hard, rewarded with a second of clarity. He systematically repeated the motion while checking the ground around him. Blink, search, blink, search...

Then he saw it - the shiny, worn grips to his beloved Colt tempting him from just beyond the reach of his free hand. It teasingly peeked out from under a purple stand of sage; their only means of defense was less than a foot away but it may have well been across an ocean.

Scott, however, could easily reach it. He lay in the dirt practically on top of it.

Gulping back rising bile, Johnny tried again. "Scott!" His head swam with the words. Vaguely, he was aware of the noises below telling him the outlaws were climbing upward. At this angle, they were out of sight and time was running short for the Lancer brothers. He knew the only reasons they were not already dead were the steepness of the valley wall and the concealment of the brush. They were sitting ducks unless he acted. A desperate idea germinated. Its repugnance resulted in a surge of energy, allowing one more push on the

coach to confirm its unyielding presence. One last, unanswered call to his brother closed the final option to his hasty plan. If he didn't act now, this would be their final stand and next in line for execution. This time, Johnny would not be alone. This time it felt worse. This time, there wasn't a Pinkerton agent to ride in and save him.

Johnny channeled his concentration to his right hand, which dropped to his right knee. The touch brought exquisite pain that caused his stomach to roll. Pushing that distraction, and every other black vision that overcame him, aside he forced his mind's eye to zero in on his goal and guide his hand.

With a gasp, he squeezed his eyes shut to stop the world from spinning. The entire of his being focused on the few square inches of fingertips that felt down his shattered leg and fumbled with the silver conchos until the top of his boot was exposed. The moment he brushed the knife's handle, he grit his teeth and forced his fingers to curl around it.

"Don't drop it, don't drop it," he chanted to himself, the pounding of his head keeping the same rhythm. Something wet tickled a trail from temple to chin. It burned to breath. Ever so slowly, he drew the knife from its sheath. The sound of the hunters in the brush grew louder, telling of their closeness.

Johnny focused his energy and managed a good grip on the smooth wooden handle of his knife. Partially dried blood on his hand made his grip tacky and secure. He brought the knife up in a shaky hold and forced his sticky lashes apart to regard it blearily, trying to discern which side was the cutting edge. As he did this, Johnny hoped that some other plan would come to him in those few seconds.

Regretfully, the stark reality was that one numb arm held him back from a fully loaded Colt - one knife versus six chances against three enemies. The arithmetic couldn't be any simpler.

"Dios, guía mi mano," he whispered hoarsely in a rare prayer. Laying the razor edge of the blade midway down his bicep to the point where the corner of the coach held his arm, he began to saw.

Johnny's voice was barely audible, his eyes faraway as he told his last memory of that fateful day. He absently rubbed the stub of his left arm. The clearness of detail always astounded him; spoken aloud, it seemed so surreal. "The time after that - the years - aren't as clear as that memory and that decision." Johnny paused, his eye wandering to the window where the town's steeple was just becoming visible in the distance from between the treetops. "I asked God to guide my hand that day. I've come to believe that he did, and that there's a reason I'm alive. It just took me awhile to figure it out."

With that admission, he turned to face his brother and waited with calm eyes.

Scott held the look, amazed, as his heart raced. Did Johnny not remember what happened next? Was that possible? How could that be?

Scott hadn't told the details of that day to anyone. True, he told a story, but it barely skimmed the emotional truth of the time. He always felt that Murdoch and Teresa suspected there was more. Although he never spoke of the specific events, they were in his mind constantly, replaying to the point where he thought he would go mad.

How could Johnny not remember the promise he'd demanded of Scott? How could he not remember yielding that promise like a razor-sharp sword for years after that day? How could his brother not remember something he, himself, could never forget? Maybe Johnny's divine intervention made him forget. Would forcing him to remember close the chasm between them or make it wider?

Reluctantly, Scott picked up the tale with a faint hope of finding some kind of redemption.

"I knew we were going over the canyon edge, but I don't remember hitting ground . . ."

At first, he wallowed in darkness. Then a deafening buzz ruled the moment. Pain rose next, waves of it, crashing over him from all quarters. The smell of earth assaulted his nose when he tried to breathe. Scott opened his mouth to take more air, and instead, felt grit and dust on his tongue. Coughing, he forced his eyes open against the blinding light that flared with each ragged gasp. He slammed his lids shut again, sorry for the sudden action that made his head spin.

The buzzing calmed to a dull roar that throbbed relentlessly, each crescendo in perfect rhythm with the pounding of his pulse. To roll his head aside was painful torture, to blink was a blinding chore. Scott could feel his lids dragging over his eyeballs and it was not pleasant. Still, he forced himself to do it in response to some urgency he could not quite define.

His body twitched in response to . . . something. It twitched again and Scott managed to pull his eyes open against the spears of pain. All he saw was dark fuzziness, velvet-like without definition. He winced at a sudden noise, which repeated desperately.

Desperately – something was wrong. The urgency he felt began to coalesce in a rush and through the debilitating pain he managed to push his mind to consciousness. When he worked out that his eyes were, in fact, open, Scott discovered that he was looking at a patch of ground framed by his hands. He lurched to one side, caught his balance, and realized he was on his hands and knees. He didn't know how he got in this position or where he was at this moment.

Through his puzzlement, Scott slowly became aware that the intermittent sudden noise he'd been hearing was a voice, the words not yet making sense. Carefully, Scott twisted his head to the sound, the roaring in his ears subsiding ever so slightly. The motion caused him to catch his balance. The jerk of movement made him hiss in pain and squeeze his eyes shut.

Someone shouting? Johnny? It was not quite his brother's voice. Still foggy, Scott forced his eyes open and squinted against the pain until the vision of what was before him burned into his brain.

The terror in Johnny's eyes was enough to scare Scott into awareness. That alone was a

foreign vision to assimilate, but when the realization of what Johnny was doing finally struck him, the instant horror nearly paralyzed him.

Johnny was awash in blood, his eyes wide and dilated to near blackness. He was hacking off his own arm.

Johnny's mouth moved frantically and the noise Scott had been hearing finally became words. It was not the words but the urgency of Johnny's expression that spurred Scott into motion and dispelled the nausea. He managed to push back and sit on his haunches and fought to keep his balance before even attempting to stand. At that moment, Johnny tore free and threw himself to the ground at Scott's knees. Scott found himself frozen by the sight of Johnny's mutilated shoulder. He was, mesmerized and unable to move. He never saw the fingers of his brother's remaining hand scratch the dirt under a bush laden with purple flowers.

Sudden explosions were blinding points of pain that seared Scott's vision and knocked him senseless. He didn't know how many there were because they blended into one nova of hurt that knocked him unconscious once again.

The second time he came around Scott found that he was flat on his back. His head still rang with ghosts of pain but then the alignment of memory crashed down. Scott sat up quickly, blinking wildly and flailing his arms to keep from keeling over. His head swam and searing pain nearly stole his voice. "Johnny!" he rasped at the same moment he saw the twisted form of his brother on the ground an arm's length away.

With awkwardness borne of pain and shock, he rolled to his hands and knees again.

"Johnny..."

Frantic hands reached for the still form, but his first touch did not comfort. Instead - and amazingly- Johnny became restless and mumbled incoherently. The amount of blood on Johnny's clothes was horrifying and the empty space on Johnny's left side was an abomination to Scott's eyes. His hand kept going back to the stump to affirm what his eyes saw but his brain refused to accept.

"Got away..."

The mumbled words Johnny uttered suddenly snapped clear in Scott's ears at the same moment the grotesque sprawl of his brother's body clicked. The coach still pinned Johnny against the massive boulder below his left hip, the leg hidden behind the wreckage. His torso slung sideways with his face and shoulders on the ground. Scott's stomach turned sickeningly when he saw the unnatural angle of Johnny's right leg. At the same time, he realized that Johnny's left arm was out of sight, held to the rocky wall by the coach body. Dark blood smeared on granite marked the exact spot. Lifeless fingers dangled just within view from below the coach frame.

“Scott . . . got away. . .” Johnny’s arm twitched in an effort to raise the Colt. His face rested sideways in the dirt.

“Don’t move, Johnny. We need help.”

“One more . . . out there.”

Uttered in a ghostly whisper, the words made Scott’s skin crawl. He glanced around, his hands pressed uselessly on the remains of his brother’s arm, the bleeding already staunched by crushed veins. Eventually, he noticed a body tangled in the brush and the scent of burnt gunpowder suddenly registered in his brain - there had been a firefight.

Johnny’s words sank in - someone was still out there.

Frighteningly, Johnny had finally grown still under Scott’s touch and the bleeding seemed stemmed. With shaking, crimson hands he felt for a pulse at Johnny’s neck. Surprised, he found one struggling under his fingertips. Then he lifted the Colt from Johnny’s lax fingers, ignoring the gritty dried blood and dirt that coated the usually pristine metal, and looked around.

His vision was still blurred and the light was painful. Squinting, Scott fought to control his near-panicked breathing so he could ascertain if they were still in danger. Slowly, he rose to shaky feet, doubtful his knees would hold him for long. The pressing need to get help was the only thing that kept him going.

He found a second body a few yards away, mostly hidden in the brush and still breathing. The gut shot was ugly. Black flies buzzed around something slick, white and grossly unidentifiable protruding from between the man’s bloody fingers as he vainly tried to hold in his guts. The man was still alive, staring at the sky with a surprised expression and grey, dead looking skin. Scott could hear his rattling breath when he got close. Glazed eyes crawled toward Scott and the dying man’s breathing quickened. His pale lips gaped as he attempted speech.

Scott’s stare shifted to the gun at the man’s side and he then noticed the ammo on the bloodstained gun belt. Dropping to his knees, he retrieved the weapon and stuck it in his own empty holster, keeping Johnny’s Colt in his grip. As Scott started to harvest the bullets, the man croaked, “Kill me.”

Gritting his jaws painfully, Scott’s once latent rage quickly chased away nausea. Ignoring the request, he reloaded Johnny’s gun with shaky hand and then loaded his pockets and stood, his knees feeling a bit more secure. The dying man’s eyes tracked him. Scott swallowed hard and met them straight on.

“You’re going to hell the slow way, mister,” he whispered before backing off and escaping into the brush. Bits of memories came in flashes - there had been three of them, two chasing the coach and one shooter of the lead coach horse. In addition, there could even be more out there

keeping Scott from getting help.

As his vision slipped between double and true, fuzzy and sharp, Scott found that making his way down the severe slope was extremely tricky. Various aches and injuries that previously dulled by adrenalin were now making themselves known and his balance was severely compromised by his throbbing skull. When the pounding in his head got to the point of interfering with his vision, he stopped to catch his breath. That's when he saw the horses - three of them shifting their feet uneasily at the end of their tied reins.

Scott crouched low. Three horses, two dead or dying men- that left one man still out there, just as Johnny said. How did his brother manage to take out two of them in his condition? A flush of shame heated his cheeks. "I wasn't much help," he thought bitterly. "And now it's up to me to save us both. I won't let my brother down again.

The horses calmed when Scott sat quietly. Listening through the dulled roar in his head and hearing nothing threatening, he decided to make a move. As he rose to a crouch, the horses' ears twitched and swiveled sideways, away from him. The animals turned to face a different distraction. Scott froze and tried to find the source of the horses' attention.

A man stumbled from the brush and fell flat on his face, causing the horses to dance sideways, one of them nickering nervously. After a moment, when the man didn't move, all of them settled down. Scott decided to press his slight advantage and stumbled the rest of the way down the slope and out of the brush with Johnny's gun leading the way. The horses accepted his presence calmly as he circled behind them, keeping the man covered with the Colt. The man began to push to his feet.

"Hold it right there." Scott hoped his voice carried the short distance. The humming in his head made it difficult to tell.

The man dropped to his side and then rolled to a sit, cradling his right arm across his lap with his left. The glare burning Scot's way showed no sign of weakness.

They were at an impasse. Although he tried to hide it, Scott felt his strength wavering and his vision was beginning to blur and narrow. His head pounded. The outlaw's eyes were like that of a hungry predator - black, beady and bloodthirsty - and patiently waiting.

"I don't have time for this," Scott rasped. "Get over to that tree." With his free hand, he shakily reached for a rope tied on the nearest horse's saddle. He damned his fingers as they fumbled, but managed to get it loose without dropping his eyes from the stranger.

The outlaw's thin face drew into a rictus grin, his yellow teeth bright against his dirty, sun-leathered skin. "You ain't getting' it either," the man stated flatly.

Scott ignored him. He was concentrating on not passing out and trying to figure out how to tie the man up while holding a gun.

“That other fella’s quite a shot. Prob’ly why th’ bank hired ‘em. Our man Marty was suppos’ to have th’ job; it was a perfect set up with the decoy drawin’ all the fire and Marty bein’ on our crew. I figger ‘ol Marty’s dead, otherwise he’d a been there instead a your partner.”

Scott’s jaws tightened at the thought of the man his brother shot in Barley Creek. The sheriff said the man’s name was Martin Coit - the driver had called him Marty. Had Johnny inadvertently set up the events leading to his own mutilation?

“No matter. When Rusty gits here you both will be dead. He’s much better with a gun than ol’ Marty ever was. An’ I’ll make sure it’s a painful, slow death fer ya both.” The injured man’s eyes burned like dying embers.

“Shut up,” Scott growled. His stomach lurched with the information. Neither he nor Johnny was up for a fight.

“So you may as well take a look at that gold now, ‘cos it’s the last time you’ll see it or your partner up yonder.”

Grimly, Scott came up with a plan. He stepped forward, the man’s eyes following him, and got close enough to drop the loop over the man’s head. Scott yanked it up tight as soon as it cleared the man’s jaws. The outlaw gagged. “I said, shut up,” Scott growled.

The man coughed and grabbed at his throat with his undamaged arm. The other lay limply in his lap. He laughed, the gravelly noise sounding grim. “Yup, better take a look now, boy, ‘cos it’s the end of the road for ya both.”

Anxiety zinged through Scott’s gut. He had to get Johnny out of here, away from the gold and the arrival of Rusty. Pulling hard on the rope until the captive choked into silence. Scott jammed the Colt under his belt and dragged his captive to a nearby oak. He chose a thick branch and threw the other end of the rope over it. Then he hauled down on the line, forcing the man to his feet, choking and sputtering, until he balanced on his toes with his back to the stout trunk of the ancient tree. If he stayed on his feet, he wouldn’t strangle himself.

“You’re gonna die, boy!” the man cackled, his lips drawn back tightly against the pain he tried to hide.

Scott tied off the rope and collected another from the horses all the while cursing his clumsiness. He tied the man to the tree, winding the rope around the trunk with little finesse. He just wanted the man to stay put. The man hissed as his injured arm compressed against his body.

“I’ll see you skinned and your insides pulled out for the vultures to pick at while you’re still alive!” He gurgled.

The sickening smile made Scott’s stomach lurch. The elder Lancer son turned and stumbled. His priority had to be to get his brother out of here. He caught his balance and started to

move away in search of something to gag his prisoner.

“An’ your friend,” the man rasped. “I’ll cut him to bits for the coyotes. Start with his fingers, then his hand, then his arm...”

Something snapped inside the mind of the normally stoic Easterner. Suddenly, Scott was furious knowing that this vermin had unknowingly accomplished what he threatened. Blinding anger surged and in a flash Scott pulled the Colt, turned, and shot before he was even aware of his actions.

The shot echoed into silence and the gunpowder stung Scott’s nostrils. His pains screamed. With a soft squeak, the rope took the weight of the dead man as he slumped against the ancient trunk. Blood from a perfectly round hole in his forehead leaked a trail between open, dull eyes and down the bridge of the dead man’s nose.

All Scott noticed was that the man wasn’t smiling anymore.

Scott found that somewhere during his recitation, he rose and began to pace. Now his stomach instantly knotted to the point where he had to snare a nearby chair to keep from going to his knees.

All of it had come back in a rush - the shock, despair and helplessness of the time along with the horrific realization that he had, in essence, murdered a man outside the confines of war. Combined with all the other ghosts of the past that haunted him, the reason for why he left Lancer all those years ago came crashing down in his mind. Scott’s knees wobbled and the chair teetered on two legs.

Although the memories were terrible, Scott knew they weren't the worst part of that life-changing event - there was another part he managed to put away in a dark box in his mind with a vow to lock it away forever. Another part, he knew, he had to expose to the light of day to explain his departure from Lancer.

Cold fear fingered out from his gut when Scott Lancer acknowledged that he would be examining that dreaded memory after denying it for more than two decades. When he raised his eyes to meet those of his brother’s he saw the steady, solid gaze of the Johnny he remembered long ago, before the accident and knew that it was time to open that dark box. Scott’s fingers flexed on the chair and he took a fortifying breath before continuing.

“After I shot that man - I found out later his name was Nelson - all I could think about was getting us both away from there before the man Nelson mentioned - Rusty - showed up. There was no way we could fight him and you needed help. We both did.”

Scott glanced to his brother after that statement surprised Johnny held his tongue. In fact, his brother seemed to be relaxed which encouraged Scott to continue.

“I didn’t think I had time to get you out. I could barely stand without falling and you were still pinned. I couldn’t take the chance that Rusty would be alone. The only thing I could do was shore up and wait and, hopefully, catch him in an ambush. I didn’t know if he would

come from the road above or the valley below.”

Reliving the event brought back the anxiety. Scott released the supporting chair and began a measured pace in front of his brother as his actions at the time replayed in his mind.

“I couldn’t move you yet. We could not be caught unprepared. I decided the best place to take a stand was right where we were and the only thing I could hope for was that he’d come soon or you’d . . .” Scott spared his brother a sideways glance. Johnny’s face was still a picture of calm. “Or you wouldn’t make it.” Scott ran a hand over one eye.

“I pulled a rifle from a saddle scabbard and took all the ammo I could find. I secured the horses because they were our only way out. I climbed to the top of the slope above us - I think I blacked out a few times along the way - and didn’t see anyone on the road above. Then I checked the valley below. I saw something on the road in the valley and later found it was the stage driver, Thompson. I couldn’t tell what it was from the hillside. My vision wasn’t very good.”

The memory of seeing the unidentifiable dark shadow of the body reminded him of how bad his injury had been. Scott unconsciously rubbed his forehead as he remembered the later diagnosis - a severe concussion and, looking back now, knew that he probably had a skull fracture, too. It still seemed a minor injury in light of it all. His vision alternated between blurry darkness and spiking brightness and the throbbing pain was relentless. Scott recalled vividly how difficult standing straight was, and that he questioned his ability to save them more than once. He cleared his throat and continued.

“Figuring I had a little time, I decided get you ready to go while you were still unconscious. I managed to push my way through the brush to see if I could find the harness shaft to pry the wreck off . . . you.”

He didn’t mention the fact that he could see the gut-shot robber as he worked. Scott paused, the vision of the fly-swarmed, dead man clear in his mind’s eye, not realizing that it was foreshadowing what was to come. His stomach fluttered and he swallowed hard.

“I . . . um . . . found the shaft, but it was broken. One end was stuck through one of the horses. . .” “*. . . and the horse’s tongue was purple and swollen and hung obscenely out of its mouth. . .*” Scott closed his eyes and hung his head until the vision faded. It was a common sight he saw in the war, too, and for some reason, a detail that stuck with him for years afterward. He spoke again with his eyes still closed. “I . . . I got the other part of the shaft back to the wreck and was able to move the coach enough to free your . . . you.” Scott paused and ran a trembling hand through his hair, squeezing his eyes tightly shut in an effort to try to ward off the memory that inevitably followed this particular line of memory. “*. . . and your arm. When it hit the ground with a dull thump, a black cloud of flies rose from it.*”

Scott swallowed hard again, took a breath, and raised his head. He forced his eyes open, focused on nothing in particular because his eyes were unseeing at this point. “I . . . I was surprised the bleeding had stopped and remember thinking I was grateful for small favors.” Again, a glance revealed a calm Johnny, his face neutral, his eyes squared with Scott’s. “I could tell the leg was bad. Both legs, actually. The right one was obviously broken, but the

left one . . .” he hesitated, but held his gaze as he continued. “The left one was crushed to the point of being almost severed. I managed to roll you onto your back and lined up your legs so they looked straight.” As he spoke, Scott held out his hands parallel to each other, demonstrating the position.

“Then I heard the horses whinny and knew I was out of time.” Scott dropped in his chair and leaned back, resting his right arm on the end table next to him. Long fingers toyed with the china cup half-full of cold coffee. Locking his eyes on the rocking surface of the liquid, Scott felt his resolve tighten; he would get through this.

“I saw a buckboard with a rider behind coming from the west on the road below. Two men, from what I could make out, and all I could do was hope there weren’t any more coming from the upper trail. I set up on a boulder next to you and waited until they were closer. My head . . .” Scott ran his hand over his eyes and felt how it trembled. “I couldn’t see too well so they had to get a lot closer than I really wanted before shooting. I’d only have a small window of opportunity.” Letting his arm drop, Scott leaned forward and rested both forearms on his knees. He clasped his hand in an effort to control the tremors he felt growing from deep inside. He wondered if he was going to be sick.

“I could feel the sun burning the back of my neck. The insect sounds seemed too loud. I remember it took a lot out of me to maintain focus. I distracted myself by trying to figure out which one I should take down first. If I shot the driver, the rider had a better chance of getting out of range more quickly. If I shot the rider first, the driver could easily bail out into the brush.” His fingertips started a drumming rhythm against each other. “I was just about to take out the driver, thinking I could take out the rider as he ran, when I saw the gun tied low on the rider’s thigh.” Scott looked up and met Johnny’s placid eyes. It was unnerving, considering how he himself felt his control slipping so badly. “He wore his gun like you did, Johnny. I had to take him first.”

Johnny’s solid calm remained but a wash of sadness filled his eyes. Scott wondered why.

“I took him clean, I found out later, but the kick and noise from the shot blinded me for a time.” That moment of pain was amazingly clear. Scott focused on his hands again. “It took a few moments before I could see again. When I could see again, the wagon was empty and the horse was slowing from his initial bolt. The driver was in the brush and headed our way. I guess the shot brought you around, too.”

With careful significance, the elder Lancer purposefully raised his head and caught Johnny’s gaze, holding it with a force he fought to control since that day - barely controlled fury. He wished his thoughts could be as clear enough that Johnny could read his mind because he’d sworn to himself long ago that he’d never speak out loud about the following event; it was the pivotal moment in time where their ultimate separation began.

Johnny’s eyes were still calm but there was a shine of growing tears. Was he just now realizing what this moment meant to Scott? Did he know all along, but simply needed confirmation?

Was it possible Johnny didn’t feel anything about the moment because . . .

“You don’t remember what happened next?” Scott was stunned.

“No,” Johnny replied, so softly that it sounded like a sigh. He ducked his head for a moment, and then raised his gaze and met Scott’s again, obviously reading the growing anger in those slate blue eyes. “I don’t remember much of anything after shooting those men, but I used to have this dream . . . or vision . . .” Johnny continued, fingering the trailing end of his beaded bracelet and dropping his eyes again. “This dream always starts after I shoot. I’m standing on the edge of a sheer cliff and the ocean is below. I can feel myself getting ready to jump. The water is turquoise and so calm . . .”

Scott blinked, unexpectedly pulled from his misery with the memory of another story about coastal Indians, Johnny and the beaded bracelet he wore. Scott had not seen that bracelet in years but knew what it meant and realized that Johnny had ignored its message in those trying times. He ignored every offer of redemption and was surprised to see the bracelet on his brother’s wrist again.

Johnny’s dream revelation did nothing to soothe Scott. In fact, it enraged him. He shot to his feet and glared at his brother. Johnny raised his head; if he was surprised by the action, he didn’t show it. He met Scott’s glare evenly.

“You wanted to die,” Scott said suddenly, the long suppressed anger cresting. His voice rose uncontrollably and he jabbed an accusing finger in Johnny’s direction. “More than that, you not only asked me to let you die, you asked me to kill you!” Johnny’s mouth tightened into a line at the tone, and Scott - eyes brimming with hot tears - exploded. “You made me promise, Johnny! You made me swear that I’d kill you!” Scott began to pace, unable to keep still. He angrily wiped his tears with the palm of his hand and found himself mentally back at the very place he sought to escape by coming to Scotia.

The enemy was coming. The last man was somewhere in the brush forewarned and coming. Scott frantically hoped his vision would clear. Adrenalin eased physical pain but his other senses became unnaturally sharp. He became aware of the rising heat, the smell of gunpowder and the earthy taste of dirt in his mouth.

A groan caught his attention. Johnny was coming around, probably dragged from unconsciousness by the closeness of the rifle shot as old instincts stirred awake. Reluctant to give up his post, Scott glanced over, blinking hard to steady his dubious sight. Johnny’s arm reached out, and then dropped to his hip. His fingers brushed his empty holster, the tremor there visible even to Scott.

Then Johnny reached for his legs, lightly tracing his right thigh first before slowly resting his palm on his left hip. Fingers traced the crushed flesh and bone. Johnny sank flat with a groan.

Scott tried to focus on the threat in front of them - the need for silence was paramount.

"Scott . . ." Johnny's voice was low and raspy, his breathing labored.

Scott scrambled to his brother’s side, shushing softly, hoping Johnny would settle down

again. Instead, he grew more restless. "You need to be quiet, Johnny." Scott leaned against the broken coach and used the cracked wheel to lever the rifle.

"Scott. Leave me. You have to leave me..."

"No! We're getting out of here together but you have to be quiet!"

"Let me go, Scott, you have to let me go." Much to Scott's chagrin, Johnny's voice grew stronger. "Go!"

"I won't leave you, do you hear me? There's another one out there..."

"Leave!"

"Johnny, you'll die if I leave you!"

"Let me die! Let me go, Scott! Just let me go..."

Scott's heart raced even faster. Was that rustling in the brush? He dropped his voice to a low growl and leaned down, his lips next to Johnny's ear while he kept his eyes on the brush. "I won't leave you. I can't leave you. Don't ask me to do that again, brother, do you understand me? DO YOU?"

"Then give me m' gun. I'll do it."

"No!" Scott sat back up and tried to concentrate on the rifle's sights.

Johnny lay quiet for a moment, his breathing harsh. Quietly, he said, "Then promise me you'll let me die if I get worse. Kill me, Scott, you have to promise. Put me down."

Scott spared him a glance and was shocked at how clear and hard Johnny's eyes were. Scott had no doubt his brother knew exactly what he was saying but Scott's heart made him believe that Johnny was simply delirious. He paused, stymied for a reply, but snapped back to the moment with a nearby noise.

"Promise me! Swear it, Scott!"

Scott didn't imagine the rustling this time - the enemy was close. He brought the rifle to his cheek. "I swear it, Johnny! I promise!" he whispered hotly, his attention split between the approaching danger and the bright, steely eyes of his brother. "Now be quiet!"

Scott's heartbeat thundered in his ears and his vision wavered. Another minute sound made him hunker down and center the rifle and his focus in one particular area. Then the silence became excruciating. Flies buzzed around Scott's ears but he ignored them. Time seemed to slow down. Something hot tickled down his temple. With each agonizing second, Scott found his mental focus sharpening as he let his instincts take over.

Then there was a snick of rock on rock far to one side. Scott twitched, almost falling for the ruse, and instead of turning to the sound as expected, he kept his aim straight. A partial second later his target rose from the brush, directly in his sights. Scott fired, his aim true. The intruder fired a wild shot and dropped, snapping brittle branches in his fall to the earth.

Scott melted as his body drained of energy and he slumped to the ground. With its dissipation, pounding pain returned to his temple; a few deep breaths seemed to temper it a bit. When he finally thought he could look around with out vomiting, Scott sighed and raised his head to look at Johnny. Those solid blue eyes, shiny with torturous pain, pinned him where he lay.

"You promised, brother," Johnny said in a whispery voice before allowing his lids to slide shut over glazed eyes.

Scott stared to confirm that Johnny's chest still rose and fell. Then he rolled aside and pushed himself to his feet for the next part of his task - getting his brother home. The fact that he lied to his brother to save them both did not sit easily on his mind, but it was necessary. It was for survival and his brother would realize that with time and distance. Everything would be all right.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Scott's voice was flat and weary. "I had to get us off that slope and to the road. I went down the hill and caught the wagon and horse. There was a blanket inside - I suppose it was there to cover the gold - so I used it to make a travois. I took it up the hill and loaded you on, thankful that you stayed unconscious. Before I started down again, I found your saddlebags and used one of your shirts to wrap up your left arm so I could take it with us." Scott blinked and his voice faded. "I remember being surprised at how heavy it was. I carried it across my lap the whole time I drove the wagon to Cross Creek."

The trip to Cross Creek was a blur in Scott's mind, trusting the horses pulling the wagon to find the way. They simply headed home once they realized the man with the reins would be of little guidance.

Scott remembered clinging to Johnny's arm. The solid heaviness of it and knowing it was safe in his lap was oddly comforting. It was the only thing over which he felt any modicum of control.

Relentlessly, his head reminded him of the tenuous hold he had on consciousness. To try to turn and look at Johnny was folly; any motion at all resulted in blinding pain. It was all he could do to keep in the wagon's seat. Over and over in his mind, Scott recalled the way he prepared his brother for the trip. He knew that Johnny - horribly quiet so far - was as safe as he could be.

The next thing he knew, someone pulled Scott from the wagon. He started to fight, then realized that his lap was empty and redoubled his resistance.

"Where is it?" he yelled. "Where's his arm?" Gentle voices and firm hands tried to calm him but he ignored them to try to fight off the blackness that enveloped him anyway.

When he woke, it was dark. Yellow lamp light stained a corner of the small room that smelled of oil and sweat. A blurry form moved, the telltale scrape of wood on the floor telling Scott that the shadowy form had risen from a chair.

"Shhh," someone said, a soft hand feeling his forehead. "The doctor said you shouldn't move."

"Where's Johnny?" A sense of urgency pushed him to try to sit up. His stomach rolled as

spears of pain pierced his brain.

“He’s still at the doc’s. He’s alive and being tended to, Mr. Lancer.”

Scott felt his throat constrict as he collapsed back into the pillows. “His arm! Where’s his arm?” he demanded through the pain as he caught the soft wrist near his cheek.

“Doc has that, too. Don’t worry, everyone is safe. You need to rest. We notified your family. We sent a telegram.”

“Murdoch? You wired Murdoch?”

“Yes. Murdoch Lancer. He’s on his way.”

Valiantly, Scott fought to keep his eyes from closing. “Maybe this is all a dream,” he thought as he felt his body sink back into oblivion.

Eventually, Scott made out Murdoch’s voice but the words did not make sense. He did feel a measure of relief fall over him at the sound. “Murdoch will know what to do,” he repeated to himself. Scott later found out it was nearly three days before he was fully conscious and aware. When Scott realized his father was sitting next to him, the first thing he noticed was how awful Murdoch looked.

Murdoch Lancer had aged decades. His skin was sallow, his cheeks pale. His eyes, normally sharp and piercing, were dull. His hair was an unkempt halo, gilded by lamplight. A small spark of animation flared when Murdoch noticed Scott’s awareness. The younger man’s heart froze in his chest at the frailness of his father and the bits of memory that flashed in his mind.

“Where’s Johnny?” he croaked, alarmed.

“He’s still at the doctor’s, Scott. It doesn’t look good.”

Scott felt his eyes begin to tear up. He threw the blanket back with determination. “I’ve got to see him.”

Murdoch didn’t try to stop him. The big man helped him dress and wrapped an arm around his older son’s waist for support as they walked across the street. Scott concentrated on where he would place each, next step. When they reached the doctor’s door, he was both alarmed and disgusted at how washed out he felt.

Murdoch pushed the door open and maneuvered Scott to the back of the house where a bedroom door stood ajar. When he stepped into the room, strong with the smell of antiseptic and herbs, Laurie quickly stood and dabbed her eyes. Her tentative smile did little to hide tear stained cheeks and the dark shadows that told of sleepless nights.

“Scott,” she said softly, her voice quavering. He noticed she didn’t move from the bedside

because her hand still clutched Johnny's.

Scott moved to the bed while Laurie's eyes followed his motion. He didn't have to touch Johnny to know the fever was high. Very high. But, he was alive.

"Doctor Fields says he's never regained consciousness. He's been so still." The normally vibrant woman was pale and trembling. "I'm so scared," she whispered, grasping her husband's hand with both of her own.

Murdoch maneuvered Scott into the chair across the sickbed from Laurie. Carefully balancing his head on the top of his neck, Scott leaned in and lightly brushed his brother's cheek with his fingertips. It was hot and dry, the cloth across Johnny's forehead quickly becoming the same. His hand then went to the Johnny's upper arm, where its abrupt end confirmed it all wasn't a dream.

"The doctor had to remove his leg. There wasn't anything there to save and he was afraid of gangrene." Murdoch's voice was matter-of-fact. Scott knew the reality of it hadn't fully sunk in. "The other leg was badly broken. It's splinted and should heal if..."

"I brought his arm back," Scott said out of nowhere, his eyes still locked on Johnny's long lashes. "I couldn't leave it behind. I just couldn't."

Laurie began to cry. Murdoch stood stiffly and moved to her, his hand absently rubbing circles on her back and his face fixed with dull shock.

"He was conscious after the wreck." Scott frowned, the memory fuzzy. "I... I think he called to me." Bits of memory flashed through his mind. "He kept us from getting killed. The robbers..."

"They found seven bodies," Murdoch choked. "Seven! The sheriff still hasn't figured out what happened." His father's voice gained strength as he spoke, his desire to know the "why" and "how" of it all fueling his anger. He stepped from behind Laurie and circled to Scott's side of the bed. "What happened, Scott?" he demanded, hands clenched. "What were you two doing there?"

Johnny moaned and weakly shifted in the bed. Scott moved his hand to Johnny's chest and pressed his palm flat, reassured by the heartbeat he felt. Johnny calmed.

"Mr. Lancer!" A no-nonsense feminine voice snapped from the doorway. A sturdy woman glared at Murdoch through the low light. "This isn't the time or place. The doctor said you would have to leave if you couldn't be quiet."

The big man glared at the smaller woman but she didn't back down. She strode into the room, snatched Murdoch's elbow and turned him to the door. Surprisingly to Scott, his father didn't resist and allowed himself to be led out of the room.

Scott turned back to his brother. Johnny's heart beat a little faster under his hand and his brother's breathing became uneven. When he lifted his right hand again to feel Johnny's forehead, he was shocked to see two glazed blue eyes boring into him. Immediately, Laurie relinquished her grip with a gasp and stood. "I'll get the doctor!" she said, quickly moving to the door.

Scott took Johnny's hand with his left, his grip desperately strong. Scott glanced down at his brother's arm. The numerous needle marks dotting its length explained the dull look to Johnny's eyes.

"Scott." Johnny's voice was barely a whisper between panting breaths. "Scott."

Leaning closer to Johnny's lips, He could feel alarming heat as it radiated from his brother's skin. "I'm here, brother," Scott said softly.

"Your promise. Don't forget."

Scott's gut churned. "Johnny, I..."

"You swore." Johnny's eyelids fluttered, and then slid closed again.

"Johnny, I can't keep it. I can't," Scott said in a pleading whisper. "You just need to get better, you hear me? Johnny?"

Johnny didn't answer. His eyes were closed to the world once again.

With the anger finally spent, Scott's voice had dropped to a bare whisper and he sank back in his chair with his elbows on his thighs and his head between his hands. He was unable to look at his brother. "I had no idea how much that lie would come back to haunt me. I was so angry with you for demanding I make a promise of which I had absolutely no intention of keeping. A promise to *kill* you like some wounded dog!"

Heavy silence, thick with unspoken thoughts, pressed between the brothers as they absorbed words that had never been uttered aloud. Unable to look each other in the eye, Scott and Johnny both studied the floor, hunched over in a nearly identical pose. Finally, Johnny's voice probed gently, "Is that why you left? Because you were mad at me?"

Scott sat up straight in a quick motion, his mouth open for an instant response. Shoulders still hunched over, Johnny tipped his head slightly aside and studied his brother with a sideways look. Scott felt his cheeks burn and knew the flush was obvious. He snapped his mouth shut in response to Johnny's curious look, a little surprised how his anger spiked at the question.

Finally, he sighed. "No," Scott said, refocusing on his fiddling fingers. "No. That's not it at all." Warily, he ran a hand through his hair, fleetingly wondering when it had gotten so sparse. He knew his mind wanted to wander to other mundane thoughts, but one more scene pushed into his mind, demanding regard. He stood and moved stiffly to a window,

where he rested his hands on the sill and stared outside as he tried to explain.

“I left because I very nearly honored that promise. Leaving was the only thing I could do to save us both.” Scott’s mouth quirked, then he spoke again. “I remember the day clearly. I woke up exhausted - which wasn’t unusual at the time - but I felt something was different. The day before had been especially difficult. You were on another rave that didn’t stop until you passed out on liquor that we finally supplied. You wore us down again. All we wanted was a little sleep.

“It wasn’t even dawn and I made a decision. You see, I’d given myself an ultimatum the night before when you were at your peak. This was the day I would finally make a decision.”

The long pause was fraught with anguish. Johnny’s fingertips released the beaded tail of his bracelet and he focused on his struggling brother. Scott dragged himself away from the window and forced his feet to move until he was standing directly in front of Johnny. Claspng his hands together in front of him, his head bowed just enough so he could look squarely at his little brother, Scott looked like a man waiting to get his due.

“You never forgot my promise, Johnny. For five years, you hounded, raged, begged or demanded that I let you die. Finally, I began to think seriously about it. Although you were out of your mind on some kind of - medication - you still picked up on my thoughts. I don’t know how - subtle body language, something in my eyes, I don’t know - it’s the only thing I can think of that triggered the change in your requests. Instead of just letting you die, you began asking me to kill you. This went on for nearly a year.

“You never did any of this in front of anyone else. No one else knew what you were doing and I never told them. I couldn’t. You still had this mental control, this ability to maneuver people that astounded me. It explained Madrid and I began to reason that if Madrid kept you alive all those years before you came home, there had to be some kind of truth in Madrid’s reasoning.

“I began to see that you were right. That Madrid was right. That maybe you were better off dead. The ultimatum I had given myself was to decide what to do: End your suffering or leave. I woke up with the decision made and I remember feeling so relieved. It was the best I’d felt in a long time. A long time.

“The house was dark that morning and I dressed without lighting a lamp . . .”

November 19, 1881 - Fifteen years ago

The floor was cold beneath his feet. The wool socks were scratchy as he pulled them on. Black pants followed, fresh from the drawer and smelling of soap. The material was stiff from drying in the sun and made a snapping noise as he pulled them on. Shaving with cold water was mechanical and difficult in the dark, but it didn’t matter because his mind was elsewhere. Next, a clean shirt neatly tucked in and the belt weaved through the loops and buckled. Boots last.

Scott ran his fingers through his hair as he opened his bedroom door and walked as quietly

as he could down the hall toward the stairs. He stopped at Johnny's old room. Carefully cracking the door, he saw the rumpled state of the bed in the weak natural light filtering through the curtain. Jason was tangled in the sheets in a familiar fashion. A crooked smile tipped Scott's mouth as he compared his nephew to his brother for a moment. Then he shut the door with a soft click. Scott continued on to the stairs. Circumventing the one squeaky stair mid-flight, he made it to the bottom in relative silence and headed to the front door.

Once there he stopped and instead of going outside, Scott lifted his gun belt from the hook next to the massive oak door and cinched it around his waist in a smooth motion. With a final hitch to settle the weight, he turned on his heel and headed to the downstairs hall. As he passed the great room, a rustling noise stopped him and he peered into the moonlight-splashed room.

His eyes adjusted to the silvered darkness and he easily picked out a form on the couch - Laurie, her blonde hair glowing from the moonlight coming through that huge picture window. She mumbled something in her sleep. Scott paused, wondering what she dreamed. Then, pursing his lips at the stupid thought, he admitted that he knew exactly what she was dreaming. It was what any of them dreamed anymore.

With a sad shake of his head, Scott moved on to what would always be Teresa's room in his mind. He paused at the door long enough to unlock it, then turned the knob after a moment. He pushed into the room and stepped into the blackness, and then he pulled the door closed behind him.

The heavy air of the room smelled of sweat, urine and alcohol. The useless breeze weakly rolled the heavy drape drooping in front of the open window. Scott knew the drape was there to block the sight of the bars mounted on the outside. They had long ago given up trying to keep glass in the window. When winter came, they simply shuttered the opening closed. Johnny didn't seem to care about being trapped like an animal in here; he made up for the time wasted when he was sober enough to get around.

Scott waited patiently for his senses to adjust to the conditions of the room. He stood with his thumbs hooked on his gun belt and feeling remarkably calm. The decision he came to must have been the right one to result in such peace. When he could clearly see the form sprawled across the bed, Scott pulled his gun from his holster and moved closer. His toe struck something hard. He looked down and made out the dark shadow of Johnny's crutch. Lifting his feet, he stepped over it and drew next to the bed.

Johnny was lying diagonally across the mattress, the sheets wadded into a lump at the foot of the bed. Stained long johns, unbuttoned to his waist and folded down to expose his torso, was all he wore. They were cut off at the knee on one leg and much higher on the other. His skin glistened with sweat even in the cool darkness and Scott wondered what proof the sweat was when he saw the shattered bottle on the floor under dangling fingers. Scott's eyes followed the arm, the old needle scars dark splotches against skin that didn't see the sun as much as it should. Shoulder blades and the line of Johnny's spine stood out, as did the parallel lines of

his ribs. The scars of his life before Lancer were still visible among the bones' shadows.

Scott's eyes rested on the especially thick collection of scars on the abrupt end of Johnny's left arm. Johnny's self-surgery lacked any skill. A curl of long, unkempt hair rested just above the area, dancing along his shoulder with each hot breath. Scott smiled slightly; Johnny's hair was never completely under control, but now, at beyond shoulder length, it was always a wild mess. Between that and the untrimmed beard, Johnny looked like some kind of untamed creature from the woods in a child's nightmare.

Slowly, Scott raised his gun and took his time aiming it at the specter that used to be his brother, calculating exactly where the cleanest shot would be at this angle. As he did so, the joyous calm of Scott's mind began to bubble.

Unbidden, flashes of the Johnny he'd known and loved began a parade across his mind. The smile that melted hearts, that silly blue flowered shirt that finally grew too thin to wear, Barranca galloping madly across one of the pastures with Johnny urging the animal even faster with a whoop, Johnny covered in yellow paint at Camp Juniper, Johnny heartily brawling in a bar, Johnny holding baby Jason, Johnny -happy, sad, angry. Johnny, when he had choices.

Scott caught his breath and his eyes burned as he focused on the one spot lined up in his gun sights. His hand shook. One pull of the trigger would put this creature out of his deep and volatile misery. One pull would ensure he never had choices again. As his brother, he had made that promise...

Suddenly, the robber Scott executed hanging from the tree came to mind and stayed there, the dark, round hole in his forehead trickling a line of bright crimson. That man certainly didn't have choices any more, either.

The gun's muzzle dipped a fraction as a surprising thought came to him - if he shot Johnny, it would put him in the same place as that robber. It would make them equals in some bizarre way.

The Johnny he remembered was better than that but would the Johnny he remembered ever come back? Scott knew then that it wasn't possible. The Johnny he knew was lost forever.

The gun dropped lower then hung uselessly by his side as his mind whirled with this new thought. The Johnny he knew was dead, never to return. Would a new Johnny, different from this untamed thing, ever rise up from all this like a fiery Phoenix? Again, he didn't think so, but he had to leave that choice to Johnny. Scott knew then that his own hope was long gone.

"Damn you," Scott muttered, his throat suddenly dry and tight. "Damn you for pushing that promise on me!"

He was so tired. They were all stuck in the living Hell called home. Right now, he could stop himself from executing his brother but he knew it was a real possibility that he would not

stop in the future. He simply could not see his wonderfully raucous little brother like this anymore, and even if Johnny's attitude changed, the missing limbs would always be a reminder of Scott's weakness. If he was just a little more tired, a little more muddled, Johnny would be dead this very second.

This time, he would not put Johnny out of his misery, but would there be a time when he could? When he mentally answered 'yes' to that question, Scott knew he had to leave. He couldn't live here anymore with the constant reminder of this moment or the moment he lied to his brother.

In their absence, the weight of those missing limbs was too much.

"If I wasn't there, I couldn't do it. It was simply easier to leave. I was weak. After some time away, I was ashamed I had ever thought that killing you was a good thing. I couldn't be around you anymore, Johnny. I came too close that morning. Too close. I left the next day. I had to, all because of that damned promise."

Scott's voice was raspy by the time he finished. Turning from his brother, he strode to the side boy and opened the middle door. Scott withdrew a bottle and a glass then poured amber liquid into the cut crystal. The crystal glass sang as the bottle's rim rattled the edge from the shaky hand that yielded it. He put the bottle down and threw back the shot, grimacing slightly as it burned its way down.

Scott was surprised to find his long simmering anger evaporated, just like that. Turning his head to Johnny, he hefted the bottle in an offering.

"No, thanks," Johnny said lowly. "I don't drink anymore."

Scott stood up straight, his eyebrows high in surprise. "Really?" he said. "I'm . . . surprised."

Johnny chuckled at his brother's reaction. That wide-eyed look always made him laugh. "Yup, me too. Me too. It ain't been easy, you know."

It was Scott's turn to chuckle, but it was a nervous kind. "I can imagine," he said softly. "I imagine it hasn't been easy for awhile."

"You're right about that but it's worth it. Scott, you can see I've changed. I'm a new man, a different man, and it's all right. You got your wish that day, you know."

"My wish?"

"Yeah. You wished Madrid would die, remember? Well, he did and I'm glad."

The lean, gray-streaked blond studied his little brother with a new eye. This whole conversation was like a dream - a dream he had convinced himself a long time ago would never come true. It was like venturing into a new land.

Johnny returned the appraising look with that puzzling quiet calm. It was like waiting for

the other shoe to drop. Nothing about the Johnny he knew was this serene for very long.

“You really don’t remember any of it?” Scott asked, still bewildered at this new incarnation before him. “You don’t remember pressing me so hard?”

“Like I said, I don’t remember a whole lot after the wreck. I . . . it . . . was many years before I remembered anything. I was in a dark place for a long, long time, Brother. I remember when you left, and when Laurie left.” Johnny sat back in the comfortable chair, settling into a corner. “I only recall bits and pieces up to that point, and more bits and pieces after, probably because of the morphine and other things. Before I knew it, ten years had passed. Then fifteen.” Johnny let out a short, shaky laugh. “Don’t think I was too good company in that time. There was a lot of anger.”

It was then Scott’s turn to let out a short, bitter laugh. “You weren’t company at all. You were an event. ‘A lot of anger’ doesn’t begin to cover it, Brother. It wasn’t just on your side, either.”

Johnny nodded in agreement. “I . . . ah . . . was thinkin’ too much about myself to notice. No excuse, just the way it was.”

Scott returned to studying his fingers still wrapped around the crystal glass. “I knew what was happening to you. I knew there was a problem with the morphine and laudanum. I tried to pull you out of that pit at first, but I got so tired. I tried to stay away, but the guilt of laying the work on everyone else became unbearable. I remember feeling jealous of Teresa, that she had a legitimate reason to leave when she married Daniel. I didn’t think it could get any worse. I kept telling myself it would get better. I kept telling Trish that, but she didn’t believe me.

Trish. There was a woman he hadn’t thought of in a while. He briefly wondered where she ended up.

“Then you took up alcohol along with the drugs.” Setting the glass on the side boy, Scott scrubbed his cheeks with his hands. Unable to look into Johnny’s eyes yet, he moved to the window again and stared out at the trees. “I had no idea you could be so mean. I wasn’t sure if that was you anymore. I began to believe that the Johnny Lancer I knew was the illusion and this was the real you down inside. I mean, that would partially explain Madrid.”

Johnny raised his brow at that revelation and ducked his head. Scott watched him curiously and then turned his back to the window and leaned against the sill. With arms crossed over his chest, he waited for Johnny to gather his thoughts. It was a while before he lifted his eyes to meet Scott’s.

Scott looked into the depths of his brother’s eyes for any sign of uncertainty and all he saw was peace. He felt a curious warmth begin to flow through his body and realized how cold he’d felt inside for so long. Even with Nancy there was a part of him he never allowed to show. “*So many secrets,*” he thought. He’d never told her any of this. She knew the basics about the family he left behind but never intruded into the reasons why he left. As a result, he knew he wasn’t as open as he could have been all these years. Scott’s love for her hit him hard at that moment; she deserved so much better, especially after William. Perhaps it was

his turn to change.

Unable to speak, Scott simply nodded. He returned to his chair, this time he felt as if a great weight lifted from his shoulders. The long silence wasn't awkward in the least; in fact, it was soothing and comfortable.

"Now what?" Scott finally asked.

"Come home, Scott," Johnny said softly. "We've wasted so much time and Lancer needs you. It was Murdoch's last wish, that you come home." Johnny's voice sounded husky. "Lancer is your birthright. You and Nancy can live in Laurie's and my house. Or in the hacienda, whichever you prefer. I - we - just want you back."

"We?" Scott questioned.

Johnny's cheeks flushed a little and he grinned crookedly. "Yeah," he said with a grin. There was that gleam in his eye that Scott realized he missed. "I've managed to talk Jason into stayin' and Laurie's packin' to come home as we speak. In fact, Jason's waitin' in town right now."

Scott beamed, then reached over and playfully slapped Johnny's thigh. "That's great! I'm so happy for you, Johnny. I'm not surprised about Laurie. She was always crazy about you." As quick as it came, the smile dropped away and he became serious. "I had no idea she'd leave. If I'd have known . . ." At a loss for words, he ended the statement with a weak shrug.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Boston. It had to happen. Everything had to happen the way it did for me to finally open my eyes, don't you see? It was fate."

"I thought you didn't believe in fate."

"I was wrong."

The pair regarded each other for a few moments.

"Can I have that in writing? That you were wrong?" Scott's eyes shone brightly.

"Hell, no. That's between you and me alone, Brother," Johnny parried, the word 'brother' tasting sweet on his tongue. He leaned back into the chair again. "Teresa kept in touch with Laurie and Jason. Those two women are the only reason Jason's talking to me now."

"Sounds like we've surrounded ourselves with remarkable women, haven't we?" Scott looked toward the front door. Scott cocked his head and turned serious. "I have to ask, why the change? Why now? How do I know this is real?"

Johnny stared at his fingers working the beads. Furrows deepened across his forehead in thought, what was on his mind obviously heavy. Finally, he released a long slow breath. "It's been a long road. I didn't just change yesterday - it's taken a while." He looked up and met Scott's questioning gaze. "I hit rock bottom, Scott. I got to a point where there were only two ways out - up, or the coward's way."

Scott smiled a little before speaking. "You were never a coward, Johnny. Not even at your worst."

A soft chuckle escaped the younger Lancer's mouth. "You didn't see me at my worst, believe it or not. I went to prison. Did you know that?"

Shock froze Scott's features, his lips parted in surprise. Wide eyed, he slowly shook his head. "No," he whispered. "No, I didn't know."

"I finally crossed a line and someone called me on it. Murdoch finally got eighteen months of rest. It's the place where I realized I had nowhere else to go. I had to change, and prison's a pretty good place to dry out." Johnny pushed to a stand and placed the worn crutch under his arm. "How 'bout I leave you to think it over? I know that I'm feelin' a bit drained right now myself."

"Stay here, both of you. Nancy would be thrilled and I'd love to see Jason again." Scott stood. "I think Julia will be more than a little enthralled with the idea of having a cousin." An honest grin lit his face, taking away a lot of years.

Johnny laughed from deep in his chest and it was a joyous noise. "Thanks, but not tonight. Jason's waiting and to tell ya the truth, I'm more tired than I care to admit. I think we'll settle at the hotel tonight at least. Tomorrow?"

Scott nodded, both saddened and relieved. He wanted to believe what was before him now, but years of doubt would be difficult to overcome. In addition, he didn't want to put Nancy and Julia through any more grief. Returning to Lancer was a decision that not to be made quickly or lightly. His doubts had to be washed away completely first and he knew that Johnny realized that, too.

"Then I'll be seein' ya tomorrow, Boston."

Johnny looked a bit weary to Scott's eyes. He, too, felt a bit wrung out and appreciated the time to withdraw and regroup. As they headed for the door, Scott noticed Johnny pause at the small, silver-framed photograph above the fireplace. The four members of his family, frozen in time, looked happy and oblivious to the upcoming tragedy. Scott was grateful that Johnny had not asked anything more about them. He wasn't sure he could tell him yet, either; neither he nor Nancy had spoken of the event since it happened a year ago. The scar was still too raw.

Johnny continued to the door where Nancy appeared, smiling and wishing him a good day, and after a brief caress of Scott's cheek, withdrew to the kitchen. Scott wondered as he escorted his long lost brother to the well-bred horse that patiently waited outside if Murdoch Lancer, wherever he was, watched their reunion. A warm feeling of well being came over him with that thought. He also wondered if Murdoch would recognize his grandson . . . Scott shook his head to clear away the distracting idea. He had enough emotional baggage to deal with already.

Scott watched Johnny untie the buckskin, throw the reins over the horse's head and then

duck under the proudly arched neck to get to the other side. There, he stowed the crutch and unbuckled the saddlebag, and pulled out an envelope. When Scott joined him on the far side of the horse, Johnny glanced his way and bounced the envelope in his hand. After a moment, he held it out and met Scott's questioning eyes. "Here," Johnny said softly. "Hold this while you think about coming home."

Frowning slightly, Scott took the envelope and looked inside. It was the contracts that he and Johnny had signed so long ago - the contracts that gave each of them a third of Lancer. Also in the envelope was the document he drafted when he left San Francisco for Scotia, leaving behind his part of Lancer. Murdoch and Johnny's signature lines were still blank.

"The contract's never changed, Scott." Johnny hopped up and found his stirrup, pulling himself into the saddle in a practiced motion. "Except now, half of it is yours. You've always been part of Lancer." He reined Sierra back and turned to go. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Scott could only nod as his newly found sibling rode away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Unmotivated to go to work, Scott restlessly prowled the lower floors of his home. Speechless, he'd watched as his brother had mounted the beautiful buckskin and melted into the lifting fog like a spirit on the wind. It was ethereal, like watching a ghost fade away. It was unreal and previously unimaginable.

Scott stopped at the bay window, a flash of memory of the great windows at Lancer passing through his mind. Instead of vast pastures, he saw stands of trees reaching for the sky as his father had reached for the mountains that surrounded him. "*We are not unlike in that way, Murdoch*", Scott thought, placing the flat of his palm on the cool glass. "*I only wish I could call William home like you called Johnny and me.*"

For a brief moment his eyes stung, but with practiced control Scott forbid the tears to fall. William - his son that never reached manhood, yet died as a man. Pride and sorrow swirled into a familiar miasma of emotion that threatened to overwhelm; Scott rubbed his eyes and took a breath. Just then, he heard soft footsteps that told him his wife had joined him.

Scott turned and followed his wife progress to him with sorrowful eyes. Nancy paused on the last step, her hands clasped together in front of her and her gaze connecting immediately with his thoughts. With a small, sad smile, her eyes, too, began to mist.

"You're thinking of William, aren't you?" It was more a statement than a question.

Caught, Scott dropped his chin and nodded once. "Yes," he said, his voice low and rough. "I've tried not to have regrets in my life but there's one I'll always carry - Murdoch not meeting our children."

Nancy reached his side and took Scott's elbow in a comforting embrace. She leaned her head on his shoulder and they both turned to face the greenery framed by the window sash. "Your grandfather, too?"

"No," Scott replied after a long thought. "He was lost to me a long time ago. I was alone when I met you."

"Alone by choice, my husband. I don't know the reasons and I've never pried, but I do get the feeling that you were the one who made the choice to walk away."

“Yes, I was. I was so sure of that decision, so convinced it was what I deserved.” After a moment, he added, “I’m not so sure anymore. I resigned myself to living my life out alone and then I met you. Then we had William and Julia . . .” Scott’s voice caught. He took a deep breath to settle his thoughts. “I miss my family, Nancy. William, Johnny, Murdoch; I do not think I can be truly happy here anymore. Too many reminders of Will, and now I’ve had a glimpse of a brother I thought was gone forever. It seems . . . hollow . . . here, now.” He scrubbed his face with his free hand. “That sounded terrible, didn’t it?”

Nancy breathed a short laugh and hugged his arm more tightly. “No, not so terrible; in fact, it’s very close to how I feel. I do understand.”

“But you were born here. This is your home.”

“Where you are is my home, my love. Since William’s been gone and the mill rebuilt, I’ve felt disconnected from this town. I’ve never been anywhere else, and that is such a shame. William wanted to see what was beyond the horizon – so does Julia. So if you want to go back home, we’ll gladly follow. Our home is wherever you are.”

Finally, he looked down on his wife of so many years, noticing that the grey hairs outnumbered the auburn. “*When did we get old?*” He thought. Nancy tipped her head back and found his eyes. “So you were listening in,” he chuckled, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “The idea of picking up stakes doesn’t scare you?”

The soft light from the window made the lines of Nancy’s face disappear, her smile and bright eyes bringing back the young woman he married. “Of course it does. But with you by my side, I’m safe. Scott, my side of the family is all gone. I am the only Foster left in Scotia. I belong with you and your dreams. The idea of starting fresh is very appealing. Julia will adjust and I’m sure will be more than a little curious about this mysterious family of yours.”

Laughing together, Scott gathered Nancy both arms and held her tight, again wondering how he was as lucky as to find her in all this world. “Then let’s talk about it.” He took her hand and led her to the divan, where they settled down side by side. Scott felt a dark weight lifting from his soul when he realized his heart had already returned to Lancer.



Johnny and Jason’s two days in Scotia overflowed with good feelings. Just as Scott predicted, Julia was enthralled with the idea of having a cousin. Scott could also tell that because Jason happened to be a very good-looking young man was merely icing on the cake.

With amused patience, Jason allowed her to drag him around the countryside, introducing him to her friends. In those unguarded moments when Scott could watch Jason without the boy’s knowledge, Scott could see his brother behind every shy smile and brash comment. Jason was most definitely Johnny’s son, both in looks and mind. In turn, it recaptured some feelings of better days.

Scott showed Johnny the mill, the small company town and parts of the surrounding forest. Johnny was as taken by the massive, ancient redwoods just as Scott was on his arrival here.

Somehow, they offered an inner peace with their silent presence. As the days passed, thought, Scott could tell that Johnny was ready to head south and Scott could not blame him. Laurie was waiting, and had been waiting for much too long.

It was now the morning of Jason and Johnny's departure. While Johnny and Scott lingered over breakfast in the café next to the solitary hotel, Julia and Jason saw to loading the horses on the train in Rio Dell. Scott was sure that Jason would be doing the loading while Julia happily directed. The girl was as adept as Teresa about issuing orders.

When Ellen, the waitress, topped off their coffee cups, Johnny gave her a soft "Thanks", and a smile that Scott remembered melted any woman's heart. The very married, middle-aged Ellen visibly flushed and quickly left them alone. Johnny's visit would be the talk of the town for weeks.

Scott chuckled. Johnny gave him an innocent expression in return. "What?" his little brother protested, eyes wide.

The past had come around full circle because this new Johnny was annoyingly and endearingly close to the brother Scott remembered. It was so right and good that it made it painful to recall when it was so wrong; and with that thought, old concerns fought to make themselves noticed.

"You probably don't remember the last time I saw you," Scott said. Before Johnny left, he had to make it clear where his hesitation was coming from. "I mean, before you came here."

Johnny shifted in his seat, a little wary, but still managed a weak grin. "Like I told ya, I don't remember a lot in that time frame," he said lowly, ducking his head. "I did read the letter you wrote to me when you left San Francisco."

"I wrote that in '82. In San Francisco - the last place I saw you."

Johnny's head popped up in obvious surprise. When Scott spoke it was with a certain detached manner, as if he was repeating a well known, but not necessarily well liked, story, devoid of any emotion nor colored by any judgment.

"About a year after I left Lancer, Murdoch hired the Pinks to find me. It wasn't that difficult; I came to San Francisco and simply stopped. The strain of the past years had taken more from me than I realized; I needed rest. Anyway, he wired me and practically begged me to meet with him." He glanced at the startling blue eyes across from him and smiled crookedly. "I'd never seen him beg before. It was . . . unsettling, to say the least."

Johnny nodded in agreement. "I've seen him beg twice. The first time . . ." He took a breath. "The first time fell on an addict's ear. The second time is what brought me here."

Several beats of silence passed before Scott nodded. Then he continued.

"I agreed to the meet without even thinking. He didn't tell me, though, that he was bringing you along." Scott raised a brow and met Johnny's stare. "I assumed he'd come alone. We

agreed to meet at a public place, a restaurant near his hotel. I was staying across the street and knew about what time he would be arriving. It sounds so silly, but I wanted to see him from a distance first. I wanted to see how he really looked and carried himself without him knowing I was watching.”

“You were sizing him up.”

Scott cracked a crooked grin and nodded shortly before turning his attention to the white, porcelain coffee cup. He spun it thoughtfully between his fingers. “Exactly. Anyway, I saw him step from the cab. His figure is - was - hard to miss.” Scott chuckled and shook his head. “I tell you, when I first saw him the feelings that came over me were so strong, so strong. Homesick. I was terribly homesick. Then he helped you down from the coach. That was the moment I was relieved to be across the street.”

Long fingers tightened around the mug. “I felt so betrayed. I know how that sounds and I am sorry, Johnny, but that’s what struck me first. I watched the two of you and could read the body language. You were still the center of things, still the main event, but I do remember being surprised and pleased that you were functioning. You were dressed, clean and holding a conversation - you looked so much better. Still, I was skeptical. It had only been a year. Remember, I watched you put up fronts many, many times before. What showed on the outside of Johnny Lancer wasn’t necessarily what was on the inside.”

“You knew me well,” Johnny agreed softly.

They exchanged a smile and Scott nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I did.”

He cleared his throat before continuing. “Murdoch took you inside the hotel. As soon as you were both out of sight, I felt relieved. I was relieved that I wouldn’t be surprised when he and I met, that he couldn’t blindside me with you. I felt prepared for the meeting. I also wondered when Murdoch would bring you into the picture. Part of me still wanted to see you, Johnny and that part of me could not be trusted. That was the part that made me leave in the first place.”

Johnny nodded in silent understanding. Scott took a moment to study Johnny’s face, now etched with lines of a life they had not shared. He continued. “So, when Murdoch and I met at the restaurant as planned I was confident we could work something out, that maybe there was some way I could go home . . .”

August 25, 1882 – Fourteen years ago

Scott chose this restaurant because the service was good and the food passable. He knew he wouldn’t taste the food anyway, and he wanted guaranteed privacy. They had a table in the back corner, but the place was small enough that he could escape quickly if needed. A small wave of shame swept over him as he thought of how horrible that would sound if uttered aloud. Even though he’d been separated from Boston for over a decade, the manners he’d learned there continued to dog him at the most inconvenient times.

He arrived first and settled in the chair that faced the door. The place was close to where he

rented a room so he was a regular here and the waiter brought him his drink without his having to ask. Scott stared at the door, sipping smoky Scotch without really tasting it and trying to keep his hands from shaking.

When Murdoch arrived, his figure filled the doorway as he tentatively stepped inside. Scott felt relief that his father was alone and then a comforting wave of familiarity overwhelmed him. He was thankful for the distance, albeit short, that Murdoch had to cross to sit with him. It gave him a little time to collect himself. By the time the big man was standing next to him, Scott felt in control again. Murdoch offered his hand, but Scott ignored it, stood, and embraced him. He could feel Murdoch's heart racing against his chest as his father's arms slowly encircled him. It was as if he was afraid that Scott was not real and would wisp away like smoke at any second.

"Scott," the older man whispered.

Scott held the hug until Murdoch's tremble lessened. Then he stepped back and waved at the waiter, calling for another Scotch. Murdoch sank into the chair across from him, their eyes finally meeting for the first time in a year.

"How are you, son?" Murdoch asked huskily.

"I'm getting along, sir. How are Teresa and Daniel?"

"They're fine. Teresa sends her love. What are you doing with yourself in San Francisco?"

"I'm supporting myself." Scott kept his reply purposely vague. "Getting to know the lay of the land."

They made it part way through the main course of tough steak and mealy potatoes when a ruckus at the door caught the attention of the patrons. Scott could see that the doorman, posted outside the establishment to keep the drunks and unsavories from entering, was holding back a stocky Chinaman. Scott was surprised and confused when his father seemed apprehensive about the insurgent's arrival. His eyes flicked nervously from the doorway to his hands, which fumbled the silverware.

Scott was more than surprised when the doorman called Murdoch to the entry. Murdoch responded, stepping just outside the door as the Chinaman animatedly spoke to him. Scott rose slowly; his gut clenched, and made his way slowly to the door. Suspicion turned to stomach-churning dread when Murdoch, after listening to the messenger's whispered ramblings, turned to Scott and asked for his help.

Murdoch didn't have to fill in any details. Scott knew that nothing had changed after all.

"He led us down the street to a - colorful - part of Chinatown." Scott looked pointedly at his sibling.

Johnny had the grace to look embarrassed. His forefinger nervously traced the check pattern of the tablecloth. "You hauled me out of the opium den," he said softly. "I didn't even know you were there."

"Yeah, I was," Scott muttered, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. Making a decision, he sat back and added, "You fought like a rabid dog. It brought back a lot of bad memories and clarified why I left."

Johnny chuckled and shook his head in resignation. "Can't say that I blame ya, Boston. Not a pretty sight."

Scott swallowed. "No," he agreed. "It wasn't. Definitely not a scene I care to repeat."

The following silence was awkward, but they both knew Scott had to say what he did to make it clear that there was still ingrained doubt, that there had to be more thought behind this decision. Rebuilding trust could not be rushed.

Finally, Johnny spoke. "Well," he breathed. "I guess it's time to say adios for now, Brother." He worked his way to a stand and tucked in his crutch as Scott drained his coffee cup. "Oh, I got somethin' for ya." Johnny fished around in his pant's pocket and produced a key. He held it up, causing Scott to raise an eyebrow then tossed it in his direction. Scott caught it one handed and studied it, frowning.

"What's this?" Scott asked, trailing his brother as he headed toward the door.

"A key. Where'd you graduate from?" Johnny chided playfully.

"Very funny. I see that what you think as your sense of humor is back."

Scott followed Johnny down the boardwalk, stopping at the coach that would take Johnny and Jason to the train station. Jason was just straightening from placing a small crate on the walkway. Julia, giggling happily, hopped down from the coach with enthusiastic eleven-year-old girl style. It had only taken half of a day for her to move from shy interest to be her cousin's shadow. She stayed with him for the rest of his visit.

"Hi, Jason. All ready to go?" Scott shook his nephew's hand and then took his daughter into an affectionate hug. He knew she would miss her newly found relative.

"Yup. The horses are all loaded on the train. And we best get movin', Pa, it's leavin' on time." Jason reached over and tweaked Julia's nose. "See ya soon, cousin."

Pa. Scott smirked at Johnny, who smiled right back. At the same time, he felt a tug at his heart with the reminder of William. Scott knew he would have to tell his brother about William someday - when he could. Thoughts of his son always made it hard to breathe and Scott had to look away and clench his jaw to gain control.

He felt Johnny studying him and swallowed hard before clearing his throat and turning to say his goodbyes. Before he could speak, Johnny nodded toward the locked crate on the

boardwalk. Scott glanced at the box.

“The key goes with that,” Johnny said softly as he turned to the coach. Jason stepped forward and helped him in, then climbed in after and shut the door. Johnny leaned out of the small window and pointed at the box. “I’m hopin’ it’ll help you with your decision.” Johnny winked and gave a short wave and Scott suddenly felt uncomfortable about the “gift”.

As the driver called to the team of horses, Scott found his voice and moved in closer. “It was good to see you, Johnny,” he said hoarsely and from the heart. The brothers’ held a warm gaze. “I’m glad you came.”

“I just hope I did some good,” Johnny replied with a mischievous sparkle in his eye that Scott had missed. As the coach lurched forward, Scott raised a hand in farewell and Johnny called, “Vaya con Dios, hermano!”

Scott felt a tug of loss as Julia waved madly. When the coach was out of sight Julia pulled insistently on her father’s arm until Scott turned his attention to her and bent over. She wrapped her arms around his neck gave her father a quick kiss on the cheek before hugging him.

“Doesn’t ‘vaya con Dios’ mean going some place with God?” Julia asked.

“It means ‘go with God’. It’s usually said to travelers.”

Julia frowned in thought. “Are we going somewhere?”

Scott grinned and wondered the same thing. “If we are, you’ll be the first to know, sweetie.”

The girl’s expression was unchanged. Scott could see the wheels turning in her mind and wondered if his answer would be enough. Suddenly, she nodded in acceptance and smiled brightly, “I like having relatives,” she said happily. Then she released his neck and flounced away. “I’m going to Bea’s,” Julia called over her shoulder. “Mama’s going to meet me there and help Mrs. Swensen with her new dress.”

Inwardly, Scott let out a relieved sigh, glad that no more explanation was required. “Okay, honey. See you later.”

As Julia skipped away, Scott fingered the key still in hand and eyed the trunk with curious trepidation, wondering what Johnny meant about it helping him to make a life-changing decision. What kind of power could such small box contain?

Scott borrowed a wagon from Carl, who owned the small general store, and lifted the small trunk to the bed of the wagon where he studied it for several long moments. Hesitantly, he fingered the lock while trying to ignore his growing curiosity. Finally giving in to it, Scott fitted the key and twisted; the lock clicked open. Scott pulled it free, flipped open the latch, raised the lid, and was then immediately aback by the stacks of letters within. He lifted out one of the bundles and saw that the letters were bound together by year and, as far as he could tell, all unopened. One bound stack was from his grandfather, but the vast majority

carried his father's script.

Cold sweat broke out under his collar. It was a voice from the grave calling to him and he was reluctant to dabble any further. Carefully, he replaced the stack with a trembling hand and gently closed the lid. His heart pounded. Scott knew he had to read them. He was obligated to do so to honor his father - a little late, perhaps, but necessary just the same. This was something he had to do by himself for now, at least, as he was afraid of how it would affect him. Slamming the tailgate shut, Scott made sure it was secure and moved to the front of the wagon. With pointed determination, he climbed to the driver's seat and gathered the reins. One flick set the sturdy horse in motion toward his house.

As he wended his way along the narrow path, Scott felt the presence of his father behind him in the bed of the wagon. He urged the horse to go faster but he couldn't outpace the feeling.

Once at the house, Scott pulled up the horse and toted the trunk to the study under the curious eye of his wife. Nancy must have sensed his ambivalence concerning the box, as she held her tongue and simply helped to clear a path through the house. Once settled, she quietly closed the door and left him alone with the written history.

"Thanks," he uttered distractedly after the door snicked shut. His attention turned to the box. It sat on the desk and enticed him to open it, and he did. Carefully at first, he lifted the first packets and held them tentatively. "Where do I start?" he mused softly. He noticed his palms were damp with nervous sweat.

After setting aside the stack from Harlan Garrett and his lawyers, Scott decided to arrange the rest on the desk in order, by year. He noticed that early on, the stacks were tall but as the years passed, the stacks shrunk. By the tenth stack, Scott realized the last six years contained twelve missives for each year - one envelope a month. There were only two envelopes for this year; Scott clutched them with a trembling hand and felt his throat constrict. These contained Murdoch's last words to him.

Clearing his throat to regain composure, Scott took little time to decide where to start. "I guess at the beginning," he decided. With that, he picked up a tall stack of envelopes bound with string and gravitated toward the closest wing chair as he undid the knot. Settling into the cushion, he fanned the letters out in his lap and picked out the one with the earliest date, which was at the bottom of the pile.

The letter was date stamped September 13, 1882, mere weeks after Scott had cut contact with Lancer, he realized.

August 30, 1882 - Fourteen years ago

"I'll take a ticket heading north," Scott told the stationmaster at the ticket window. San Francisco bustled around him in the morning light. To his jaundiced eye, the city seemed dirty and crowded and the sooner he left the sooner he would feel clean again. The stationmaster's silence caught his attention. Scott looked up and read the puzzled expression of the elder man.

“Usually people have a destination,” the uniformed man said.

“I don’t care, really. How far does this train go?”

“Rio Dell,” the man replied with a raised brow.

“Then Rio Dell it is.” Scott peeled off some bills. “When does it leave?”

“Noon.”

Scott nodded and traded money for a ticket. When he stepped away from the window, he slipped the ticket into his billfold. The folded letters in his pocket made it difficult to replace the wallet, so he grabbed them none too delicately and pulled the envelopes out as a wad in his fist. Scott looked at the letters balled in his hand as he put his wallet away. Murdoch had been sending about one a week trying to keep his son involved in the ranch and the family. Each one caused Scott more pain than he could ever have imagined; it was emotional torture.

He arrived in San Francisco with no clear plan hoping he would eventually get a grip on how to handle himself. But then the memory of that morning when he held his own brother in the sights of his gun would play out again - every smell, every feeling, every part of the vision as clear as when it actually happened and Scott knew he could never go back. He had to move on to save his family.

With the decision finally made, he looked around and was able to look beyond the stagnant part of what surrounded him. There was hope after all. He dropped the letters in the first trashcan he came across and headed toward the Pinkerton office. There was just enough time to end this life and start a new one somewhere north of San Francisco.

The first letter he opened brought back memories of those he had thrown away that day. It still carried the news of the ranch, the deals and contracts made, the doings of Teresa and Jelly. There was very little mention of Johnny and nothing of Laurie and Jason. Now that he knew Johnny’s wife and son had also left, Scott read between the lines and felt Murdoch’s grief. The man knew he was losing his family one by one but stoically went on. What Scott viewed as stubborn single-mindedness back then was now understood - Lancer was his father’s coping mechanism. Without it, Murdoch could never have been able to survive the trials thrown at him since coming to the West.

Scott smiled, glad that his father had something to hang on to. In a way, he realized he did the same thing by coming to Scotia. He was more like his father than he thought and the idea warmed him.

He skimmed the rest of the letters for that year and started on the next. Scott paused at certain parts, like when Murdoch described his reasoning for Laurie leaving, Teresa’s visits and how much Eliese looked like Teresa, Paul’s growth and later in the year, Jason’s visit just before Christmas. The following year was much the same, but more time passed between letters. Murdoch still spoke of contracts signed and fulfilled, how the weather was treating them and which various friends sent their greetings. As he read, Scott superimposed his life’s

events into the picture Murdoch painted.

It was that summer when Scott met Nancy. From when he left Lancer to that point, Scott realized he had been floundering with no direction. Familiar with that feeling, he recalled the same reasoning when he left Boston for Lancer - a desire to start over to prevent self-destruction. The war had affected him to the core and his move west had cleansed him and given him purpose. The same could be said of this journey north; when he met Nancy, he found his direction once again.

What meaning did that give his past lives? How could he possibly ignore them?

The letter in his hand made a crackling noise and Scott realized his grip on the paper had tightened with his thoughts. With careful attention, he released the paper, smoothed it out on the table and refolded it along the crease lines. As he tucked the letter away, he noticed that the next stacks were shorter.

Murdoch's missives dropped to once a month. Scott could read the tone change as his father adjusted to aging and turning over more and more of the ranch duties to his Segundo. He spoke of Johnny occasionally, but only in the barest of terms; clearly, his brother had not changed. Julia and William were born around that time and Scott again superimposed his life with Murdoch's grandchildren over the dialogue in the letters. He felt his throat tighten as the one big regret in his life rose up like a redwood's shadow - Murdoch never meeting his grandchildren.

Scott pushed on, able to ignore the burning of his eyes until his gaze brushed over the unusually brief letter of July 1886. Murdoch reported Jelly's accident and broken hip with his usual detail, but the following pneumonia and death, followed closely by the death of Sam Jenkins, overwhelmed Scott's defenses. Even through his own tears, Scott could see the quiver in Murdoch's usual bold signature. It was as if his last defenses had finally crumbled.

In the next letter, dated late September, Scott could see a marked difference in his father's written stroke. What was once as firm and strong as the man itself now held a trace of weakness. A quiver in his hand took hold and from this point onward, it became gradually more pronounced. By the time Murdoch reported Johnny's prison sentence, his father's handwriting was nearly an illegible scrawl.

Prison. The word jumped out from the sheaf and demanded Scott's attention. He tried to skim over it but could not and instead, backtracked through the letters with a more attentive eye. Murdoch didn't give much detail, but what he wrote was enough. Johnny, in his now usual drunken state, had offensively handled the wrong woman by pulling the Mayor of Stockton's daughter into his lap like a barroom harlot while uttering grossly inappropriate suggestions during a Cattle Grower's Association dinner.

Scott closed his eyes and ran the words through his head, clearly seeing the offense as it occurred. In the letter, Murdoch wrote of his hesitance about Johnny attending the dinner but the hope he always held toward his son's recovery was now gone, snuffed out in one night by Johnny's actions. The public humiliation during the event and through the trial drove Murdoch back to Lancer where he served a self-imposed sentence that paralleled his

son's.

Nausea rolled through Scott's gut. Except for Teresa's visits, Murdoch was alone in the hacienda. The letters during that period were short, nearly illegible and loaded with names he did not recognize as outsiders were hired on for the daily tasks. Scott imagined the big man locked away in the house and marking time. He visited Johnny once a month and wrote Scott often, the connection with both his sons now reduced to unanswered letters.

He assumed Johnny didn't reply. The idea twisted in his mind for a few minutes as he leaned back and again assessed the stacks of letters piled before him like so many pieces of Murdoch's soul. They were a physical confirmation of his father's stubborn persistence, which was the same trait that made him a success in the Valley. It was how he got what he wanted. Scott ducked his head when he acknowledged that his father wanted him back every second of every day.

"I'm sorry, Murdoch," Scott muttered, fingering the envelope in his hand. "I should have explained myself better." He raised his eyes and evaluated the stacks again. "Though I don't think it would have made a difference."

With a bit of trepidation, Scott gingerly picked out an envelope pinned near the end of Johnny's prison term and broke the seal. As he unfolded the paper, he noticed the marked changes in Murdoch's voice. The words that announced Johnny's return to Lancer seemed like a whisper, the uncertainty very clear throughout.

Murdoch Lancer was afraid.

Scott's stomach lurched. He rose quickly to his feet and unopened letters fluttered to the floor. Clutching his stomach with one hand and the frightening letter with the other, Scott stumbled to the window and threw it open, gulping great draughts of air. Murdoch afraid. The very thought sickened him.

Scott had seen his father scared before but not like this. Murdoch had been afraid when they nearly lost the ranch to drought, floods, poisoned salt licks, land raiders - all sorts of calamity came to mind, but through it all Murdoch Lancer buckled down and did what he had to do. He usually had a plan, but not always; those times he worked with the hand dealt him. His father's decisions came from knowledge of not only the land, but of the men around him.

This time was different. Murdoch finally accepted that Johnny was one force in his life completely beyond his control. Johnny thrived on unpredictability even if it was a physical or emotional detriment. In the days before Johnny's return Murdoch scratched off a flurry of thoughts and fears. The sentences were piecemeal and scattered, but Scott saw that his father had finally admitted to his own physical weaknesses and mortality. If Johnny was unchanged, Murdoch feared that his own son would be the death of him.

"A man's life should be filled with joyous reunions," Murdoch wrote. "And I feel nothing but dread as if a particular darkness is rolling up the valley with its sights on my soul."

Yes, that is what sorrow looks like, Scott acknowledged with a sigh. He let his gaze skim the

tree-filled horizon and closed his eyes to settle his stomach. Sense memory was very long, he discovered. With his eyes closed, his nose could pick out single elements on the wind and each element would raise a memory if he allowed it - dusty cattle drives, fresh cut redwoods of the mill, the sweet jasmine aura of Julia, Teresa's lavender sheets, Will's smoke infused hair . . .

Scott's eyes snapped open, hot with sudden tears as he remembered burying his face in William's hair when he carried his body from the burning mill. His boy's soft, blond tresses were transformed to a burned-roughened shag that scraped against Scott's cheek. Even now, a year later, the barest scent of smoke carried on the early morning fog just like Murdoch's "particular darkness." Scott wondered if it would ever fade away.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Scott returned to the missives. The only thing that allowed him to pick up the letters again was the fact that they were there; Murdoch obviously survived his fear and sorrow of the time - the presence of the letters confirmed that. Scott fingered the stacks with blossoming curiosity.

"How did he do it?" He thought. *"How did Murdoch find the secret to surviving the loss of your sons?"*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Scott refolded the letter in this hand and tucked it away before picking up the next stack and sitting down. The string that bound the next collection together loosened easily and fell away, and Scott allowed the envelopes to tumble to his lap. Which one held the secret? His natural orderliness took over and he started with the first one of the year. Quick mental calculations indicated that the letter was written about two months after Johnny's return from prison. Scott removed the sheet and flipped it open, stunned at the change.

"Dear Scott," the letter began, the script again in Murdoch's large style. It was still shaky, but the cowering, diminutive scale was gone. "I wish you were here with me now, sitting where I am sitting and seeing the miracle below in the dusty corral. And it is truly a miracle."

The words took Scott there in his mind's eye. He could see the breaking corral from a position at Murdoch's bedroom window. That time of year, the Bougainvillea vines burst with red blossoms and framed every window on that side of the hacienda. The rolling hills golden with wild oats and dotted green with ancient, umbrella-like oaks. Calves bellowed for their mothers, faint in the distant pastures.

In the corral below, however, something was happening. Scott continued to read.

"The horse isn't a colt. Rafe has been working with him for years now. Rafael is quite a Segundo, just like his father, and he saw something in this animal since the day it was foaled. Scott, we have both seen well-trained horses, but this one is a cut above. Genetics has a part, I am sure, but I also believe Rafe was guided by another's hand when he started this animal.

"The horse's name is Sierra and right now, at this moment, Johnny is riding him."

Scott paused, the picture so clear he felt he could touch it. If he had not seen his brother and this remarkable horse with his own eyes the past few days, the vision would not be possible. He would not have believed it and thought that Murdoch had sunk into his own contrived world made up of left over wishes.

"I never thought I'd live to see this day, Scott, truly I didn't."

The pages went on to describe the trials of Johnny Lancer learning to ride all over again, his

little brother attacking the project with his own brand of vigor. The rest of the year's correspondence painted a picture of the reincarnation of Johnny into yet another form. As with any birth, there was pain, agony and challenge as this new Johnny emerged. There were incidents of backsliding and occasional resistance but he - they - persevered.

Scott recalled Johnny's quip about prison saving his life and Scott now understood what he meant. The only shame of it all was the time lost, but Johnny had shown him repeatedly that lost hours weren't something to grieve. He finally listened to himself in that regard. Life was hard, and he stopped crying and gotten on with it in true Johnny style.

The next year's narrations revealed the slow rebuilding of the Lancer name. Johnny thrived under Murdoch's tutelage now but even though things were shaping up within Lancer's borders, the outside world was another thing entirely. Damaged trust did not heal well and there was that one last step in confidence that Johnny had yet to take. Old business partners and friends still traveled wide around his son. Murdoch felt that there would be one defining moment when the outside world would again accept him.

When Scott finished the last entry of 1893, he found the sun near setting. He had been reading all day and would have kept on through the night but the guilt of ignoring his family nudged its way to the forefront. He was as hooked as a trout on a line - what happened next? Even knowing the story had a positive conclusion didn't dampen the curiosity of how it got that way.

A rap on the door startled him and the letters on his lap tumbled to the floor. Julia poked her head into the room. "Sorry, Daddy," she giggled. "I guess I scared you."

Scott squatted down to gather the envelopes. "It's okay, sweetheart. I was just in another place, that's all."

"It's dark in here," she said as she stepped in and lit a lamp. "Here, let me help." Julia dropped to the floor and collected the last few items. They stood up together and she eyed the cluttered desktop. "That's a lot of reading," she said as she fingered through a few of the envelopes. "These are all from the same person?"

"Yes," Scott breathed. "Most of them, anyway. They're from your grandfather. Johnny left them for me."

She was silent for a few moments. He could tell she had a million curious questions, but he wasn't sure he wanted to answer them yet. Then he considered what he learned today about getting on with the business of living.

"These letters tell a story I wasn't ready to hear until now," he explained. "It's a story you and your mother deserve to hear, but I need to get to the end first. Can you wait?"

Julia smiled and nodded. "I like it when you tell me stories. Does it have a happy ending?"

Scott considered a second then smiled crookedly. "Yeah, I think so, honey, but I'm not sure it's over yet." She frowned slightly, not quite getting what he meant, and he laughed. "Come

on, I smell something good.” His growing stomach pointed out that he skipped lunch.

“Pot roast,” Julia announced happily. “And berry cobbler!” She took his hand and led him to the dining room.



Vivid and continual dreams interrupted Scott’s sleep that night as the life he had shoved into a closet in his mind fought to escape. It wasn’t that the dreams were bad or dark, in fact, most of them were vignettes from a palette of day-to-day events, but they were from a life that ended fifteen years ago. The coming dawn brightened the sky to a dull gray when Scott decided to quit fighting them and quietly got dressed. He trod downstairs started a pot of coffee, but the pull of the letters in the den was strong. It took every bit of self-discipline to first quell his grumbling stomach with a biscuit and honey and wait for the coffee.

Finally, armed with a final crusty biscuit and a warm cup, Scott returned to the den and surveyed the scattered letters. “There goes another day of work,” he sighed. When Nancy returned Carl’s wagon yesterday afternoon, she told Scott’s boss that her husband was still “entertaining family” and would not be in today, either. Scott smile wryly at his wife’s intuitiveness.

He set his coffee down next to the wing chair, selected the stack representing 1894, and settled down to read. Johnny, it seemed, still teetered on the borderline of forgiveness by the residents of Morro Coyo and the members of the Cattle Grower’s Association, and Murdoch thought about relinquishing complete control to Johnny. There was a feeling that everyone - Johnny, Murdoch, the townsfolk - was waiting for someone to make a decision regarding his acceptance. Everyone still harbored doubt of Johnny’s stability. Some were more obvious about it than others were:

“We received an invitation to dinner from Aggie and Buck. Johnny is scared to death but, of course, hides it well.” Scott snorted at the understatement. “I caught him practicing how to say hello in the mirror. He didn’t see me. I remembered how, as Madrid, Johnny could hold a stare with bold determination. I never thought I would say this, Scott, but he needs a bit of Madrid to get through this. I have no doubt he’ll do just fine and I honestly think Johnny’s getting close to believing that himself.”

Scott went on to read about the success of the evening, and how Johnny insisted they reciprocate the following Sunday. The letter ended on a positive note, but the next one began darkly.

“Johnny received word yesterday that Val Crawford died. His heart, apparently. Val moved to Reno shortly after Johnny went to prison. I don’t think he could stand the way the town talked about Johnny after that, but I cannot really say for sure. Theirs was an odd relationship, wasn’t it?”

“As you can imagine, Johnny’s not taking it very well and I have to admit that I have concerns. I think this goes beyond Val because he was asking about Jelly and Sam as well. Johnny has not asked after them before, at least not to

the extent he did last night. I cannot help but feel that this is a test of some kind. I kept my answers brief."

Scott sat back and thought about that, ignoring the chilly tingle that made the hairs on the back of his neck rise whenever the subject arose. Death as a test to the living; not an angle he viewed before. In fact, he learned to quash the entire subject in the past year. It was simply too painful. When he returned to the letter, Scott noticed his hand was icy with sweat.

"I think he's seeing, for the first time, where he was for so long and questioning why he's still here. We stayed up all night, talking. After breakfast, he rode off and I went to bed for a few hours. It is now late afternoon and Johnny has not returned. This is the longest he has been out of sight of the hacienda, alone."

"Yet it's so like him," Scott whispered, the worry in Murdoch's words very clear.

"I want to post this letter this morning, so I need to be brief. Johnny came home just before midnight last night. He apologized and went straight to bed and I have yet to see him today. The only information I have now is that he is home and he was cold sober when he went to bed. Time will tell if he passed his test or not."

Curious, Scott returned the letter to the pile and wondered when Johnny realized he passed the odd test, because it was obvious that he did. The next letter harbored the start of spring, 1894, but still carried a winter-like darkness. After a cursory introduction regarding the stock, and how the winter had physically affected Lancer, Murdoch commented on Johnny's struggle to rejoin society. His father questioned the intentions of friends and neighbors, trying to get a feel if he was helping or hindering Johnny's progress or lack thereof.

"I look at everyone with new eyes and have to wonder 'Where will Johnny stand with this individual when I'm gone?' I have to wonder that because I always thought of Lancer being carried on by my children, and my children's children. This place will be on Johnny and Jason's shoulders soon, and yours, too, Scott, whether you like it or not. We never dissolved your third so your blood is still in every blade of grass and drop of water."

"I sometimes think it would be better if I left. It would be the only way to prove to this community that Johnny can be a vital part of it. They still rely on me, and I have to admit, I am getting tired, Scott, and I am running out of time. I need to know Johnny is good before I die, that he will have the support he needs and the security he deserves. He was without those things for so long as a boy and as a young man, and is just now realizing what it means. I've done what I could, but don't feel like it is near enough."

There it was, Scott noted - the seldom-acknowledged guilt Murdoch carried about the decisions he made as a young husband and father. He smiled at the other parts of the letter that showed Murdoch's expectation that if he willed it, it would happen. The letter ended with the news of Maria's retirement the following week. Rafael's wife, Carmen, would

replace her. Scott vaguely recalled the girl as the daughter of a cook in Morro Coyo.

Funny how time changed things, he thought. Or, was it that things changed with time? Scott laughed shortly and shook his head. "Look at me. I'll be talking to myself soon."

The letter left him feeling unsettled and he welcomed the sound of life in the kitchen. Scott left the den, empty coffee cup in hand, and wandered out to find Nancy breaking eggs in a pan.

"Good morning," she chirped with a smile. She studied his face a moment before returning to her duties. "My, was the coffee that bad?"

Scott put his cup down, moved in close behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Nope, I make great coffee." She snorted. "I just didn't sleep very well." He gave her a quick squeeze, kissed a spot just below her ear and released her. "Living another life in a day is both tiring and disturbing." He retrieved the coffee pot and refilled his cup.

"I thought you were tossing and turning last night. It must be difficult."

"Yeah." Scott rubbed his eyes and leaned wearily against the wall as he stared into his coffee cup. "I want to tell you and Julia about it," he said quietly. "I do risk losing your respect because of it, you know."

Nancy tilted her head to look at him. "That's not possible," she said firmly.

Julia flounced into the dining room and slipped into her seat just as breakfast was laid out. After saying quick graces, they began to eat.

"Are you coming in town today, Papa?"

"Later, perhaps. I have some things to do this morning."

"Does it have to do with the box again?"

Scott smiled as he spread jam on his biscuit. "Yes, it does. I'll tell you all about it soon."

"When?"

"Soon."

"But Papa . . ."

"Julia, let your father eat."

The girl scowled and ate a few bites. "Are we ever gonna visit Uncle Johnny and Jason?"

Scott thought a moment. "Yes, I think we will. Uncle Johnny, Aunt Laurie, Cousin Jason and maybe Aunt Teresa and Uncle Daniel and Cousins Eliese and Paul . . ."

Julia stopped chewing, stunned. "There's more of them?" she whispered.

Both Scott and Nancy laughed. "Yes, there's more and it's about time you met them, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes!" she breathed. Excitedly, she took a few more bites. "Papa?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"When are we going?"

"I'm not sure."

"Soon?"

"Julia! Eat your breakfast!"

Scott returned to the den with a lighter heart. His lively daughter and loving wife again did their job in erasing the guilt built up by time. There was no mistake that they had been destined to be in his life. He stopped at the desk and studied the mess. He decided to skip a month or so and see what the summer of 1894 brought to Lancer.

As he chose an envelope dated in late August, Scott realized that William had less than a year to live at that time. The air sucked instantly from his lungs and he swayed, dropping the letter on the desktop. Scott leaned heavily on the desk until he could breathe again and when the moment passed, he took a deep breath, retrieved the letter and sat down in the wing chair again.

"Dear Scott,

"I hope this point in time finds you happy and healthy because it nearly wasn't so for us. I thank God for Johnny because he is the reason why Lancer, many of the surrounding ranches and Morro Coyo are still standing. It was like when the three of us first met only this time, he made everyone follow his plan. My God, you should have seen him!

"I seem to be getting ahead of events, and I apologize. Details are still coming but I think I have enough of the facts to fill you in.

"We smelled the wildfires south of us on the devil's wind for days. With a drought, fires, as you know, are not unusual, especially this time of year. However, this time, the drought was longer and the wind - all I can say is that the wind was a possessed life of its own. I don't recall ever seeing winds like that short of a cyclone. They were so hot your eyes dried up in seconds and you'd swear you were standing in an oven, surrounded by embers.

"There was some warning, a few days at least, and in that time Johnny was rarely home. Every morning he would take a group of men and be gone all day. He left lengthy instructions for Rafe that involved hauling barrels of water to every corner of the hacienda's grounds. It looked like fortifications for a war

and I thought he was exaggerating the possibilities.

"I was never so wrong in my life."

Scott's mouth dried when he understood where this was going. He recalled reading about the fires, but dismissed the implications when he read that they spared Morro Coyo. That was the end of it, as far as he knew.

"I didn't see much of Johnny, but I did see the hungry maw of flame as it topped our outermost ridges to the south and the suffocating blanket of smoke that heralded its arrival. It was the breath of Hell and the devil was blowing toward Morro Coyo.

"In those preceding days, Johnny and our crews hit the southern properties hard. They dug, cut, dragged and clawed a clear path a hundred yards wide and miles long. The townsfolk thought he was crazy - and they had no qualms about telling me this - but as reports came in from the south from stragglers and survivors, more and more men joined his ranks. They listened and they worked. Scott, he pulled together an army and guided them as efficiently as any General.

"Since he couldn't ride with any speed, your brother found a sturdy Summer's cart and went through five horses in a day when it was at its worst. No one can figure out how he got to some of the places he did but if he had not, if the flames had not been slowed and then stopped when they were, none of us would be here today. He read the land and the elements perfectly.

"We are still reeling from the losses, but they are negligible compared to what could have been. It will take time for the scars on the land to heal, but they will. We have faith, and faith properly given is always rewarded. And I have faith in my son once again."

Scott felt drained and stunned at the magnitude of Johnny's project and its results. There wasn't a hint of this effort mentioned in any of the papers. Johnny read nature as exactly as Madrid read people. It was simply amazing, but not entirely surprising. Scott remembered how his little brother could bring out the darndest things in people - unexpected and surprising things. Finally, he did it to himself.

The rest of the letter detailed the damages to Lancer and Morro Coyo, but Murdoch was right. It could have been much worse. Scott turned his attention back to the desk and the tied stacks of unread letters that remained. What other surprises were in them? Did he need to know? Was the letter in his hand and the Johnny he saw with his own eyes proof enough that he could return to Lancer and not be hurt again?

When Scott admitted to himself that the answer to the last question was "yes," it seemed like he should be able to reload the trunk and be on his way, but he found he could not. Not yet. What he'd read so far had returned Johnny to him. What remained would give Murdoch back to him. Scott picked out an envelope.

The year of 1894 closed on a revitalized Lancer. Murdoch wrote of dinners, parties, dances and all sorts of social invitations since Johnny had proven himself. Murdoch attended when

he could, but Scott could tell by the stroke of his hand that although his father was satisfied, he was also tired. The letters grew shorter, but came just as regularly. When, in early 1895, Murdoch skipped two months, Scott knew something was wrong.

All of 1895 was wrong, Scott summed up. Again, that icy chill tickled his neck when his thoughts had the possibility of wandering to the tragic events of the spring. In an effort to derail his thoughts, he found the next letter and momentarily taken aback by the change of handwriting on the envelope. He had not seen it in awhile, but Scott could still recognize Johnny's hand. Inside, the first paragraph explained the change:

"Dear Scott,

"I am sorry I have missed the past two months, but the doctors say I suffered a stroke in the middle of January. I cannot hold a pen well enough to write so Johnny has taken it upon himself to keep the tradition, so to speak. He says he will write exactly what I say, so I will have to trust him."

Scott smiled, imagining the good-natured teasing that must have taken place at that point as he swiped at the unbidden trickle that started down one cheek.

"Perhaps he can be persuaded to speak for himself on occasion, but he insists that this stay my venue and I appreciate that. Johnny and Carmen do not seem to have a problem understanding me so I guess the rest of the world will simply have to come around."

Scott laughed aloud at that, causing both eyes to tear to the point where he had to put the letter down and retrieve a handkerchief. How he missed Murdoch's dry humor!

"The winter rains have all but guaranteed a lush spring and fat steers. Johnny has handled Lancer on his own for the past two months and has done a fine job. I am confident in handing all affairs concerning Lancer over to him at this point and know the spread will grow and prosper. He has rounded up some excellent, experienced hands that are loyal to Lancer and to Johnny especially, although he insists that I still call the tune. I know better."

“Teresa plans to come up for a visit soon. Eliese was married over the holidays and plans to start a family soon, so Teresa wants to travel while she can. I do not recall if I told you Eliese was getting married; that part of December was too busy for me to keep up. Traveling to Los Angeles took more out of me than I care to admit so Johnny and I stayed to ourselves. I cannot believe little Eliese is married. It seems just like yesterday when she pushed Jason in the horse trough. She certainly has her mother’s spunk.”

Scott smirked. That was a story he would like to hear. The letter moved on to things that are more mundane and, reading between the lines, he saw that Murdoch was pretty much infirmed since the stroke and missed much of the previous months. Scott closed his eyes and imagined Johnny sitting next to Murdoch’s bed writing as his father spoke. With his one arm and Murdoch’s poor speech, it probably took longer than it should, but it struck him that it did not matter. Johnny not only made the time, he made the time count. He was proud of his little brother, which sparked a yearning in his heart. This was a man he wanted to know.

It was difficult to read the next letters. They were newsy and, obviously with Johnny’s input, brought Scott up on the state of the surrounding ranches as well as Lancer. He fondly described Teresa’s visit with humor and devotion. As Scott read, it was almost impossible to believe how oblivious they were to his pain at the time, that his personal world of heartache and grief was not as big as the whole world after all. Lord knows that Murdoch and Johnny needed peace, but Scott had a flash of resentment about it.

It was morbidly fascinating that the rest of the world just . . . continued. Life kept going, people got married, women had babies and brothers wrote letters. Scott’s world froze for most of 1895. So what did this mean? Or, did it have to mean anything?

By Christmas, the tone of Murdoch’s letters changed. December’s was short and January’s just a few paragraphs, and Scott doubted Murdoch said much else outside the missives. He was sure Johnny tried to get a dialogue going but obviously did not have much success.

February of 1896’s message was completely new. Johnny wrote in his own voice and Scott sat straight and focused.

“Dear Scott,

“Hey, brother, it’s me. I am sitting here with Murdoch, trying to keep his tradition going, but I do not think he will be participating much for a while. He had

another stroke, you see, and has not yet come around. The docs think it could be any minute or several months, but they're pretty sure he'll come around.

"I have to tell you I'm scared, Scott."

Scott's eyes were swimming again. Johnny, scared?

"As you know I'm no saint and there's things I've done that I'm not proud of, but my biggest regret is letting this man down. Do you know that the best things I've done were when you or Murdoch were by my side? I can also say that about some of the worst things, too, but I would rather dwell on the good.

"I can't recall exactly what made you leave but I hope with all my heart that you'll choose to dwell on the good, too, and come home. I know I sure miss you, and I definitely know the old man misses you.

"Anyway, I'll end this now and try to keep up Murdoch's tradition. I know he wants this, and doing this is important to him. And me.

"I hope to hear from you soon.

"Your family,

"Johnny and Murdoch"

March's letter held more sad news from Johnny and relayed Murdoch's wish for Johnny to bring him home. It was short, to the point and Scott could see wrinkled spots from either water or tears. He had to admit to himself that he knew which one it was. He was thankful that as much as Johnny seemed to want Scott home, he never begged and never would. That much of the Johnny he knew was familiar. Johnny ended the letter with a personal thought.

"P.S. I used to think Murdoch was crazy for writing you when he never got a reply. Then I humored him because he enjoyed it so much. Since I've been helping him, I've come to realize how good it feels to put thoughts on paper. It frees my head and gets things in order. I wonder sometimes what he has told you and I wonder

what I would have said if I started doing this years ago - probably a good thing I did not. After I have signed it, however, I feel ready to go on. If you are reading this now, Scott, I highly recommend it. Lately, it gets me through the nights.

Johnny

Scott did not bother to open April's telegram. How the Pinkertons' got their hands on it was beyond him since telegrams were hand delivered. They needn't have bothered. Leaning back, Scott tapped the unopened telegram on his thigh and looked outside. It was early afternoon and he was unbelievably tired. Reliving the years in one day had certainly taken its toll.

Outside, the sky was blue and the clouds puffy and drifting lazily. The earthy smell he had come to love now missed some vital thing. Heavy thoughts tumbled through his mind and Scott became unsettled, unconnected and unable to think. His hand grew still and he turned his attention to Johnny's letter lying open on the desktop.

Should he try it?

He moved without conscious thought and settled in behind his desk, quickly gathered the letters and dropped them in the trunk. He cleared a spot on his blotter and found his pen. From the second drawer he pulled out several sheets of paper and laid them to one side, placing the top sheet in front of him. It didn't take a whole lot of thought to decide where to start.

He began to write.

"Dear Johnny,

"I have decided to take your suggestion and put to paper the things I wasn't ready to tell you when you were here. Your visit certainly was a surprise, and a pleasant one, I might add. I have to tell you how impressed I am with the man you are, the man that I knew was always in there, waiting to come out. Honestly, I did not think I would see the day.

"We spoke of many things, Johnny, and you will never know how good it felt to air those dark thoughts and let the light in, but there are some things - one thing - that I can't bear to speak of, yet, anyway. I would like to try this way first, I think, because it gives me a sense of control over a situation that was completely out of my

control.

"It looks like I'm speaking in riddles, so I will simply get on with it.

"When I left San Francisco after seeing you and Murdoch that last time, I bought a train ticket north and ended up in Rio Dell. From there, I bought a cheap horse and found my way to Scotia. At the time, it was called Forestville. During that ride, I became enamored with the trees, and specifically, the redwoods. I had never seen something so grand, so old and so strong. I wondered how they survived.

"Scotia is a lumber company town, as you know, and when I first saw it tucked neatly amongst those grand trees I felt that my traveling was over. I felt safe here. Luckily, not many Harvard graduates come to this town looking for work so Mr. McPherson and Mr. Wetherbee hired me immediately to handle the books for their growing enterprise.

"I arrived in the fall of 1882 with the first freeze. Being swept up in the excitement of a quickly growing company kept me warm and I easily blended with the small town and its residents. I met Nancy Foster that first day at the café and I have to admit that I must have looked like an idiot. After Trish, I simply did not have it in me to try again. I avoided Nancy at every turn. You see, I loved Trish with all my heart so the day she broke off our engagement and left, I think my heart turned to stone. Looking back, she is probably the true catalyst that instigated my leaving Lancer. She left because of you, Johnny, and made it seem so easy.

"Nancy Foster was the daughter of the mill foreman and we saw each other daily but I tripped and stammered and did my best to avoid her to no avail. She is smart, well read and has a laugh like a spring morning. We were fated to be together. We were married the next year and I loved her more than anything in this world until our son, William Murdoch Garrett, was born a year later.

"I understand now a lot of things about Murdoch's actions. To have complete responsibility of such a helpless innocent is an

incredible thing. It moves a man to excel and become a better man. I saw that happen to you, Johnny, when Jason was born, but until you are there, holding your flesh and blood in your arms, you truly do not understand, do you?

"That was the closest I ever came to returning to Lancer. I finally sympathized with Murdoch as a father unable to touch his son; the pull was so strong to keep the bloodlines together. Then Nancy became pregnant with Julia Marie and we were grounded in Scotia. We were so happy.

"William was a perfect blend of Murdoch and me - blue eyes, blond hair, tall and strong. Those lines were so evident I almost expected to hear a Scottish accent when he began to talk. Poor Nancy wondered if she had anything to do with his lines. He was clearly my son and Murdoch's grandson. I regarded him with awe, Johnny. Nancy and I were so proud of him.

"Julia Marie Garrett was born the next year and our family was complete. If William was mine, then Julia was Nancy's. Although she carries the Lancer blue eyes, the rest of her is clearly of Foster descent. Being twice blessed with such perfect babies humbles a man. We were - are - so thankful for that.

"The following nine years seemed to race by, each day dawning like a gift. I will admit that we did have our low times but they were eclipsed by the good times. Will was curious and bold and asked more questions than I thought were possible. One time he asked me if anyone had ever visited the stars. He started helping me in the office when he turned eight. He was remarkable.

"The first thaw of spring began like any other day. William and I ate in the café and greeted the workers as they passed our table. Will knew all of their names and spoke to each person, as we did every morning, and then we left for my office in the mill. I doled out his usual chores for the morning, delivering notes and folders for me before he left for school. At noon, I met him and Julia at the schoolyard and we ate lunch together. We did this once a week, without fail, during the school year.

"After school, he stopped by before going home and we reviewed his school work. He stayed a little longer than was usual to work on an extra school project while I finished up in the office. This day, I had more receipts than usual, so I sent him off ahead of me. I do not remember how long it was before I noticed the smoke, followed immediately by the fire bell.

"The rest is a blur, Johnny. I cannot tell you my next actions. I have been told that I helped evacuate the building and set up a water brigade, and I have to accept that account. I honestly do not know. What I do recall next is seeing Nancy and Julia running down the path from our house. When I saw Nancy's eyes I saw the question - where was Will?"

The pen slipped from Scott's hand and he covered his eyes in an attempt to stop the burn. It all came back in a rush - the choking smoke, yelling men, screaming women; the heat on his face and the cold splash of water from the buckets on his arms. The impossibly bright flames casting bottomless black shadows that became even darker as the sun set. The pain . . .

Scott gasped and dropped his sweaty hands to the hard arms of his chair, stopping himself from pushing to his feet as Johnny's words popped in his mind. "... I feel ready to go on. It helps me through the nights." Would it help? Was he ready to take that leap of faith and finish this? When done, would he, too, feel ready to go on? Scott had no doubt that Johnny loved Murdoch and he was so . . . complete . . . when he was here. God, was it only yesterday that he left?

He forced his hands to release their grip on the chair and picked up the pen, rolling it in his fingers until the visceral sensations abated. Scott inhaled deeply through his nose, rolled his shoulders, and continued.

"With that one look, everything became quiet and all motion dragged. I remember hearing my own heartbeat in my ears and feeling the burn in my nose from breathing the hot air. I ran back to the mill on some instinct I will never understand. I threw off hands trying to stop me and ran right into the heart of the beast.

"It was black, Johnny, black as pitch as I swam through the smoke. I know I called out Will's name, but could not hear my own voice over my heartbeat and snapping wood. I tripped and fell, and found it was clearer on the floor so I crawled. I was in amongst the saws and knew the river ran close by. I could not see or breathe

because of the smoke, and the sleeves of my shirt smoldered but I couldn't stop. I don't know how I was able to find him . . ."

The fat tear that struck the page and smeared the ink startled him, but Scott hesitated for only a moment, unable to stop the flow that pulsed through his fingers.

"I noticed his shirt first. It was a red and white check pattern that wasn't one of my favorites, but Will liked a little color to his shirts."

He snorted a short laugh at the familiar trait and swiped his eyes.

"One arm reached out and I saw there were small burn spots on the sleeve. His blond hair was black with soot and he lay on his side, so still. I pulled on his shoulders but he did not move. There was a burning beam across his hips. I remember lying on the floor and kicking it with all my strength. Weakened by the fire, it finally gave way enough for me to pull my son clear. I remember gathering him up, and then I was outside."

The pen stopped, the point still on paper, pooling ink. Scott didn't notice because he wasn't there.

In that moment, he was outside in another time, sitting in the dirt with his boy cradled in his arms. Burying his face in Will's hair, he could feel the stiff, burned ends roughing his cheek and smell the sour, ingrained smoke. The checked shirt crumbled into ash in some parts and in others, stuck to oozing, charred skin. There was no evidence of the smooth, flawless boy left except in his mind and memories.

The pen started again, drawing from the pooled blackness.

"In the weeks that followed, I learned that Will was the first to notice the fire. Instead of sounding the bell outside, he ran into the mill and warned everyone. He became trapped inside because he was making sure others got out."

"The next days and weeks are a blur still. I had some burns, everybody did, but I was numb to the pain. I vaguely recall the funeral and the memorial service; Johnny, losing a child is the worst possible thing in the world. It isn't natural; parents are not supposed to outlive their children. That is not the way it is supposed to be."

What is missing is . . . simply indescribable. If it were not for Nancy and Julia, I would not have survived it.

"The three of us saved each other. The pain is always there and I still cannot speak of it, and I know it will be there for the rest of my days, unchanged. I know I will never forget and I have to learn to live with it but there are days and hours I find it nearly impossible."

Scott stopped and laid the pen aside and sat, staring at the sheaf of papers. It took a few minutes for him to realize that he felt changed somehow, like there was some epiphany, but he could not grasp any detail at this moment. He felt . . . lighter. Could the physical weight of the ink and paper in front of him have come from somewhere inside?

Johnny was right. Scott snatched up the pen before the words in his head skittered away.

"As I sit here now, I see that you are right. Putting this all on paper has uncluttered my mind. In some indescribable way, I feel lighter. I will not go as far as to say I am free of it but I will say that I can put it aside long enough to live. For now, anyway.

"Thank you, brother. Thank you for so many things. One concept I see clearly at this moment is that is that there is a place for us at Lancer where we can go on. All my memories of this place are tied to my wife and daughter so, by moving, I am not leaving anything behind.

"Please keep this letter safe for me until we come home to the Valley."

"Your brother,

"Scott Garrett Lancer"

EPILOGUE

Johnny threw the covers back with exuberance. The work of the past month would finally come to fruition today - Scott was coming home. His household items had been arriving for a week now and were waiting to be unpacked.

He could hear the bustle throughout the house as he dressed and paused a moment to study his bed. Laurie's imprint was still visible on the mattress. Without a second thought, Johnny reached down and picked up the pillow, bringing it to his nose to inhale her scent. He immediately felt a rush of excitement and warmth and grinned stupidly just as the bedroom door swung open and the love of his life stepped in.

"It's about time you got up, lazy bones," Laurie teased. "I guess I won't have to pour this coffee on your head after all."

Johnny chuckled and pulled her close.

"Careful!" she yelped, managing to keep the liquid in the cup and laughing at her success. Johnny loosened his hold enough for her to set the delivery down, and then pulled her in tight. "Well," she said in a light tone as she snuggled close. "Too much sleep has made you a little frisky, I see."

"Sleep's got nothing to do with it," he murmured in her ear before nuzzling lower and marking a trail of tiny kisses along her jaw line and slender neck.

"Oh . . . I see. . ." Her words were breathy as her body sagged at the attention. Laurie tilted her head aside and when he found her lips, the kiss deepened. Then she pushed against him and he released her, chuckling. She absently patted her hair as she caught her breath. "You keep doing that and this place will never be ready in time!"

"Scott'll understand." He reached out again and she dodged his hand, skirting around the bed to pull it together.

"I'm sure he would. You Lancers always stick together."

Johnny laughed again and drank his coffee, appreciating her every move as she cleaned the room.

After breakfast, the rest of the morning sped by in a blur of activity and preparations. After giving Rafael directions for the day's work, Johnny withdrew to the great room. He checked the grandfather clock and felt his heart race - Scott and his family would be here at any time now. He moved to the massive windows and let his gaze sweep over the land. He could always feel Murdoch's presence the strongest in this spot. Johnny shut his eyes and imagined his father standing next to him, grinning. Johnny knew then that Murdoch was proud of him. The legacy of Lancer would live on.

Shouts outside caught his attention, and Johnny opened his eyes as Laurie entered the room.

"They're here," she announced. "Well, they're almost here." She walked to her husband's side and wrapped her fingers through his. She pointed briefly with the other hand. "They're stopped up on the ridge road for some reason."

Johnny didn't need her to tell him where they were. He knew exactly where they stopped and exactly what Scott was saying to his family - he could hear it clearly in Teresa's young voice . . .

"There it is, as far as the eye can see - the most beautiful place in the whole, wide world. Lancer."



AUTHOR'S NOTE

I respectfully request that no part of this story be posted elsewhere or be converted to any digital format without my permission. This was a difficult tale to tell, and I can only hope you understand how difficult after reading it. Making the decision to keep it off the internet indefinitely was the only reason I was able to finish writing it. Thank you for reading.

I regret not including a bibliography, considering the amount of research this story required. Maybe next time!

Feedback is always welcome, positive or negative.

AJB
ajbfanfic@gmail.com

1st Printing: August 2008
Edited 2nd Printing: August 2010
Edited 3rd Draft: September 2019