

**THE GREAT ROOM  
BOOKSHELF  
VOL. II**

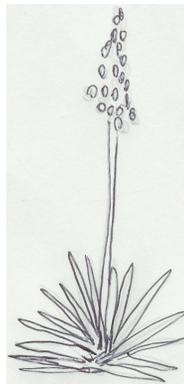


**A COLLECTION OF LANCER FAN FICTION & GAMES**

**SPRING, 2006**

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# THE GREAT ROOM BOOKSHELF, VOL. II



## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Greetings, and welcome to Volume II of the Lancer Great Room Bookshelf!

Again, the talent of many writers and puzzle-makers has been collected and put to print. I, for one, am very excited. This Volume contains excellent, original, never-been-published anywhere before fan fiction and brain teasers. The world of Lancer comes alive with these stories thanks to the fertile imaginations of not only the writers, but also the readers that have made their desires very clear with their feedback and comments. On that note, please remember to contact the authors and leave your feedback on these tales at <http://burfield.org/YuccaFlowerPress>. Feedback is the only way we can ensure more 'zines like this one in the future.

The Games portion of this 'zine started with the very first page. Though out the 'zine, you will see various usages of the very recognizable Lancer 'L' brand; I challenge you to see if you can recall from which episodes these 'L' brands were taken. The 'L' Game answers are in the Solutions section of the 'zine.

So, curl up with your beverage of choice and immerse yourselves into the 1870's world of Lancer!



Sincerely,  
A.J. Burfield, editor  
Poway, California  
April 2006

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## LITTLE THINGS

### BY MAUREEN

The kid was back.

Horace Gant looked up from his accounts ledger and caught sight of the kid just before Ben Jeffries's wagon pulled up right in front of the store and blocked his view of the street. Gant reflexively glanced over to the clock sitting atop the far end of his counter.

*'Three-ten today,'* he noted, but had no idea why in all the heavens it mattered. *'Kid isn't keeping a regular schedule is all.'*

*'Regular schedule . . .'* Horace shook his head and huffed out a scoffing breath as he finished noting his last customer's purchase. *'Since when do the comings and goings of some dirty ragamuffin kid matter to you, Horace Gant?'*

To his surprise, "HG" found himself giving the question a sincere moments thought. *'Since the kid don't come and go . . . just appears and disappears. Stands there in the street in front of Morgan's saloon every day for a week, watching you, then he's gone. Most likely scouting you for thievery, HG, so you just keep on watching that little snip back.'*

"Hay do?" Jeffries greeted as his impressive bulk filled the doorway. He pulled off his hat and used it to beat the top layers of dust from his clothes before he passed on through the open door.

"Do fine," HG answered as he closed his ledger and spared one last glance out the window. But his view hadn't miraculously cleared. "Do better if it were just a little bit cooler."

"That's a churchyard fact," Ben agreed as he clomped across the planked floor toward HG. "What'll it be, Ben?"

As if Gant didn't already know. He knew all his customer's regular orders. In the small, lazy Texas border town of Burfield it was easy to keep track of who would want what and when. Nothing more exciting than an occasional bar fight happened in the area. The Mexicans around town might throw a noisy fiesta from time to time, but you had to go all the way over to Eagle Pass to get your blood stirred up any on a regular basis.

*'Maybe that's why the kid keeps niggling at me . . . he's new. Different. Hell, the kid's darn right intriguing.'*

*'Intriguing . . . now that's a word I have never considered using here in Burfield,'* HG mused.

"Is she pretty?" Jeffries tossed his hat onto the counter in front of Horace and startled him out of his considerations.

Gant jumped. "What? Who?" he stammered.

"Whoever or whatever is more interesting than me," Ben said. "Come on, HG. You gonna daydream all afternoon, or get me my tobacco?"

Horace was flustered and embarrassed that he'd let his mind wander. He reviewed the pile of goods in front of him, but had no memory of having assembled them. *'Damned kid.'* HG noted the sugar, flour, bacon and coffee already on the counter. "Sure . . . sure. Right away."

HG picked up Ben's empty tobacco pouch and headed over to a small barrel set on a bottom shelf in the corner. "Grab a bag and measure out your beans," he instructed over his shoulder. "I'll get your molasses."

Jeffries marched down to the opposite end of the counter and snatched one of Gant's newfangled paper bags off a stack next to a big wooden barrel filled with dried beans. With a deft snap of his wrist he whipped the bag and popped it open. Gant glanced over at the sound, and watched off and on for a minute as Ben's big, oversized hands dug into the barrel and scooped several piles of beans into the bag. He measured out six handfuls.

Horace repositioned his ladder and climbed up to pull down Ben's jar of blackstrap. He needed to pay attention to the task at hand, but heard it when those beans were manhandled a couple more times.

"Anything else today?" HG asked as he set the bottle of sweet blackness and the now bulging tobacco pouch onto the counter, just as Ben set down his bag of beans.

"Nope. That'll do 'er."

Gant opened his ledger and began to tally. "How much beans?" he asked, not looking up.

"Six handfuls." Ben spoke his lie, then suddenly found the new shipment of hats in back of him worthy of a try on.

Horace glanced up knowingly and wrote Jeffries down for owing on seven handfuls of beans. Even with that he knew he was being cheated.

"Going to pay any on your account today, Ben?" HG's pencil hovered over the ledger. "Not today, if you don't mind. Gotta pick up seed, and you know Clyde won't take a marker."

"That's a churchyard fact," HG concurred. He set his pencil down and closed the book. "You going to be able to carry all that?"

Ben had already gathered up most of his goods into his beefy arms. "Yeah. I can get it. Got a crate in the wagon. Be nice if I'd remember to bring it in with me once in a while."

Horace laughed as Jeffries turned to leave. "See you next week, Ben."

"That's a churchyard fact," Jeffries agreed as he plodded out the door.

The ladder was set back safely out of the way, and a box of baking soda that had been pushed askew was faced properly front. Horace heard Jeffries's wagon pull away as he scanned the rest of his shelves for anything else out of place. Everything found to be in order, Gant turned to check if that kid had moved yet.

He sure had. The kid now stood right smack dab in the middle of the entrance to the Gant Mercantile. Where Jeffries's massive body had filled the doorway, the kid barely cast a shadow.

'*Scrawny*,' summed up HG's initial impression.

He was indeed on the skinny side, but on further consideration Gant realized the kid looked extra small because his clothes were at least one size too big for him. A white shirt patterned with little blue flowers hung low off the kid's shoulders. The sleeves were rolled back several times and bunched into a mass of material atop a pair of thin, dark-skinned forearms.

'*I'll bet he's got that shirt properly tucked just to keep his pants on*,' Gant surmised.

The kid's pants were held up by the grace of God and a too-long black leather belt. The strap was laced through a simple buckle and

then wrapped twice more around itself so the end dropped down to lay flat against the kid's thigh. The look may have been considered a might rakish on an adult, but on the kid it just drew attention to the poor nature of his clothing. The pants showed too much wear on the knees.

*'Religious as hell, or a hard worker . . . and what does any of this matter, HG?'* Gant couldn't believe how fascinated he was by this kid.

A pair of simple Mexican peasant sandals peeked out from beneath the kid's pant legs that had been rolled up about three times into cuffs. The footwear completed the kid's outfit, and just happened to be the only thing that fit him proper.

The kid stood still, watching Gant watching him for a minute, then he purposefully turned his head to scan both directions down the boardwalk. Apparently satisfied with the circumstances, the kid faced Gant again, and in a clear, strong voice asked, "You sell to folks like me?"

HG didn't hear anger in the unusual question, just matter of fact caution. "What's 'like you,' kid?"

"Mixed. I'm mixed."

The way the kid said it kind of pained HG deep in his chest. He didn't particularly consider himself an intolerant man, but he'd never stood up for any half-breed he'd seen being bullied, either. By Gant's reckoning the kid was nine years old . . . maybe ten at the most. *'The kid knows what he is, and is just trying to avoid trouble.'* Somehow HG judged that sad . . . very, very sad.

"Do you have any money?" HG asked, and found he had to clear his throat after.

"Yes, sir."

*'Polite cuss.'* "Well then. Welcome to the Gant Mercantile. Come on in."

The kid stepped forward, moving quiet as a cat. He kept his eyes firmly on HG the whole way over to the counter. As he drew nearer, Gant found himself riveted by the clearest, deepest blue eyes he'd ever seen, peering out at him from under a ragged mop of raven black hair. *'Damn. Kid's got a right to be cautious. Eyes like that on a Mex could get a body hanged in some parts.'*

"You new in town?"

"Kinda."

"Got a name?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what is it?"

The kid's eyes narrowed. "You gotta know for me ta buy here?"

*'Secretive cuss.'* "No. No I don't." *'And might just be better for me if I didn't.'* Gant passed a stupefied hand through his thinning hair, then set both palms flat atop the counter. "What do you need, kid?"

"I'd like some flour."

HG had fully expected a child's typical request for sweets, not household staples. "Got it right here." Gant turned and paced down his shelves a few feet. He pulled off a small sack of flour he'd measured out just that morning, brought it back and set it on the counter. "That big enough?"

The blue eyes stared at the bag, then up at Gant. "How much is it?"

"Two bits for that size. I have larger bags too."

“No, sir. This’ll do.” The kid reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small assortment of coins. He selected the biggest and slid it across the counter.

“Anything else?”

“Salt. We could use some salt.”

*‘We . . . hmmm . . . At least he isn’t alone.’*

“Just a little,” the kid clarified.

“All right.” Gant paced down his shelves again and pulled off his smallest package of salt. He set it on the counter next to the flour. “That’ll be a nickel.”

The kid selected another coin and placed it next to the quarter. “Do ya have any beans?”

“Whole barrel full of them. Follow me.”

Gant headed down his side of the counter while the kid mirrored him down the other. HG swung around the edge and stood behind his big barrel of dried beans. “How much would you like?”

The kid looked into the barrel, those blue eyes wide and wanting. He raised a cupped hand and appraised his remaining funds. Looking a little hangdog, he held the hand out toward Gant to reveal two worn flying eagle cents. “How much can I get for this?”

Gant gazed at the coins and shared the kid’s bleak expectation. HG thought himself to be a fair Christian man, but he’d never been known to run a charity. “Hand those over and let me see your palms.”

He eyed Gant suspiciously, but the kid gave over the money and held out his hands. Gant considered the small palms before him, then grabbed and opened a paper sack. “My customers usually serve themselves. You take this bag . . .” The kid took the sack. “. . . and

get yourself three handfuls. These . . .” HG held up the coins, “. . . should cover that much.”

Instruction provided, Gant walked away, back down his counter. *‘Now I find out how honest this kid is.’*

The kid held the sack in his left hand, over the center of the barrel. He reached down into the beans and carefully closed his fist. As the hand rose and traveled toward the gaping opening of the paper sack, a couple of beans escaped his grip and fell to freedom back into the barrel.

Gant crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a hip against his counter as he watched closely. He found himself silently cheering the kid on. Most of his customers scooped the beans up haphazardly, unmindful of how many might fall from their grasp back into the barrel – or onto the floor for that matter. But not the kid. His movements were being carefully controlled. He refused to rush.

It was a challenge to keep the slick beans in his little fist, but the kid seemed willing to buck the odds. He lost five beans back to the barrel with his first fistful, only two with his second scoop, but three with the last handful. He wrapped both his hands around the top of the sack to close it tightly, then carried his precious bounty back over to Gant and set it on the counter next to his little bag of flour and portion of salt.

HG pulled open the bag and peered down at the contents. Snatches of brown paper could still be seen shouting out at him accusingly from under the beans. *‘Nope. Don’t seem fair at all. Do it?’*

He looked up, leaned forward and again set his palms flat against the counter. “This isn’t right, kid.”

The kid stared at Gant. As his eyes widened his mouth gaped open – only to snap shut into a tight line. He let his anger and confusion flow. “I done what you said. I only took three handfuls. Honest!”

“Settle down there! I know you did. But I figured the size of your hands wrong. You gave me two cents, but don’t have more than a penny’s worth of beans here.” He picked up the sack and held it out to the kid. “You best go get three more handfuls.”

The kid’s eyes narrowed. “You sure? I wouldn’t want ta cheat ya.”

Gant grinned, almost laughed. “You’d be the first customer today who didn’t. No. You get another three. That’ll make us square. Go on now.”

HG found himself on the receiving end of a lopsided smile that was one of the most cheering he’d ever witnessed. His own mood brightened perceptively.

“Thanks, mister!” The kid grabbed the bag and headed over to the barrel. Three fresh handfuls were carefully added to the sack, then the kid brought it back for inspection. HG peered into the bag, and those loudmouth snatches of brown paper had been appropriately silenced under a layer of beans.

“Looks better now, kid. Anything else today?”

“No, sir.”

HG tightly folded down the top of the paper sack and held it out to the kid, who’d already gathered up his other small items. “You going to be able to carry all that?”

“Yes, sir. I got it. Thanks, mister.”

“Gant. It’s Mr. Gant, kid.”

“Thanks, Mr. Gant.” The kid beamed him another smile. “See ya later.”

“Hope I will,” HG replied, and really truly meant it.

The kid did end up patronizing the Gant Mercantile on a regular basis. Not regular like his other customers – expected like – but whenever he was able to scrape together a few coins. He never bought anything frivolous, just staples. On occasion he’d select a piece of fruit or a vegetable or two, but those cost him dear so were a rare purchase. He always got beans . . . always, even if it was only a cents worth.

He never came when there was anyone else in the store. The kid would announce his arrival with a hearty and polite, “Howdy, Mr. Gant,” or “Buenas Dias, Señor Gant.” HG found himself actually looking forward to the kid’s visits.

“Where do you get your spendings, kid?” Gant bluntly asked one morning.

The kid looked hurt. “I don’t steal. I work for my pay!”

“Hey. No offense meant. Matter of fact, you look like you’d be a top hand. You want to do a job for me?”

The kid softened. “Maybe. What ya need done?”

“I got a storeroom that needs a proper sweeping, and all the jars and bottles dusted. You afraid of mice?”

“Nope,” the kid announced proudly. “Rats neither!”

Gant laughed. “Well, I better not have any rats back there. I’ll give you a dollar for the sweeping and dusting, and a nickel for every mouse you find and kill. How’s that sound?”

The kid’s mouth scrunched up in consideration. “Can I see the room first?”

Gant laughed again. “Kid, you are a shrewd businessman to want to know what you’re getting yourself into before you cut a deal. Follow me.”

The kid looked over the storeroom thoroughly, then turned and held out his hand. “I’ll do it, sir.”

HG was proud to shake on the deal.

Not once did the kid bother HG at his counter to help him move anything in the storeroom. The kid did it all himself, and never complained about how heavy some of the barrels were. It took him the whole day. He didn’t break a single bottle or jar – although he pointed out three that had lost their seals and let the contents go bad. He also killed five mice. HG happily handed over a dollar and six bits.

“You gave me too much,” the kid said, holding out a pair of quarters.

“No, you earned it, kid. I believe in paying a man for the work done. You did a good job. You keep that.”

The kid looked at the two extra quarters like he’d been handed a twenty-dollar gold piece. “Thanks, Mr. Gant,” he said softly. He added the coins to his others and then held his fortune out to HG. “I’d like to open an account, please.”

Gant smiled. He also took the money. “If I’d have known you were just going to spend this all in my own store, I would have paid you more!” The kid returned the smile as the pair walked into the front together. “What can I get for you today?”

The kid ended up leaving with some flour, a jar of stewed tomatoes, an onion, a whole dime’s worth of beans, even a small measure of sugar. Best of all, he left with a half inch thick slice of bacon. For the first time HG had to

give the kid a burlap sack so he could carry his groceries home.

“Thanks a lot, Mr. Gant,” the kid said on his way out.

“You’re welcome. If I hear anyone else looking for help, I’ll let you know.”

The kid was in town for a couple more weeks after that. Until one afternoon when he came in looking like he’d been to a funeral.

“Hey, kid,” Gant saluted. He’d never seen the kid so serious.

“Hi, Mr. Gant.” There was none of the typical enthusiasm in the kid’s greeting.

‘*This is going to be bad,*’ Gant thought. “What’s got you hanging today?”

“Mama wants ta move on,” he said, then turned and rested his back up against Gant’s high counter.

HG set his arms atop the counter and leaned forward as far as he could. The kid had his head down, but Gant could feel the disappointment oozing out of him. “How come?” he asked.

A heavy sigh drifted out from the bowed head. “She says it’s too quiet here. She’s bored.” There was a long pause, during which the kid’s shoulders seemed to sag a mile. “I like it kind of quiet.”

“I know you do, kid.” HG was surprised at how badly he truly felt for the kid. “Where you headed to?”

“Mama heard ‘bout some town called Eagle Pass. She wants ta move there.”

Gant wanted to find the woman and strangle her good. ‘*Eagle Pass for a breed kid . . . Holy angels in heaven . . .*’

“Don’t imagine it’ll be much quiet there,” the kid supposed.

Now it was Gant who sighed as he suppressed his anger. It wasn’t his place to take on anyone else’s family problems. “No, kid. Won’t be too quiet there.”

A moment of silence passed between the pair, as the kid kicked a bare toe idly at the floorboards with a sandaled foot. “Turn around, kid.”

It took him a second, but finally the kid did. “When you get to Eagle Pass, you find Jim Campbell’s Trading Post. You tell him Horace Gant said he should treat you right. We’ve been friends for a few years. He’ll do you fair.”

The kid smiled a little. “Thanks, Mr. Gant. I appreciate that.”

“My pleasure. Now. I imagine you’ll want to close your account today. What do you need for traveling goods?”

The kid had enough money left on his account for some jerky and cheese . . . and a final nickel worth of beans. The kid stood over the big barrel of dried beans and too slowly began grabbing up his fistfuls. Gant tried not to stare . . . tried desperately not to care. But with each handful more and more beans seemed to fall back into the barrel than into the bag. When he saw the kid’s shoulders start to tremble, Horace went to lend a hand.

“Let me fill your order, kid. Kind of dusty in here today, and looks like it’s causing you trouble.”

The kid dropped the sack into the beans, and turned away. “Thanks,” he said quietly, as he swiped an oversized sleeve across his eyes.

Gant wanted to fill that bag to the top, but he knew the kid well enough to know he wouldn’t want that. Just his nickel’s worth, fair and square. HG finished the task . . . then

threw another handful in anyway . . . and a bit more.

“All done.” Gant walked back and set the bag of beans next to the jerky and cheese. As the kid slowly slogged over to join him, HG reached under his counter and pulled out a burlap sack. He loaded the kid’s items into it and then held it out.

The kid took the bag and faced HG, his blue eyes done shedding tears, now full of gratitude. “Thanks for everything, Mr. Gant. I’ll look that Mr. Campbell up.”

“You do that. Take care of yourself.”

“I try.”

*‘You certainly do, kid.’*

“Adios.”

The kid hefted his bag and gave a little wave, then turned to leave. Just at the door, Gant called out, “Hey, kid. What’s your name?”

He didn’t turn back, just kind of dropped his head and peered back over his shoulder, bearing that beguiling lopsided smile. “Johnny. I’m Johnny.”



“Johnny?”

There was still no answer.

“Johnny? Son?” Murdoch Lancer tried a third time to gain his son’s attention. But Johnny just continued to squat near the counter by the pantry. He stared intently at something small cupped in his hand that he’d picked up off the kitchen floor well over a minute before.

Scott hovered in the doorway. Teresa sat next to Murdoch at the dining table. Maria stood at the stove. Murdoch looked to them all, but

everyone seemed as confused as himself by Johnny's remote behavior.

Johnny finally stood and turned toward the stove. "You cookin' beans today, Maria?"

The housekeeper glanced at Murdoch, her eyes wide, clearly embarrassed that she had been addressed while the patrón had been ignored. Murdoch nodded his approval to answer. "No, Juanito. I cook beans yesterday."

Johnny held up his right hand to reveal a dried bean trapped firmly between his thumb and forefinger. "You let one get away." He dropped the bean back into his palm, and again stared at it intently. "You can never have too many dried beans," he stated philosophically. "They'll get you through the hardest times."

He grasped the bean firmly, and headed into the pantry. The distinctive scrape of a

stoneware lid could be heard, then a soft chink as it was set back on its pot.

Johnny came out of the pantry and crossed right over to the outer door. He pulled his hat off a peg and set it on his head as he turned. "You workin' today, Boston?" he lightheartedly called to his brother across the room.

"Right behind you, Johnny."

Without another word Johnny opened the kitchen door and closed it firmly behind him.

Teresa picked up her fork and poked idly at her remaining breakfast. Maria turned back to the stove and stirred at the contents of a big stew pot. Scott slowly pulled on his work gloves. Murdoch nursed his now tepid cup of coffee.

All were left to contemplate the value of little things.



## SONS: A HOMECOMING

### BY JOAN



#### Scene One

A bed! He was in a bed – just maybe the softest, most comfortable bed he'd ever felt in gentle hand stroked his forearm, and then touched his face. He wanted to reach out and hold her hand, but he couldn't seem to move. He sighed again, as warmth suffused his body. He started to turn his head towards her, wondering if she was beautiful. Suddenly his instincts kicked in and he froze in place, hoping it wasn't too late.

Just where was he exactly? He had no recollection of getting a room, or of finding anyone to share it with. He could still feel a presence, her female presence, close by. He tensed, listening intently, holding his breath, not daring to open his eyes even a fraction to try to determine if he recognized this place.

A door creaked open and he heard a deep male voice, gruff but not unkind, speaking quietly, obviously not used to using that sort of caution, "How is he?"

A young woman answered, "No change. I thought he was coming around just a moment ago, but I was wrong. He's so pale. I wish Sam would get here."

Johnny found himself liking this voice. He could tell the girl was young, probably still in her teens, and he almost blushed as he remembered his recent reaction to her soothing touch. She sounded calm though, someone to rely on for all her youth, for all her distress. Was she upset about him?

"He's on his way, Teresa. Be patient." The male voice ended in a sigh, "I just wish he didn't have to be in here." Johnny could hear the man's frown and felt a surge of anger – yet another prejudiced gringo, another who thought Johnny Madrid wasn't good enough to be under his roof.

The young woman cut in quickly, "This is the best place. We can't use Scott's room – he'll be here any day now. And it's too soon to use Daddy's," the voice broke and Johnny felt a strong desire to comfort her.

To his surprise the male voice softened, "I'm sorry, Darling. You're right. It - it's good to see this room open again. If my son can't be here . . ." and the voice trailed off, leaving Johnny feeling confused, his anger draining away. He felt a shadow of sorrow radiating from this man, and wondered if the room's former occupant had died. He drifted off to sleep again, deciding he was safe and that getting answers could wait for a while.

#### Scene Two

Johnny lay awake, listening intently. He was aware of a cool, gentle breeze coming in the window, along with the sounds of horses passing by, and the farther off shouts of workers apparently wrapping up for the day. He was on the second floor he decided, judging from the distance of the noises coming from below.

What he couldn't hear was anyone breathing. This time he was alone, he was sure of it. He

took the chance of opening his eyes, mere slits in the falling darkness.

It was still light enough that he could get a sense of the room. It was spacious and tidy, but with an unused look. There wasn't a speck of dust where the soft light of sunset caressed the dresser top. He turned his head, and immediately wished he hadn't. Sharp pain crashed down around him, making him feel nauseated and even more confused. As he took deep, slow breaths, trying to get both his unruly stomach and the pain under control, he felt the edge of panic nudging at him again.

What could have happened to him? Had he been shot – a head wound? He slowly – very slowly – raised a tentative hand to his head. Bandages! He struggled to remember anything that might clear up the mystery. Was he in enemy hands? He had heard there was a range war going on; that's why he had decided to head north in the first place. A trigger happy guard might have decided to shoot first and ask questions later. As he lowered his hand, a cheery voice spoke from the open doorway, "You're awake!"

It was her – Teresa, the man had called her. She bustled over to the bed and looked down into his face. He had a glimpse of kind brown eyes before she turned away to wet a cloth. He studied her more closely as she wiped his sweat soaked face, tutting over his increased pallor.

"Dr. Jenkins says you're to lie still." She gave him a concerned smile. He tried to smile back, but knew he hadn't managed the usual charming grin that he liked to bestow on pretty girls. And she was indeed pretty, very much so, with her long brown hair, large eyes, and delicate features. And young, he reminded himself sharply, not more than fifteen or sixteen would be his guess, way too young for the likes of him.

"Dr. Jenkins?" He was surprised the words came out, though his voice sounded raspy to his own ears. Her smile brightened. She was clearly pleased that he could attempt to carry on a conversation, "Yes, Sam Jenkins. He was here earlier this evening. You were awake and talked to him briefly while he examined you and wrapped up your head. He says you have a concussion, and that you should rest in bed at least until he comes back to check on you tomorrow. He seemed quite sure you would be fine though."

Johnny vaguely remembered them mentioning that Sam was on the way but he had no recollection of meeting the man. At his puzzled frown, Teresa guessed what the problem was, "Don't worry if you don't remember much about Sam's visit. He said you'd be pretty foggy about things for the next day or so."

"What happened?" He felt his voice going, so he ended quickly, "Shot?"

"No! One of the hands found you on his way back through the mountains. It looks as if your horse slipped, and you fell and hit your head on the rocks. You were lucky Cipriano found you. That trail isn't very well traveled."

Johnny mulled over the information, willing it to come back to him, but he couldn't remember anything about a fall, anymore than he could remember Dr. Jenkins. He knew that would just be the concussion though – it's not as if this was the first one he'd ever had. And at least he remembered the girl. He almost smiled as that crossed his mind.

A sudden thought came to him, and he frowned instead, "Horse?" The girl looked sad and he knew the answer before she spoke. "I'm sorry. Cipriano had to put him down." Johnny pressed his lips tight together and turned his head away, not wanting this mere slip of a girl to know how attached he had

been to his horse, his only real friend and companion for the last two years.

He sensed that she was about to offer him sympathy and he spoke quickly to head her off, “Where,” his voice abruptly left him, and he had to try again, “Where am I?”

Putting down the wet cloth, and sitting on the edge of the chair next to the bed, Teresa announced proudly, “You are at the most beautiful place in the whole wide world! Lancer!”

Johnny turned his head sharply to look at her, and felt things going black – whether it was the knowledge he was in his father’s house, or the abrupt movement, he didn’t know, but he was sure he was about to be sick. Teresa realized it too and grabbed a basin, as Johnny wretched uncontrollably.

When he finally lay back against the pillows, his skin pallid and clammy, she helped him take a sip of water and then gently lectured him, “I warned you to lie still.” She again wiped his face with the damp cloth and watched him closely as his colour gradually returned to normal.

“Sorry,” Johnny whispered softly, and was rewarded with another gentle wipe of the cloth. “Tell me – tell me about Lancer.” He spoke so softly she almost didn’t hear.

### Scene Three

Teresa had given him a great deal to think about before he had fallen asleep. He had tried hard to stay awake, to keep her talking, but she had been adamant. He couldn’t blame her really, not after he heard about the recent violent death of her father. When he woke, again checking his room through half closed eyes, he realized she was still there, watching over him. A small smile touched his lips as he considered how good it felt to have a friend.

It had been a long time since he had anyone he could truly put that label on, but he had come to feel this girl could well fit into that category. He smiled a little more as he thought of his last true friend – a young man about his own age, the son of a Southern California rancher who had hired his services during a range war several years back, when he was barely twenty. The rancher had not been pleased that his son had gravitated to the young gunman, but had not gone so far as to forbid the friendship between them. He certainly hadn’t understood how much the relationship had meant to Johnny. The two boys quickly became fast friends, while Johnny had been planning the protection of the ranch and its residents.

When the attack came, Johnny had been seriously wounded saving both father and son. He’d been asked to stay on, to be part of the family, but he knew he couldn’t do that. His smile faltered as he thought of why – the same reason that he could never think about having family and friends around him – it was just too dangerous, for them and for him. That’s why he had given his affection and trust only to his stallion, but now even his brave Fuego, with his coat as red as a fiery sunset, was gone.

He was startled by a concerned voice, as Teresa rose from her chair, “Are you alright? Is the pain worse?”

His smile returned as he realized she had been watching him that closely. “I’m fine,” he assured her. Her warm brown eyes studied him seriously, and after fixing his pillows, she settled back in her chair without further comment.

Johnny nestled back comfortably against the soft pillows, annoyed with himself for allowing his emotions to show on his face. As his thoughts continued to wander aimlessly, he tried to school his features, especially as he

thought about Murdoch Lancer. On one hand he hoped to have a chance to meet the man, to form his own opinion, untouched by the hatred his mother seemed to feel for the man who had fathered him; on the other, he dreaded such a meeting, and hoped he could get away from the hacienda without ever having to see the man at all.

He knew Lancer had been shot in the same attack that had killed Teresa's father, and inexplicably he felt fear for his father, even though Teresa had said he was slowly recovering. His mind in turmoil, Johnny knew he had to get away from there as soon as he was able to ride.

Johnny was dozing again when he heard a deep voice asking, "How is our patient tonight, Teresa?" He caught his breath, recognizing the same voice he had heard when he first had awakened in this strange place. His father! He chanced a peek between barely cracked eyelids, and saw a tall man, a generally strong one who was surely frustrated by his weakened physical state. A man of strong emotions too, Johnny was willing to bet. He'd seen enough of such granite features to have learned that volatile temperaments often lurked behind a tough façade. With a deep breath, he opened his eyes, to face his father.

A closer look showed Johnny that his father was perhaps somewhat younger than he had first thought. It was the lines of pain around his eyes that seemed to age him, that and his slightly stooped posture as he walked with a cane that appeared to be too short for his large frame. Though his hair was grey, he had plenty of it. All in all, Murdoch Lancer was a formidable presence.

Brilliant blue eyes met pale blue grey, and both held the appraising gaze of the other. Johnny was surprised to see a small smile appear on the weathered face. "It's good to see

you awake. I hope you've been comfortable here."

The voice sounded a bit strained and Johnny remembered the earlier reluctance to have him in this room. Trying hard to mask his own confused thoughts, he attempted to focus on what seemed a harmless topic emotionally, but one that might teach him something about Murdoch Lancer.

"It's a right nice room, one of the best I've ever been in. Too bad I haven't felt well enough to enjoy it," he tried a carefree grin, but knew he failed dismally. Thankfully his father did not realize the true cause.

Murdoch Lancer paused a moment, and to Johnny's great surprise started to talk about him as a child, "This is, was my son's room. I lost John when he was just a little boy." Johnny felt his anger rising. This old man sounded as emotionless as if he was talking about the weather.

Johnny ruthlessly pushed his father, trying to get a reaction, "Your boy died?"

"No. His mother took him away from me. But one day he'll be back in this room, one day." Still the voice was cold, but just for a brief moment Johnny thought he saw a flash of pain in the alert eyes, which were still holding his.

Johnny knew he had to protect himself. He could not let this man see how affected he was by merely being in his presence. Murdoch pulled himself more erect, and Johnny felt a sense of relief that conversation would most likely be directed to safer topics.

His relief was short lived. "What's your name, boy?" Lancer asked him gruffly. Then, as if realizing he was taking his own anger at the past out on the younger man, he moderated his tone, "Do you have family we should be contacting?"

Johnny narrowed his eyes, “Don’t have no family! None worth mentioning anyway.” He took a perverse pleasure in insulting the man in front of him, even though his father had no way of knowing what he was doing.

He decided to take a chance, and find out just how hard his father was looking for his missing son. “The name’s Madrid, Johnny Madrid. Maybe you’ve heard of me?” Johnny smiled mockingly, and then felt a certain shame at his behaviour, especially in front of the girl who had been so kind to him.

“I can’t say that I have,” Johnny could feel the disapproval radiating from the older man, “though I expect that means you are well known in some circles.” Lancer had undoubtedly noticed his gun, and obviously had little use for gunfighters. Well, maybe he’d feel differently if he kept getting shot at.

Johnny had expected to feel a sense of victory that his old man hadn’t looked hard enough to find out his son was Johnny Madrid. Instead, he felt a profound sense of disappointment. He closed his eyes, wanting to close out the world. To his surprise, the older man’s voice softened, “Try to get some rest, son.”

*‘If only he meant that word,’* Johnny thought, as he felt the unaccustomed prick of tears. He drifted off to sleep wondering what the man had done to win the staunch support of his ward. Surely he wasn’t as cold and unfeeling as he seemed! The softly spoken word son kept echoing in his mind.

#### Scene Four

“**Y**ou are my SON,” the words penetrated his consciousness and he sat up with a gasp. As Teresa reached out to soothe him, Johnny flushed with embarrassment – just a stupid dream! For a moment, he’d thought that he’d been found out. It must have been brought on by his conversation with the old man.

“Did they wake you?” Teresa frowned, “I’ll have a word with Murdoch. They shouldn’t be shouting with an injured man in the house.”

Johnny was still disoriented, but also felt an urgent need to find out what he had really overheard. “Who was the old man yelling at?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Scott,” she sighed. Johnny remembered hearing a mention when he had first awakened – how long ago was that anyway? – that Scott would soon arrive.

“Who’s Scott?” Johnny knew that somehow the answer was critical to his future, but he didn’t know why.

“Scott is Murdoch Lancer’s son,” she explained. Johnny fell back against his pillows, his face ashen. Oh, he’d known that this would be the answer, but to have it confirmed took his breath away. Concerned, Teresa quickly poured him water, and pushed aside his unruly black hair to feel his forehead. Johnny tried to smile. He couldn’t let her see just why he was so upset.

“I’m just tired, Teresa. Don’t be worryin’ about me.” As Teresa returned to her chair, Johnny decided to find out all he could about Scott Lancer – his brother! His breath caught in his throat again, but at Teresa’s sharp glance he quickly brought himself under control.

“I thought Lancer said his son had disappeared.” Johnny was pleased his voice was so steady.

“He was talking about his younger son, Johnny,” Teresa explained. “Scott is the son of his first wife, Catherine. He met her when he first came to America from Scotland, and she came west to California with him, against her father’s wishes. Unfortunately she died in childbirth and Scott was taken to Boston by

his rich grandfather. As far as I know, Murdoch never saw Scott until today.”

Johnny frowned, “He just met his son today? Why was he shoutin’ at him? Ain’t he glad to have him here?”

Johnny was finding Murdoch Lancer harder and harder to fathom. He stored away the part about Scotland though, wondering if he dared ask his father any questions about the country so far away. He had met a Scotsman once, but his accent was so strong that Johnny could barely make out a word the man was saying. Of course, he had been a recent immigrant – and Murdoch had been away from his homeland for decades now. He smiled to himself as he thought of Jock MacPherson. He had been stunned to see the broad shouldered young man wearing a kilt, but had quickly come to admire the other man’s strength and bravery, as they had fought side by side to save MacPherson’s small property from an expansion minded neighbour. His smile broadened as he tried to picture old man Lancer in a kilt – but his imagination just wasn’t good enough for that.

Puzzled by Johnny’s sudden changes of mood, Teresa was worried that his head injury may have been more serious than Sam had first thought. She decided to keep a close eye on him, while she told him a bit about the newest Lancer to arrive at the ranch.

“Of course Murdoch is happy to have him here. For years he’s written and never heard a word back. He sent presents at Christmas and birthdays, but they were never acknowledged. Finally he hired the Pinkertons to get a message to Scott. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I’d like him much. I thought he would look down on us, because he’s so wealthy and well-educated. But he seems really nice. He’s handsome, and smart, and very polite. I’m sure he never received Murdoch’s letters – he would have written back if he had, at least

once he was old enough to do as he pleased. I can’t wait to hear stories about his life in Boston. I bet he’s been to the theatre and fancy dances and seen lots of beautiful places.” She ended with a sigh.

Johnny felt a surge of jealousy – he was pretty darn sure she wouldn’t want to hear about his past life, scrabbling his way through the border towns as a penniless child, or fighting in every range war he came across, trying to build a reputation for himself.

Teresa frowned as she noted the dark look on Johnny’s face. She hoped he wasn’t like so many western men, who looked down on easterners. Scott seemed a confident and competent young man, well versed in the ways of war, if not in the ways of the west.

“Scott has a plan to trap the land pirates. He was in the cavalry during the Civil War. And he apparently studied about battle tactics at Harvard too. Murdoch thinks it’s too risky though. He doesn’t want to lose Scott as soon as he’s found him.” She looked at Johnny speculatively, “Maybe you could help them make it work.”

When Johnny next woke, he knew she wasn’t there, and almost sighed aloud, unsure if it was in relief or disappointment. He had come to count on her reassuring presence, but he had a lot of thinking to do. He owed the Lancers, and not because they were family, but he hated to sign on to a fight he knew so little about. He had to be sure Murdoch Lancer was in the right. From what Teresa had told him, it would seem so, but her opinion had to be coloured by the death of her father and by her affection for her guardian.

He suddenly realized that someone was in the room with him after all, and he was pretty sure it wasn’t his old man. The faint but crisp sound of the material in the man’s clothing, and a hint of cologne, told him this must be

Scott. He turned his head and opened his eyes. Knowing blue eyes looked back at him. “I hope you weren’t playing possum on my account,” the visitor’s smile was genuine, and a hint of humour sparked in his eyes.

Johnny took a quick inventory of his brother’s appearance. It was hard to tell since he was seated, but he looked to be tall, not as tall as their father, but he certainly had several inches on Johnny. Scott was very slim, but he had a wiry look about him, as if he was stronger than he appeared at first glance. It was the face Johnny came back to though, looking for something of his own appearance, and not finding it. Scott was blonde haired and very fair skinned, quite a contrast to his own dark looks. The light blue eyes were still regarding him, more seriously now, “Teresa suggested I talk to you, that you might be able to help us.”

Johnny liked the way his brother pronounced Teresa’s name, with a long “a” sound instead of an “e”. It reminded him of an old lady his mama had worked for when he was very young. That was the way she had pronounced her name too. Johnny had pleasant memories of a full tummy and a warm bed at Senora Teresa Mendoza’s house.

Johnny knew this was his opportunity to get the full story. He tried to sound disinterested, but he had the distinct feeling Scott wasn’t the least bit fooled, “Why don’t you tell me everything that’s goin’ on around here, and then I’ll decide if I can help you or not.”

### Scene Five

Johnny had heard some of the story before, of course, in bits and pieces from Teresa. He wondered why they trusted him enough to tell him so much, things he could take to the enemy if he was the sort to deal in betrayal. He was brought back to the present with a start by something Scott had said.

“Pardee? Day Pardee?”

“You know him?”

Johnny noted the slight hint of suspicion in Scott’s voice, but chose to ignore it. “Oh, ya, I know him. He’s a gunfighter and he’s pretty good,” Johnny sighed and then quirked a sardonic half smile at his older brother, “Yeah, I’d say you have some kind a’ trouble.”

Johnny well knew what Day Pardee was capable of, and realized that the odds against Lancer were even higher than he had expected.

Scott was eyeing Johnny speculatively, “I take it that you are a gunfighter too?” There was no censure in his voice, just a mild curiosity.

Johnny grinned broadly, “Yep, I am – and I’m pretty good too.” Scott laughed at the arrogance, no, the supreme confidence of the man sitting up in the bed across from him. He immediately became serious and looked searchingly at the dark haired man. “Can I trust you?”

Johnny would have laughed at the naivety of the question, except that he had a feeling this intelligent man was assessing him and would indeed be able to measure his worth. He decided an honest and serious answer was the only option.

“There are good and bad in any profession – and that’s what being a gunfighter is, it’s a profession. Just because I’m a gunfighter don’t mean I’m the same sort of man as Day Pardee. Many of us try to live by a code that even more of us respect. We try to pick the side that we think is right in a fight, not just the one with the money, or the one we think’s most likely to win. I don’t pretend to be better than I am, Lancer – but I would never shoot a man in the back, like Pardee did to your old man. And if I sign on for a fight, I fight til we

win, or til I die tryin'. I owe your family. They saved my life. If you want my help, you got it."

Johnny didn't usually say that much all at once, but he knew he had made the right choice, as Scott suddenly nodded and smiled grimly at him, "Let's talk strategy."

They were deep in discussions when they were interrupted by Murdoch coming in the door. He frowned as he overheard Scott telling the young gunman about their meager defenses and the fact that they only had eighteen men left, nineteen counting Scott. It had occurred to him that this stranger could already be allied to Pardee and he was having second thoughts about allowing Scott to talk to him at all, no matter how much confidence Teresa had in him, no matter how impressed he had been himself in his own brief talk with the boy.

Johnny met the older man's eyes, and before his father could speak, he cut in angrily, "You got something to say, Old Man, say it."

The coldness of the voice puzzled Scott, who looked up at his father in surprise, "Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, there's a problem, Scott," Johnny's voice was still like ice, "Your old man don't trust me."

Scott knew he had to diffuse the situation quickly. They needed Johnny's help, whether Murdoch believed it or not, and Scott did not want the stubborn old Scot to drive him away. Scott believed they could trust the young gunman, and his skills were an asset not to be wasted. Johnny also had a quick, analytical mind, and they had almost reached a consensus on the best plan to protect Lancer and end the threat from Pardee and his gang on a permanent basis.

"Murdoch, he wants to help us - and we can use all the help we can get! He knows this Pardee." Scott paused to glare at Murdoch, silently daring him to interrupt. "We can use that type of inside information."

Murdoch looked from one young man to the other, his eyes finally settling on Johnny, "I can pay you the going rate - though you may want your money up front, just in case."

"I don't want your money, Lancer." Johnny's voice was less harsh now, "I owe my life to Cipriano and Teresa. Besides, I never take my pay til after I win. If we don't win, I die right along with the rest a' ya."

Scott rose abruptly, relieved that his father and Johnny were both on side, "No more defeatist thinking, Gentlemen. Together, all of us, we'll beat those land pirates."

Johnny grinned and nodded, "Now if Teresa will just let me get out of this bed, we got work to do."

## Scene Six

Johnny waited just outside Morro Coyo. He reviewed the plan in his mind. He had been surprised at how astute Scott Lancer was. The man may not have been raised in the West, but he sure understood how to make a battle plan. And he wasn't long about it either - he could think on his feet. He would do well out here - provided they could save Lancer, of course.

Any doubts Johnny had had about the Easterner had faded away as they had tried to cover all the possible flaws in their plan. And Johnny felt sure that Scott had also come to respect him; he might not have a Harvard education but he was both a good judge of people and experienced in the rules, or lack of them, in western warfare. The only thing troubling Johnny was their inability to

convince Teresa that she had to leave the ranch; she was determined to stay and help fight for the land that her father had died protecting, and even Murdoch could not sway her resolve.

Rumour had it that Pardee had twenty-five men, more than there were Lancer defenders, and they would all be hardened and ruthless. Strategy and skill were required. And luck, Johnny reminded himself as he nudged his borrowed horse forward, slowly riding the length of the rough main street.

There were few people about, and those that were walking the boardwalk scuttled along like frightened mice. “Yep, Day and his boys must be in town,” Johnny thought, with a hidden grin. He dismounted in front of the saloon, and entered quietly. As the occupants noticed him, the chatter and the few lazy card games came to a halt. His eyes found the man he sought, just as Pardee noticed him. “Day,” Johnny grinned and nodded at the smiling outlaw.

“Long time, Johnny Madrid. Care for a drink?” Johnny joined Pardee at a table in the back corner, and waited to begin his sales pitch. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Were you lookin’ for me?” Pardee asked. Johnny knew that carefree smile of Day’s hid a ruthless character.

“Yeah. I have some information ya might be interested in – if the price is right.”

“What price would that be, Johnny Boy?”

“A share of the profits – and I get the girl.” Johnny had added the last on the spur of the moment, as a possible way to protect Teresa, though he knew if Pardee got as far as the house, chances were good he and the Lancer men would already be dead.

“What girl would that be?” Pardee’s grin took on a feral aspect that Johnny, for all his experience with the man, found chilling.

Johnny returned the smile, “Lancer’s girl. She’s a right fine nurse. I could use her permanent like.”

Pardee laughed, “You do seem to attract your share of bullets, Madrid. So what can you do to help me?”

“We got a deal?” Johnny narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Sure,” Pardee nodded, “You help me get Lancer and you get the same cut as any of the boys – plus the girl.”

Johnny nodded in return, knowing full well Pardee could not be trusted – but then, neither could he, not this time. A part of him hated what he was doing. His word had always been his bond, and he did not want to damage his reputation. That could come back to haunt him when the time came for him to move on – and he would be moving on, he was pretty sure of that, no matter how much he wanted to get to know his family.

“I had a little accident, been stayin’ at the Lancer ranch. I heard a few things. They’re getting ready for you, Day. Got reinforcements coming in tonight, and then they plan to wipe you out. In the meantime, the men they got are setting up a perimeter to the south and west. That’s how they expect you to come in. We can take the house easy today, if we come in from the northeast. But we should start soon, before those reinforcements get too close.”

Pardee looked at him suspiciously, “And they just told you all this?”

Johnny grinned back. “A’ course not. But a man can learn a lot when folks think he’s

unconscious. This mornin' I thanked them nicely and insisted I had to be on my way, that I had a job waitin' for me down south."

Pardee eyed him closely for a moment, then grinned and stood up, "Mount up!"

Johnny smiled to himself – now he just had to lead Pardee and his men straight into Scott's trap. He had no fears; he knew his brother would be there to back him up.

### Scene Seven

A bed! He was in a bed – just maybe the softest, most comfortable bed he'd ever felt in his entire life. What had he done to deserve such luxury? Even with the feeling that he had been here before nagging at the back of his mind, he sighed in contentment, and waited for a gentle hand to stroke his arm and touch his face.

He nearly gasped when the rough, work-worn hand brushed his forehead and a gruff voice whispered, "No fever, anyway."

Then he heard Scott's voice and relaxed, "I'll sit with him for a while, Murdoch. You check on Teresa and get some rest."

"Maybe I will, son."

Johnny felt a pang of envy, knowing that the word son would never be said to him like that, not once Murdoch knew the truth. He remembered back to his first meeting with the man, and how Murdoch has said the word so easily to him then, when it really had meant nothing. Would an upstanding man like Murdoch Lancer want Johnny Madrid for a son? Johnny made an effort to smooth out his breathing. He did not want Scott to realize he was awake, not yet anyway. He desperately wanted the opportunity to get to know this man, his brother! His brother, who had no idea of that fact, but who treated him with

such respect. When he had first awakened, he had thought maybe it had all been a dream, that Scott did not even exist. He was amazed at how glad he felt, knowing he really did have a big brother.

Johnny felt a flush of shame at his initial doubts of the Easterners abilities. Scott had more than held his own in planning and executing the battle to protect Lancer. But even more important, Scott did not look down his nose at Johnny or at the vaqueros, like the few Easterners Johnny had met in the past had done. Scott was a good man, but would he be able to forgive Johnny for his dishonesty?

Johnny knew he had to tell both his father and brother the truth, and the sooner the better. But he was afraid! He could admit that to himself, if to no one else. Afraid he would be rejected. It was one thing for them to like a gunman who was just an employee. But would they want one for a son and a brother?

And what about his Mexican heritage? What would his brother think of that? Sure it did not seem to matter when it was the ranch hands, but for a brother? And he still could not understand his father. If Lancer hadn't wanted a half breed child, like Johnny's mother had told him, why would he want a half breed adult for a son? Yet everything he had seen of Murdoch Lancer made what he had been told by his mother seem less and less likely. And there was Teresa's unwavering belief in the man, that he was desperate to have his younger son back at Lancer.

Johnny's head began to ache, from thinking in circles. He could not stifle a moan, and found Scott instantly at his side. "Johnny? Can I get you anything?"

"No. I'm fine."

Scott helped him to a sitting position and reached for a glass of water. “What happened to me this time?” Johnny sounded irritable.

Scott couldn’t help but grin. “Your back got in the way of a bullet, courtesy of your old friend, Pardee.”

“I guess Lancer must be safe, or I wouldn’t be back in this bed.”

“Safe and sound, Johnny. We sprang the trap just as planned, and Pardee’s men were overwhelmed in minutes. We have a few injuries, but no fatalities on our side. Everything went according to plan.”

“Well, not quite everythin’, Scott, or I wouldn’t be stuck here in this bed again.”

The two men looked at each other, and Scott burst out laughing. Johnny was sure he had Scott’s friendship – but could he win him over as a brother?

### Scene Eight

Johnny was delighted to be downstairs again. The bullet Pardee had put in his back had left him bedridden longer than he could tolerate, especially so soon after his last injury. The Lancers had held a celebration dinner for him, to acknowledge his first trip down to the great room. Johnny felt a sense of contentment that he had never experienced before. He felt as if he belonged here, with his family.

Johnny pulled his thoughts to a sudden stop. He could not allow himself to go down that road. These people might be his family, but they did not know that. Still, they treated him with respect, and even with a fondness that shocked him. He felt that he was more genuinely welcomed in their midst than he had ever been by any other client.

He sat on the couch nursing a glass of tequila, resting next to his brother, who was telling a story about a recent event he had attended in Boston. Johnny drank in the detail, trying to imagine walking with a pretty girl through snow covered streets, on his way to attend a sleigh ride.

Murdoch’s voice broke the spell that Scott was weaving. “Johnny, you shouldn’t get too tired. I can help you back to bed when you’re ready.”

“I can make it by myself.” Johnny’s voice sounded harsher than he had intended, but he wondered if Murdoch was trying to get rid of him, so he could spend some time alone with Scott and Teresa.

As if reading his thoughts, Murdoch smiled, “I know you can. But you don’t have to. And I know you can decide for yourself when you need to rest. I just wanted to remind you to be careful. Besides, Teresa here was about to send you straight off to bed, so I thought I’d better get in there first.”

Murdoch smiled at his ward, who blushed, “Sam said Johnny shouldn’t get overtired, and he’s been up for hours,” she defended herself.

Johnny again felt a flush of warmth and belonging. It was a novel experience to feel so cared for. Not since his mother died had he mattered to anyone. He turned his smile on the girl he had come to admire so much, “Don’t worry, Querida, I won’t stay up too much longer. I just want to finish my drink and then I’ll head upstairs.”

“Okay then. I think I’ll tidy up the kitchen and go to bed myself,” she turned to Murdoch, “Good night. See you in the morning, Scott.” She smiled at her “big brother”.

As they watched her leave, Murdoch said, "Scott and I did want to talk to you, Johnny, if you feel up to a business discussion."

Johnny tensed and his smile hardened, "You think you need a gunfighter on the payroll full time?"

"That isn't what we had in mind, Johnny. We do hope you'll stay though."

Murdoch slowly got up from his chair behind the desk, and crossed the room to stand by the fireplace, his back to the room. He took a deep breath, and as he turned around Johnny was surprised at the look of despair on the older man's face. It quickly disappeared, to be replaced by a stern resolve, "Scott and I have talked about this. We would like to make you a partner in Lancer."

Johnny couldn't keep the look of shock off of his face, so Scott plunged in quickly, ready to head off some of Johnny's expected objections. "Murdoch offered me a share, because I was willing to fight for what was ours. Well, you fought for it too, Johnny, and there was nothing in it for you. You didn't even want us to pay you. We, Murdoch and I, talked about how well you seemed to fit in here. Johnny, it's as if you belong here. Maybe if you stay, you can help me to fit in too. We would all three be equal partners."

"Only I'd call the tune," Murdoch inserted firmly.

Johnny was having trouble grasping what these men were offering him – but he was also confused and angry that they would offer what was rightfully his, Johnny Lancer's, to a gunhawk just passing through. Then the answer came to him, and he turned to Murdoch, his eyes again icy cold, "You want me to replace your son." It wasn't a question. "And if he comes back, it'll be time for me to hit the road."

Murdoch was surprised at the heated reaction, but decided he had better be honest with the young man he had come to treasure like family. He took a step towards the couch, and spoke calmly, "No, Johnny. No one can replace my son. But John will never be coming back to Lancer. I heard from the Pinkerton Agency. My son died several months ago, in front of a firing squad in Mexico."

As Murdoch found he could not go on, Scott rose from his place next to Johnny to offer his father support. Johnny was glad neither of them saw him shiver, as he thought of how close to the truth this really had been. Murdoch took another deep breath, and another step closer to Johnny, Scott by his side this time. "No one can replace my son," he repeated. "But you said yourself that you have no family. I would like you to become part of this family - just as Teresa has."

They meant it! Johnny tried to rally his conflicted thoughts, "You know that having a gunfighter living here could cause problems. Johnny Madrid can't just retire. People will come lookin' for me, will still be lookin' to challenge me. I'd have to keep in practice."

"I understand that." Murdoch said quietly.

"It could be dangerous, for all of you."

"We understand the risk," Scott assured him.

"I ain't used to working on a schedule, and I don't take orders too good," Johnny tried.

"I can teach you some tricks I learned in the cavalry," said Scott with a smile.

"What if the Pinkertons are wrong? What if your Johnny is still alive?" A swift flash of pain crossed Murdoch's face, and Johnny felt a stab of guilt – but he had to know that he was wanted at Lancer, both as Johnny Madrid and as Johnny Lancer.

He was surprised at how steady his father's voice was, "We will add a clause to the contract stating that if my son Johnny ever returns to Lancer, the ranch will be shared four ways." Murdoch looked over at his older son, and was relieved by Scott's nod.

Johnny said softly, "I'm not worried about losin' a share of the ranch. I need to know you'll always want me here."

Murdoch searched the brilliant blue eyes, so much like those of his own little boy so many years ago, and saw the fears that the young man tried so hard to hide. There was much he did not know about this boy, but he felt sure it had been a very long time since Johnny had felt safe and loved. Murdoch planned to change all that. He knew part of the reason was because he had been unable to protect his own boy, but he also felt inexplicably drawn to this young man, more than the circumstances warranted, and he could not ignore his instincts. He knew in his heart he could trust Johnny Madrid.

"Johnny, Lancer is your home for as long as you want it to be. Ranching is a hard life, as I'm sure you already know. But I hope you'll want to stay."

"And so do I, Johnny," Scott's voice said warmly, "I think we make a great team."

Johnny flashed his unsuspecting brother a quick grin, and then sobered as he said with conviction, "So do I, Boston, so do I."

Johnny rose from the couch, "I think I better go lie down. I need some time to think."

"Take all the time you need, Johnny. I know it's not a decision to be made lightly, just as it wasn't easy for Scott," Murdoch acknowledged his older son with a nod and a smile.

As Johnny turned towards the stairs, Scott added with a smile, "And tomorrow, if you're up to it, we should take a walk out to the corral so that you can meet that palomino stallion I've seen you eying from your bedroom window for the past week."

## Scene Nine

Johnny knew he had to tell the truth and tell it soon. Murdoch Lancer might receive a follow up Pinkerton report any day, one that would tell him that Johnny Lancer and Johnny Madrid were one and the same. Johnny wanted his father to hear that from him, or how could there ever be any trust between them again?

This man had offered him a level of trust he had never experienced before, and had done so knowing only that even though Johnny Madrid was a gunfighter, he did try to live by a strong code of ethics, a code that Murdoch Lancer could relate to, one not unlike his own. Maybe this surprised the older man, but it had obviously impressed him too, or he would not have been willing to entrust one third of his beloved ranch to a stranger just because that stranger had helped to save that ranch for him.

Johnny paused briefly outside the door, and then walked hesitantly into the great room, without his usual confident stride. He saw the look of concern in the older man's eyes, "Is your back bothering you, John?"

Johnny rather liked it when his father called him John. He had seldom heard it in the past, though he had been called Juan as a child. He remembered with a chill that Day Pardee was one of the few to refer to him as John, but he resolutely pushed that thought aside. Maybe it was less the name than the warmth of Murdoch's voice anyway. "No. I just need to talk to you for a minute, you and Scott." Johnny acknowledged the other man who was

seated on the sofa reading. The book cover caught Johnny's eye, *'Charles Dickens? That book looks long. Scott's smilin' though, so it must be good. I liked the one he read to me when I was stuck in bed. I must ask him about this one – if I get the chance,'* he thought, grimacing slightly.

As both men looked at him curiously, and with growing concern, he realized they were afraid he had decided to leave them after all. They didn't realize that decision would now rest with them.

Johnny cleared his throat, "It's about your son. Johnny Lancer isn't dead." The words came out barely above a whisper.

Murdoch rose from his chair at the desk and glared in disbelief at the young man, who had his head down, not meeting the irate old man's eyes. "Are you saying you knew my son?" His voice was hard, and his anger at being lied to by the young man he had trusted was clearly evident on his face.

Johnny slowly raised his head and met his father's blazing eyes, "I'm sayin'," he paused and licked his lips, "I'm sayin' I am your son."

### Epilogue

Johnny sat on the corral fence watching his much loved palomino - Barranca, he had named him Barranca. He remembered back to that day in the great room over a month ago. He remembered his fear as he watched the anger on his father's face finally give way to shock. He had felt a momentary relief – maybe the old man wouldn't yell at him after all. He had a healthy respect for his father's vocal cords – and with a brief smile he thought back to the day he had heard Murdoch Lancer shouting at Scott, "You are my SON." Then he sighed to himself. As grateful as he was to have escaped some of the wrath that he knew was well deserved, he

was still waiting for his father to direct that word, son, to him.

Murdoch had slowly approached him, the stunned look still on his face, and had reached out tentatively to touch his cheek. "Johnny," he mouthed the word, no sound coming out. Scott had watched them, fascinated, wanting to go to his brother, but realizing how much this moment meant to his father. "I should have known, I should have been able to recognize my own boy," the guilt in Murdoch's voice was palpable.

Johnny managed a tentative smile, "I reckon I've changed some."

Murdoch hesitated and then smiled in return, "Just a bit," and his smile broadened, "You still remind me of your mother though." Murdoch turned away abruptly, and headed for his desk. He hesitated for a moment, then opened a drawer, and took out two small silver frames. He stood, one picture held in each hand, not really looking at either of them, but instead contemplating the past.

Finally Murdoch held one of the tiny frames out to Scott, who stepped forward hesitantly to take it from the outstretched hand. "I expect your grandfather has many finer pictures of your mother, but I always loved this one of Catherine. We had it taken soon after we arrived in California. I thought you might like it for your room. You are so like her, son. Not just in looks – though you have got your mother's eyes – but in temperament and your direct, common sense approach to life. I know I should have said it sooner – I'm glad you're here, son, and even happier that you plan to stay."

Scott had no chance to reply, if he had been able, as Murdoch turned immediately to his younger son. He held out the other picture, "This one of Maria was taken soon after you were born, John. Maybe you'd like to have it."

Murdoch did not seem to notice that Johnny had practically snatched the small picture from his hand and was staring at it through tears that he tried hard to blink away. He had never seen a picture of his mother, and other than in his dreams he found it hard to remember exactly what she looked like. This picture represented everything he wanted to remember about her. She looked down lovingly at an infant, at him, just the way he could remember her looking at him when he was sick or hurt, ready to soothe away any pain and protect him from the outside world.

“You are so like your mother as well, John. I should have seen it before. You’ve got your mother’s temper.” Before Johnny had a chance to be offended, Murdoch surprised him with a nostalgic chuckle, “Maria and I used to shout a lot – but she kept me on my toes. I expect you will too. She made me feel alive again, Johnny. I’ll always be grateful to her for that, and for giving me you.”

Johnny unconsciously clutched the picture tightly to his chest, secure at last in the belief that his father had loved his mother after all, had loved and wanted both of them.

Murdoch sighed, “I know it’s all past, past and gone, but I hope one day we’ll be comfortable enough together that we can sit down and really talk about those early days. I want you both to understand what it was like here then, and to know how much your mothers, both of them,” he looked at each son in turn, first Scott, then Johnny, “contributed to the dream that has become Lancer.”

The month since then had been one of ups and downs for all of them. Scott had proven to be just the big brother that Johnny had always wanted, but he could not help feeling a flash of resentment at the way he was expected to follow his brother’s advice, just because he was younger. But then he remembered the numerous times that Scott had intervened to

turn away their father’s anger at Johnny’s tardiness or his insolence, often with the result that Scott was the one on the receiving end of Murdoch’s sharp tongue. And then there was the way Scott called him “little brother” or “boy”, with no hint of condescension, in just the right tone to give Johnny a sense of belonging and family.

Things were good with Scott. Oh, they still had a lot to learn about each other, but both of them were more than ready to invest the time. It was his relationship with Murdoch that concerned him. Since that evening in the great room, Murdoch had held him at arm’s length, as if trying to make up his mind to let Johnny in. And Johnny knew he was treating Murdoch the same way. They were both afraid to make the first move – at least he was, and he hoped that was all it was with his father, not that Murdoch had come to regret asking the gunfighter to stay and be part of the Lancer family.

There had been one hint of progress – Barranca. The day after Murdoch had learned the truth about his son, he had joined Johnny at the corral fence. Murdoch nodded at the handsome stallion, “Scott tells me you’ve been making friends with this one.”

Johnny nodded, his eyes following the palomino as it moved restlessly around the corral. “If you can break him, he’s yours. Just no riding until Sam says it’s alright.”

Johnny had smiled in delight – and had made the most of the intervening time. He and Barranca were sworn partners now, and although he had hidden his pleasure, he had been thrilled at his father’s obvious pride in his success with the magnificent animal.

Johnny pushed away from the fence, heading for Barranca. He was determined that he would ride today, regardless of what Sam Jenkins had said. Another week! He was tired

of putting his life on hold. Barranca was ready to go. Johnny had been saddling the restive stallion regularly for some days now, and leading him on runs around the corral. Sure, he was aware he still tired easily, but he also knew that the best way to beat that was to do what he loved most – ride! And no horse would do but Barranca.

He tightened the cinch, over Barranca's snort of protest, and raised his foot to the stirrup. Just as he settled his foot firmly and prepared to mount, he heard an angry shout, "Johnny, what do you think you're doing?"

Johnny's own temper flared, "What does it look like, Ol' Man? I'm going to ride Barranca, finally." He turned to face his father defiantly.

"No, Johnny, Sam said another week," Murdoch moderated his tone, having already discovered that shouting matches with this son got him nowhere. Not that he ever had shouting matches with Scott, not really – somehow they actually discussed things, and the next thing Murdoch knew they were going ahead with whatever his very convincing older son had suggested.

"I don't care what Sam said. I'm ridin' Barranca today." Johnny's belligerent tone brought Murdoch back to the here and now.

Johnny turned his back squarely on his irate father and made as if to mount, but was startled by a firm hand on his shoulder spinning him back to face the senior Lancer. He was not too angry himself to see that concern was warring with irritation on his father's features.

"John, you are my SON, and you-" Murdoch stopped speaking abruptly at the unexpected

smile that spread across Johnny's face. At first he thought his son was making fun of him, but he quickly realized that the pleasure shining on Johnny's features was genuine.

"Johnny, son, what-" Murdoch stopped again, as to his amazement the smile grew broader, until Johnny suddenly flushed and dropped his eyes.

"I never thought you would call me that." The whispered words took a moment to penetrate Murdoch's puzzled mind. Then it was his turn to blush.

He had never called Johnny son before! Oh, he had thought it countless times, but never said it out loud. He had been afraid of the reaction of this independently minded son. Not that Scott wasn't independent, too, but he would have been used to similar terms of endearment from his grandfather, or at least Murdoch hoped that he was. But Johnny had been on his own for so long, Murdoch had expected him to resent anything that would indicate that his father felt he had some degree of authority over him.

Murdoch rested his hands on Johnny's shoulders and waited until the younger man raised his head and met his eyes. Then he smiled and squeezed lightly, "You are a man any father would be proud to call son, John. I'm very glad to have you for my son, and thankful to have you here at Lancer. Always remember that."

At Johnny's nod, Murdoch released him and decided to take advantage of the lull in verbal warfare, which he was sure would only be temporary, "Now let's get that saddle off of Barranca and go see what's for dinner."



## MATTIE'S LOVE

### BY LINDA BORCHERS

"I never knew a man could find so much in the night," Johnny whispered. "I never knew life could be so sweet."

It should have been wrong, what they did. But it wasn't.

He combed his fingers through her hair. She said it was blonde, and he could see it, long and soft, as gold as straw waving gently in the breeze. And it smelled of her, of the soap she used. And so many other things...as if everything she touched left a scent in those beautiful strands.

And her skin, smooth as silk. His fingertips stroked her cheek, and he could feel her skin warm to his touch. So many things he could feel in this darkness. Her head was cradled against his bare chest, her breath tickling his hair, and he laughed softly.

"Ah, querida, I wish this moment never had to end," he sighed.

And her finger gently tapped his lips, twice . . . Yes . . .

Johnny opened his eyes and saw the darkness, but he wasn't afraid. He welcomed it, with all the heightened senses it brought with it.

He squeezed her against him tighter, feeling her body next to his. Love this pure and honest was never wrong. He slowly walked his fingers down her face, stopping to feel the tip of her nose, her soft lips that he had kissed so gently that night. Her chin was strong and

his fingers found a tiny cleft there that deepened as she smiled.

"You are so beautiful, Mattie," he breathed.

One tap – No . . .

"What are you talking about? I may be blind, but I can see you just perfectly."

She snuggled into him closer, the contour of her body melding with his.

"Do you regret what we did?" he asked. She was so young, only twenty. Did he have the right?

She tapped his lips once . . . No . . . and her lips were on his, soft and ever so sweet.

Yes, he could live in this darkness if he had her by his side.

"Mattie . . ." he whispered and closed his eyes. "Don't ever leave me."

One single tap and he closed his eyes, letting sleep reclaim him.

There were things to worry about, life and death decisions to make. But not now. Not at this moment. This was a moment in time he would never experience again and he breathed it in like the very air around him to sustain him and keep him alive. Mattie was his life and he didn't need anything else.



That was this morning, now he huddled next to her in the cellar, the smell of smoke choking his lungs as Mattie clutched him, terrified. Their nightmare was nearing an end. He didn't regret a thing that had happened between them in this cabin. But he did regret, beyond words, what was happening to them now.

He pulled her tighter against him, trying to shield her face from the smoke, as he replayed in his mind each moment of their lives together. Too short, and except for a short respite in the softness of her arms, to painful.



He had awoken later in the day, he could tell by the heat that had built up in the small shack. But it was not just the heat of the day that left him parched and perspiring. A fever had built over the last few hours and he could feel it draining his strength.

He could hear Mattie bustling around in her room, Lem's house, and even with her silence and his darkness he knew everything she did. The sound of water trickling back down into a basin told him that a cool cloth would ease the heat of his fever, and Mattie's gentle fingertips would answer his questions . . . one tap no, two taps yes. It was so tempting to just lie there and forget anyone or anything existed outside that old shack.

But the real world did exist and it was a dangerous place for both of them. The men who had beaten Lem to death and shot him were still out there. They would come looking for him. They had nearly found him at the doc's office. It was only a matter of time before they found him here.

He climbed out of bed on shaky legs and shuffled through the darkness, his hands exploring the walls, feeling objects on tables,

deciphering them by shape and weight. He found a shotgun hanging on the wall and broke it open, disappointed to find the chambers empty.

"Got any shells for this?" he asked.

One stomp of her foot . . . no.

Then she was putting a 45 caliber bullet in the palm of his hand. "Gunpowder?" Two taps on the top of his hand. Yes. "Get me something that will scatter." She was back with a hand full of nails.

Suddenly he heard the approach of horses in the distance.

"Hurry," he said, pushing the last of the nails into the barrel of the shotgun with a metal rod. It was surprisingly easy in this blackness that was his world now. He had taught himself to break down and rebuild a firearm blindfolded. Both pistol and rifle . . . they felt as sure in his hands as if they were born a part of him. Now he thanked God that he had spent hour after hour perfecting his skill. But was it enough?

"Help me aim this at the door."

They were getting too close . . . too fast. Three of them. He could hear the different gait of each horse. "Hurry!"

But she was dragging him out of the chair. "No, Mattie!" She had him off balance and he couldn't right his feet. He groped in the darkness with his free hand trying to stop his momentum. "No Mattie!" but she shoved him to the floor and then he was falling, his knees hitting painfully against the rungs of a wooden ladder before he landed hard on the cold, dirt floor of a cellar. She pushed something heavy over the opening and he tried to climb back up the ladder, pounding on the trap door, but she was pounding

herself . . . warning him to be quiet. He couldn't help her, not now, not like he was.

He listened as three heavy sets of footsteps mounted the porch and the door was slammed open. Where was Mattie . . . what was she doing?

He stood there, one foot on the first rung of the ladder, the shotgun held uselessly in his hand, listening. They demanded to know where he was, but she didn't answer . . . couldn't answer. His heart was in his throat. He damned his sightless eyes. Then the sound of two sets of footsteps crossed the porch and two horses galloped away.

It was now or never. Feeling his way back up the ladder, he pushed against the trap door with his shoulder and crawled out, listening for a sound, anything to tell him where Mattie and the intruder were.

He heard him talking from the bedroom and his heart leaped. He crawled on the floor, groping in the blackness until his hand felt the wall and he climbed to his feet, following it to the doorway leading into the bedroom.

Johnny raised the shotgun and pointed. He could tell exactly where their attacker stood. He could hear him breathing, could smell the stench of body odor, all his other senses overwhelmingly powerful, but the intruder saw his sightless stare. Johnny would never know how close he came to dying that moment. Suddenly the intruder was barreling into him, and he felt Mattie's body follow, the sound of a heavy knife clattering to the floor, then the unmistakable, deadly, sound of a head hitting the edge of the iron stove.

But it was only a short respite, the other two attackers returned. And even though they had managed to kill one more, the last man drove them to take cover in the cellar again. And now Mattie would take her last breath

standing next to him. With one arm wrapped around Mattie, and the other around the ladder that would have led them out of their death trap if not for the killer standing guard at the top, Johnny waited and did something he rarely did in his life, he prayed.

Like a cat toying with two mice, their killer taunted them. "Feels a little like a coffin down there, doesn't it, Lancer?" he laughed, pounding something heavy against the iron stove, then the unmistakable smell of smoke drifted down.

Johnny held Mattie tight against him, feeling her heart beat so fast against his chest that he feared it would explode any moment.

"Lo siento," he whispered.

It killed him to think that she would die like this; that she would have to feel the lick of the flames burning her skin. Desperately, he contemplated turning the revolver, taken from one of the dead men, on her. Of ending her life quickly and painlessly, then turning it on himself. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had fought all his life to survive, and now when he had someone so precious to protect he could not end it. There was always a chance...there was always hope.

"I love you," he whispered in Mattie's ear, her arms entwining him so hard he could barely breathe . . . she squeezed him twice. He felt her body shake as the smoke thickened in the cellar and she began to cough.

He could feel the ladder grow hot as the flames began to eat at the top rungs. It would only be a matter of time before the cellar was engulfed in fire. He could not let her suffer so. She was an innocent. Her only crime was trying to save him. If only she had not been at that lake; that he had drowned like he was supposed to.

The heat grew intense, burning his lungs with each breath of choking smoke.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, a bout of coughing cutting off anything else he might have said.

He raised the revolver again. It was the humane thing to do . . . the loving thing to do. He felt her body twitch and he knew she knew what he was about to do...He pulled the hammer back and prayed his aim would be true.

Mattie’s body jerked as the sound of the gunshot reverberated in the small cellar. The feel of her warm breath on his neck just a moment ago was gone. He felt her body go limp in his arms and he held her for one last, long moment, then let her slide to the ground next to him. He felt the sting of tears in his sightless eyes, and he turned the cold gun toward himself.

The fire ate its way down the ladder and he felt it lick at this left arm and hand, still threaded through the rungs. It didn’t matter now, someone warm and precious had died because he could not protect her, and the fire that ate at his skin was no match for the fire that raged inside his soul.

He pressed the gun to his chest and squeezed the trigger.



**M**urdoch prayed it was not too late. Darkness had forced them to stop for the night and now it was two more hours since he and Scott had found the old doc kneeling in the street, beaten and overwhelmed with guilt. Nearly unable to string two coherent sentences together. Murdoch and Scott had finally figured out that he had treated Johnny and sent him and Lem’s niece into hiding at Lem’s old shack late yesterday afternoon.

He looked over at Scott. The devastating news that the bullet had left Johnny blind had sent Scott reeling in disbelief. It was all he could do to keep Scott from running his horse into the ground to reach the shack.

Now it was in sight and he saw one man sprawled across the stairs leading to the porch. Both father and son dismounted before their horses had a chance to come to a full stop and they burst through the front door.

The sight awaiting them was something straight out of a nightmare. A man stood over the stove banging a log on the top while he poured kerosene from a lamp onto a fire that was quickly spreading into an opening in the floor below the stove.

“Feels a little like a coffin down there, doesn’t it, Lancer?” he laughed maniacally.

Scott’s aim was quick and true and the bullet went straight through the attacker’s hand, making him drop the lamp. The growing inferno exploded in a blast of heat and the man staggered back. Scott grabbed him and shoved him outside.

Murdoch grabbed a log and shoved the burning stove away from the opening in the floor. He was shocked to see the top rungs of a ladder leading down into a cellar fully engulfed in flames. Through the thick smoke he could just see Johnny at the bottom clinging to a rung of the ladder, fire licking at his shirt sleeve. Someone lay crumpled at his feet.

In a surrealistic moment, the smoke seemed to clear and Murdoch saw Johnny pointing the gun at his chest, his finger squeezing the trigger.

“Johnny! No!” he screamed, and Johnny’s hand jerked as he fired and the bullet grazed his chest, burrowing itself in the far wall.

Scott was suddenly at his side yelling at him to put out the fire as he disappeared through the fiery opening.

Scott held his breath and jumped through the flames, landing on the dirt floor at the bottom of the cellar and grabbing Johnny, throwing him to the ground and smothering the flames that burned his shirt sleeve.

The smoke was thick and suffocating. He felt rather than saw Lem's niece crumpled on the floor at Johnny's feet.

The fire finally ate through the top rungs of the ladder and it came crashing down, screeching and spitting like a wounded animal, nearly landing on top of them, but the flames died as it hit the dirt floor.

Scott draped his body over Johnny and the girl as the flames hissed and the smoke turned white as Murdoch doused the fire with water.

"Is he all right?" Murdoch yelled from above.

"He's alive," Scott yelled back. That was all he knew for sure. He struggled to keep Johnny in his arms as he leaned over and grabbed the girl's limp wrist, searching for a pulse. His heart sank as he felt none. He didn't even know Lem had a niece. He had kept her safely hidden in this house for God only knew how long. Just as he began to drop her wrist he felt the throb of a pulse.

"The girl's alive too," he shouted. "Send down a rope."

It seemed like a lifetime before Murdoch returned with a rope and fed it down to Scott. Carefully he wrapped it around Johnny's limp body, steadying him as Murdoch pulled the slack out of the rope then began hauling Johnny up through the opening above.

Suddenly the girl jerked beside him and her eyes opened wide, confused and afraid. She looked around frantically and Scott realized she was looking for Johnny.

"Johnny's all right. He's up top. I'm his brother Scott."

She reached a smoked stained hand out, and cautiously touched his blonde hair.

"Half brothers," he amended. "You must be Lem's niece."

She nodded, her smoked filled eyes tearing more.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I liked Lem, he was a good friend."

The rope snaked back down to them and Scott grabbed it, showing it to Mattie. "I'm going to tie this around your waist and my father will pull you out."

She nodded again, silently allowing Scott to tie the rope around her waist and she disappeared through the hole above him without a word.



**M**urdoch hauled the girl up, surprised when she frantically untied the rope around her waist and scrambled over to Johnny, caressing his face, touching his bloodied shirt where the bullet had grazed his side and the blackened remains of his left shirt sleeve. She looked up at him with pleading eyes, and he knew then, instantly, that she loved him deeply.

"He'll be all right," he promised before turning back to feed the rope down to Scott.

Within minutes Scott was out of the cellar, coughing the smoke out of his lungs. "Let's get them out in the fresh air," he barked.

Murdoch gently lifted Johnny into his strong arms, but the girl frantically pointed to the door, trying to get Murdoch to set Johnny back down on the floor. Spotting Scott's gun in his holster, she pointed to it then to the open door.

Realizing she was afraid of the man they had found setting the fire, Murdoch took a step closer to her. "He's been dealt with," he promised. "He can't hurt you or Johnny anymore."

Not quite sure, she allowed Murdoch to carry Johnny outside. Scott guided her into the fresh air, feeling her tremble in his arms. Her silent worry over his brother tore at his heart. She was mute. He could tell, not only by her silence, but by the descriptive way she used her hands. He had to wonder how she and Johnny ever communicated. He blind, her mute . . .

"He needs Sam," Murdoch said gruffly as he laid Johnny on the ground, his fear for his son growing by the minute. Johnny had come so close to ending it. What horrors they must have gone through for his son to resort to that last fatal act.

"We need a wagon," Scott said. "I'll ride back to the ranch and..."

Mattie grabbed his arm gesturing for him to follow her. To his surprise, she jumped on a white mule and waited impatiently while he mounted his own horse.

She snapped the reins and the mule began to run at an amazing pace for his stout legs. It was less than a mile when Scott spotted a buckboard partially hidden beneath a huge oak tree with two horses grazing in a nearby patch of grass.

She slid from the mule and gestured for Scott to tact the two horses to the wagon while she

tied her mule to the back. Before Scott could say a word she jumped on his horse and was gone in a cloud of dust, headed back to the shack and Johnny. Whatever had happened in that house, the girl was deeply attached to his younger brother. Scott wondered if the feeling was reciprocated.

It only took a few minutes to load Johnny into the back of the buckboard. Mattie had collected cloths to use as bandages and a canteen of water and scrambled into the back of the wagon waiting for Johnny to be placed next to her, his head resting in her lap.

Scott raced off to town to bring Sam Jenkins to the ranch and Murdoch headed the team toward home, aware that he needed to get his son home as quickly and safely as he could.



**M**attie sat on the huge sofa, staring out through the picture window in the great room. She was cleaned up, wearing a skirt and blouse given to her by one of Maria's nieces. She had wanted to stay with Johnny but the doctor would not allow it. And that had been hours ago. Teresa had helped her to change and looked after the few burns she had on her arms and shoulders from falling cinders. Now Murdoch and Scott sat in the room with her, as nervous as she was to find out how Johnny was.

She saw their worried faces, knew they wanted to know everything that had happened, but she could not tell them. And even if she could, how could she make them understand how she felt at that moment? Fear, love, gratitude. Feeling like she had known him all her life, and wanting a lifetime more with him. Knowing he was saving her from a horrid death as the fire swept down on them. She had fainted when she heard the gunshot, sure that her life had been ended,

and contented that if it had to be, it was with the only man she had ever loved.

Murdoch told her how he had distracted Johnny at the last moment and the bullet he intended to end his life missed and only grazed his side.

Maria walked into the room carrying a tray of steaming mugs. "I know you are not hungry," she said gently to everyone, "but you must try to eat something. Juanito will need all of you to be strong for him. Especially you, chica." She handed a mug of soup to Mattie and combed her fingers through the young woman's blonde hair. "He will need you most, I think."

Mattie nodded, tears welling up in her eyes again.

"Hush, little one," she said softly. "Juanito has the best medicine right here in this casa . . . love."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs brought everyone's attention to Sam as he entered the room. He looked tired and a sadness that could not be hidden.

"Sam?" Murdoch asked.

"The bullet just grazed his side. I put in a few stitches to make it heal cleaner. He has second degree burns on his left arm and hand. It will be painful, and it will take time to heal, but there should not be any scarring if we can keep infection away. It will require changing the bandages twice a day."

"His eyes?" Scott asked, his voice almost too low to be heard.

"I'm afraid I am just a simple country doctor. I believe the trauma from the bullet caused swelling and that is pushing against the optic nerve. Hopefully when the swelling goes

down, Johnny will regain his sight. But I can't promise you that will happen. I have wrapped his eyes. In six weeks we'll see if there is any improvement."

"That's a long time," Murdoch said, shocked.

"If we remove them too soon we take the chance of injuring his eyes permanently. I know Johnny is not the best patient, but he will have to be this time if he wants a chance to see again."

Mattie pointed toward her arm, touching it to show pain.

"Yes, the burns to his arm will be very painful. I have left laudanum and sleeping powders. Give it to him no matter how much he protests."

Mattie nodded; a determined look on her face. It appeared Johnny Lancer had met his match. She pointed to the mug of broth in her hand then looked toward the stairs.

Sam smiled. It appeared that Mattie could communicate quite nicely non-verbally. "Make sure he drinks lots of water, then soup if he can keep it down."

Mattie jumped to her feet and headed for the stairs.

"Mattie," Sam called after her. "I gave him something to sleep while I worked on him, it will be awhile before he wakes up."

Mattie nodded again before turning and running up the stairs.

Sam shook his head. "I didn't know Lem had a niece."

"No one did," Scott said. "I think he was trying to protect her from the world."

Sam accepted a cup of coffee from Maria. “I know he thought he was doing what was best for her, but hiding her away like that was the worst thing he could do. There are special schools that could help her. She needs to be around people.” Taking a sip of coffee gave him time to form his next question. “It’s obvious that she cares deeply for Johnny. How does he feel about her?”

Murdoch leaned forward. “There is no way of knowing . . . yet. Sam . . . I didn’t tell you this before.” The look on Murdoch’s face made Sam’s blood run cold. “When we got to Lem’s place, Johnny was . . . he was . . . he had a gun pointed to his chest and he was pulling the trigger. I startled him and the shot went wild.”

“His own bullet grazed his side?”

“The cellar stairs were engulfed in flames, another five minutes and they would have burned to death down there. I think . . . I think Johnny thinks that he ended Mattie’s suffering and turned the gun on himself. He would never have left her to face a death like that alone.”

“Dear God. You must make sure someone is there with him when he wakes up. He has to know that Mattie is all right. I can’t even imagine the pain he must have been in to make that kind of decision.”

Scott stood up and walked to the picture window. Such beauty out there. He wondered if Johnny would ever see it again. He turned to look at Murdoch and Sam. “I always knew Johnny was strong, but to do that . . . the strength it took to make that kind of decision. I hope to God Mattie understands.”

“She does, Son,” Murdoch said. “You only have to look in her eyes. She knows.”

“Well, I have other patients to see today. Do as I said, change the bandages on his arm twice a day and make sure he takes the laudanum. I’ll be back the day after tomorrow to see how he is doing.”

Murdoch escorted Sam to the door. “Thanks, Sam. We will. I have a feeling that Mattie will make him toe the line.”

“I think you’re right.”

Murdoch watched Sam climb into his buggy then turned back to face his oldest son. Life would be hard the next six weeks and perhaps for a long time to come.



Scott slipped into Johnny’s room, not surprised to see Mattie sitting in a chair pulled up next to the bed. Everyone had tried to convince her that Johnny would sleep through the night and that she needed sleep herself, but she refused to leave his side.

Grabbing an extra chair Maria had ordered brought into the room, he quietly carried it over and sat it down next to Mattie.

“He is sleeping comfortably,” he whispered to the girl.

Mattie nodded, her eyes never leaving Johnny.

“Why don’t you try to get some rest. I promise to come get you when he wakes up.”

She shook her head vigorously.

“All right, then, we’ll watch him together.”

She seemed satisfied with that and laid her head on the edge of the bed, her hand touching Johnny’s fingers. Exhaustion overtook her and she fell into a deep sleep.



Pain, fear and confusion all vied for his attention as Johnny began to regain consciousness. He tried to concentrate, to make sense of what he was feeling. His left arm throbbed with every beat of his heart and his head felt as if it were ready to explode. He tried to shift position but the movement ignited a fiery pain in his side. Someone squeezed his right hand twice and suddenly everything came back to him.

“Mattie!” he cried out. If he was still alive then he had killed her for nothing.

“Johnny, it’s all right.” That was Scott’s voice. “Johnny, Mattie is right here.”

Johnny felt her soft hands gently caress his cheek. Two taps on his bottom lip. It was her. But it couldn’t be. He had heard the gunshot, felt her fall away from him.

“I shot . . .”

“No, Johnny. There was only one bullet fired from your gun, the one that grazed your side. You heard Slade’s gun. You didn’t shoot her.”

Johnny reached a hand out into the blackness and Mattie pulled it close to her face, kissing the back of it. Could he trust what he felt?

He pulled it back. “I almost killed you,” he said, his voice shuddering. “I almost . . .”

“Johnny, listen to me.” Scott’s voice commanded his attention. He trusted Scott. Beyond all others, he trusted his brother. But even his brother could not forgive him for what he had almost done. He had panicked and Mattie had almost paid the ultimate price. He didn’t deserve her now.

How he longed to cling to the closeness of her. She had become his lifeline, his connection to

the reality beyond the blackness. The thought of being without her terrified him . . . and yet . . . and yet he had been prepared to end her life. One bullet and she would no longer exist. “You did the right thing, for the right reasons.” Scott’s voice was gentle but stern. “There was no way you could have known that we would find you when we did. The cellar was a death trap . . . neither of you could have gotten out alive. It would have been a horrible way to die. Mattie understands and loves you all the more for what you were willing to do for her.”

Johnny felt the edge of the bed sink as Mattie sat beside him. How he longed to see her face, know in truth what he felt in his heart . . . that she loved him. He wanted to believe Scott. But how could she feel anything but fear and loathing? He had tried to take her life.

Johnny hesitantly moved his right hand up to the bandages that covered his eyes.

“Sam thinks if you rest your eyes for a few weeks your sight will return.” Johnny could read Scott’s words and knew his brother was grasping for hope.

“And if it doesn’t?” Johnny whispered.

The answer came in Mattie’s gentle touch. They would somehow cope.

The pain in his arm was becoming unbearable and he could not conceal the moan that escaped his lips.

There was a flurry of motion. The sound of water being poured into a glass, the tinkle of a spoon hitting the edge of the glass, then Mattie was lifting his head gently.

The glass was tapped against his lower lip twice for yes, and the unmistakable smell of laudanum made him pull away. But there was no escape from Mattie and her determination to get the vile concoction down his throat.

“Brother,” Scott cautioned, “you might as well give in right now, because this lady of yours is not going to take no for an answer.”

Johnny felt Scott’s hand force his arm to the mattress.

Johnny realized he couldn’t fight Mattie and Scott and swallowed the dreaded medicine.

As he waited for the laudanum to ease the pain in his left arm and hand he tried to take account of all that had happened. He knew he would never escape the guilt of nearly ending her life, but he would have to learn to get past it because if he couldn’t they could never have a life together. And he knew without a moment’s hesitation that he wanted Mattie in his life forever.

He drifted to sleep, his fears of the blackness stilled for a brief time.



Days turned into weeks and Johnny’s burns began to heal. But with the forced confinement to bed, he was becoming more agitated and as the time for the removal of the bandages grew closer so did his fears.

He didn’t know if he could live like this in this blackness. What would it be like to leave the safety of this room if his sight didn’t return? How could he function on a working ranch when he couldn’t see?

It was early morning. He could tell by the sound of Maria and Teresa in the kitchen below, and by the lingering coldness that night brought with it. Soon they would start coming to his room, trying to make the days go by faster. But right now he had to be alone. Mattie would be up soon with his breakfast. If he wanted an answer to his question he would have to do it now.

Throwing the covers off, he levered his right arm against the mattress and pushed himself into a sitting position. His left arm was still suspended in a sling, offsetting his balance. Carefully he slid his legs over the side of the bed. He had done it a hundred times in the darkness of night, and yet this time his heart pounded painfully in his throat. He slipped off the mattress, his legs shaky from the weeks spent in bed, and carefully walked toward the door.

He reached the door, listening beyond it to the sounds in the hallway. He heard Murdoch’s heavy footfalls as he slowly walked down the stairs, the years were beginning to take their toll on his father, and it took longer to get his body going in the morning. Then he heard the lighter footsteps of his brother. He made it down the stairs in half the time it took Murdoch.

Johnny pressed his head against the door, feeling the tug of the bandages over his eyes as he scraped the material against the wood. It would be so easy to just unwrap the bandages . . . but Sam was firm, the bandages would stay in place for six weeks, one more week. But that didn’t mean he had to stay in bed another week. Slowly he opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

He tried to think of this as only a midnight excursion to the great room. He had done it countless times . . . but never with the fear he felt now. If he couldn’t get around in his own house, how was he going to exist in the world outside the walls of Lancer?

He took it slow, feeling every polished floorboard beneath his bare feet. He ran his hand along the wall, fingers stretching out to feel the end of the wall and the beginning of the stairs. His right toe felt the end of the landing and he gathered his courage as he held tightly to the railing and took his first step down the stairs in five weeks.

Mattie carefully arranged the breakfast tray she would be taking up to Johnny. For the first week Teresa had walked upstairs with her to tell Johnny exactly where each portion of food sat on his plate. Fried potatoes at twelve o'clock, bacon or ham at three o'clock, eggs at six o'clock and biscuits at nine o'clock. It was always the same and Johnny soon learned to eat unassisted. Lunch and dinner were the same.

After weeks of fearing that her muteness and his blindness would be an obstacle that they could not overcome if his sight did not return, she was beginning to think that she and Johnny could make a go of it. With her heart lighter than she could remember since this nightmare began, she picked up the tray and turned towards the stairs.

'No!' she cried silently.

Johnny was slowly making his way down the stairs, carefully feeling his way down each step. He was nearly half way down, and sitting on the next step was a stack of sheets Teresa had set down for her next trip up to the bedrooms.

In that moment Mattie knew that she could not stay. She could not protect him. Allowing the tray to slip from her hands, the sounds of breaking dishes brought Johnny to an instant stop.

Teresa and Scott exploded from the kitchen.

"Johnny, don't move," Scott shouted.

Johnny stood stone still.

"Oh, my God," Teresa cried. "I forgot about the sheets."

Murdoch was behind them and pushed his way past Teresa and Scott.

"Johnny, what are you doing out of bed?" he demanded, his voice filled with fear which turned to anger as he ran up the steps. "Sam didn't say you could get out of bed, and he surely didn't say you could come downstairs alone."

"I'm blind, not crippled," Johnny shouted back.

Murdoch grabbed his arm and led him back up the stairs. "No one said you were, but you are going to obey Sam's orders."

Johnny stopped short. "Murdoch, I got to know I can do this, if . . ."

"If your sight doesn't return, then we will deal with it," Murdoch said gently. "All of us. We'll make it safe for you to get around on your own inside, then we'll work together getting around outside. But it will take time and patience. And hopefully it won't be necessary."

"Where's Mattie?"

Murdoch looked back to see Mattie had disappeared. "I think she went outside. That was quite a scare you gave her. I'll get you settled in bed and go look for her."

"Murdoch, tell her I'm sorry."

Murdoch patted Johnny on the back. "You tell her. I'll send her up right away."

Johnny nodded, allowing his father to lead him back to his room.



**A**nother long week passed and it was time for Sam to remove the bandages. Mattie made all her preparations to leave. No one knew of her plan, especially not Johnny. She knew in her heart she was making the right decision. If

she stayed and he couldn't see she could not leave him. But he would never be safe in her company. The incident on the stairs proved that.

She walked into Johnny's room. His family surrounded his bed. Sam sat next to him, scissors in hand, ready to cut away the bandages.

Her heart broke at the thought of leaving him. Their one night of passion had not been repeated, but the bond they had formed in those precious hours would never be broken. Mattie knew she would never love anyone the way she loved Johnny Lancer.

Johnny reached out, searching the air with his hands. "Mattie . . ."

And without thinking she was by his side, holding his hands tightly between hers. He was scared. So terribly scared and she

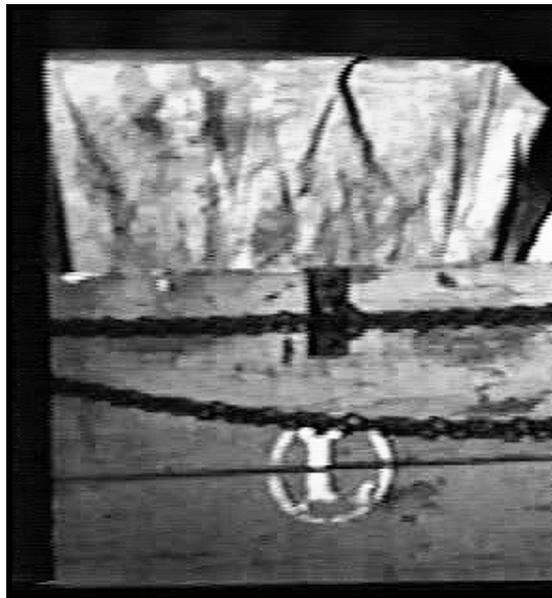
couldn't console him with the words he needed to hear. She drew his hands toward her until they settled between her breasts and she leaned down and kissed them softly.

She gathered her strength and kissed him gently on the forehead before letting go of his hands and turning to Murdoch. She slipped a folded note into his palm and ran from the room.

As she burst through the door and ran across the courtyard to her waiting buckboard, she knew she would never find the kind of love she shared with Johnny the past six weeks. She was leaving behind a piece of her heart with him forever.

She would never know if Johnny regained his sight. It was too painful to know.

Mattie rode away, passing beneath the Lancer arch and a big part of her died that day.



## MY FAIR LANCER BY ROS

LOCATION – the Great Room in the Lancer Hacienda; evening after a long day out working.

Present – Murdoch Lancer, standing by the fireplace with a glass of brandy in his hand; Scott Lancer, sitting in an armchair staring into the fireplace – thinking.

MURDOCH

You look like a man with something on his mind, Son.

SCOTT

*sighing*

Yes, I've been thinking about the Cattlemen's Ball in Sacramento next month.

MURDOCH

What about it?

SCOTT

*still staring into the fire*

It's Johnny. He's never been to something like that before. He might feel . . .

MURDOCH

*staring into the glass in his hand and swirling the brandy absently*

. . . out of place?

SCOTT

Yes, I can't help but think he might not fit in.

MURDOCH

Yes, I have to admit I've thought the same thing. There's nothing we can do about it, though. It wouldn't be appropriate for you to go and him to beg off. This Ball is a big

occasion. There'll be important contacts to be made there.

SCOTT

*frowning and looking at Murdoch*

Perhaps . . .

MURDOCH

*looking back at him*

Perhaps what . . . ?

SCOTT

Well, maybe we could give him some pointers . . . help him through it.

MURDOCH

*looking back into the glass, then taking a decisive swig from it.*

Maybe we could. Do you think it could work?

SCOTT

*considering and frowning*

Well, I suppose we'd have to start with the way he talks . . .

MURDOCH

*sighing heavily and finishing off the glass. He puts it down on the mantle and looks at Scott*

Yes, we'd have to start there. I wonder if some lessons from you might work.

SCOTT

*suddenly getting excited by the idea*

You know? It might! He has a good ear and he adapts well. Give me a chance to teach him and I'll take him anywhere and pass him off as anything. It's simply a matter of phonetics . . . the science of speech. We'll start today . . . now . . . this moment!

*ENTER JOHNNY. Saunters into the room and drops into the couch. Pulls one boot up and starts to remove the spur. His gun belt is still strapped on and he's come straight from work*

JOHNNY  
*dropping the spur to the floor and changing legs to get at the other one*  
What's got you so excited, Boston?

MURDOCH  
Scott and I were thinking that it might be a good thing if we gave you a few pointers for the Cattlemen's Ball.

*Johnny stops, the spur still on his boot, and looks at Murdoch.*

JOHNNY  
What sort o' pointers? It's a dance, ain't it?

SCOTT  
*gets to his feet and confronts Johnny*  
It's more than just a dance, Johnny. There are going to be important people there.

JOHNNY  
Yeah, cattlemen . . . like us.

MURDOCH  
You will have to be on your best behaviour, Son . . . make a good impression.

JOHNNY  
*pulling off the spur and dumping it with the first. He puts both feet on the floor and glares at Murdoch.*  
You thinkin' I won't?

SCOTT  
*anxious not to have Johnny upset*  
No, that's not what he means, Johnny. We're just saying that . . . well . . . maybe you could try talking more . . .

JOHNNY  
*smiling warily*  
Like you?

SCOTT  
No, that's not what we mean. Here, Johnny, try this . . . 'The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.'

JOHNNY  
*staring at him, mouth agape*  
What?

SCOTT  
The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

JOHNNY  
*turns his head towards Murdoch and frowns*  
You know what he's talkin' about?

MURDOCH  
*sighs*  
He wants you to say it.

JOHNNY:  
Why?

MURDOCH  
So you can learn to talk properly.

JOHNNY  
*scowls*  
I b'n talkin' for years. No one else has trouble understandin' me.

SCOTT  
*patiently*  
It's not a matter of them understanding you, Johnny. It's about correct pronunciation and grammar. Those things are important to the kind of people who will be at this ball.

JOHNNY  
*shrugs and gets to his feet*  
Then I don't think I wanta go.

MURDOCH

You have to go, son. It's a part of your responsibility as a cattleman. I won't accept any excuses.

SCOTT

That's right, Johnny. Now... repeat after me . . . the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

JOHNNY

*Scowling and reluctant*

Spain's rain falls on the plain.

SCOTT

No, no, no . . . you're not even trying... the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain

JOHNNY

Why?

SCOTT

*disconcerted*

Why what?

JOHNNY

Why does it fall on the plain?

SCOTT

Well, I don't know . . . what does that matter?

JOHNNY

It'd matter to the people in Spain.

SCOTT

This has got nothing to do with the people in Spain.

JOHNNY

It's their rain!

SCOTT

*turning to Murdoch for help*

He's not even trying!

MURDOCH

*scowling angrily*

Johnny, Scott only wants to help. Give him a little leeway.

JOHNNY

*innocently*

Sure, but I still think it must matter to them Spaniards. Be awful dry if you don't live on them plains!

SCOTT

*sighing*

Will you just forget the Spaniards and concentrate on the words?

JOHNNY

You got something against them Spaniards?

SCOTT

Of course not! I just want you to repeat the words . . . the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

JOHNNY

Alright . . . thuh rain in Spain falls mostly on thuh plain . . .

SCOTT

*scowling*

No . . . no . . . not 'mostly' . . . 'mainly'...

JOHNNY

*with a heavy sigh*

. . . mainly . . .

SCOTT

*his patience beginning to fray*

The whole thing . . . the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

JOHNNY: Thuh rain in Spain mainly falls on thuh plain . . .

SCOTT  
*firmly*  
 No . . . now listen and repeat what I say . . . the  
 rain . . .

JOHNNY  
*scowling impatiently and a curt tone in his voice*  
 Thuh rain . . .

SCOTT  
 . . . in Spain . . .

JOHNNY  
 . . . in Spain . . .

SCOTT  
 . . . falls mainly . . .

JOHNNY  
 . . . falls mainly . . .

SCOTT  
*triumphantly*  
 . . . on the plain . . .

JOHNNY  
 . . . on thuh plain . . .

SCOTT  
*claps Johnny on the shoulder, smiling happily*  
 You got it!

JOHNNY  
 You got it!

SCOTT  
*smile fading quickly*  
 That's not funny.

JOHNNY  
 That's not funny!

MURDOCH  
*angrily*  
 Johnny, stop that . . . right now!

JOHNNY  
*turning to Murdoch and pointing out pedantically .*  
 He said to repeat what he says.

MURDOCH  
 You know full well what he meant.

JOHNNY  
*ducks his head and kicks the toe of his boot into the  
 floor*

SCOTT  
*folding his arms across his chest and glaring at Johnny*  
 Are you going to be serious about this, or not?

JOHNNY  
*shrugs*  
 Sure, but it's kinda hard to take it seriously  
 when we ain't in Spain or on a plain... an' you  
 don't give a hoot for them Spaniards an' their  
 rain anyway.

SCOTT  
*still glaring*  
 Will you forget about Spaniards and  
 concentrate on the words?

JOHNNY  
*muttering to himself*  
 I think I'll shoot myself in the foot instead of  
 goin' to this ball.

SCOTT  
 What?

JOHNNY  
 Nothin' . . .

SCOTT  
 Then let's try it again . . . the rain . . .

JOHNNY  
*exasperated*  
 No, Scott. Enough's enough. I'm not you, an' I  
 won't ever be you. You'll just have to get used  
 to it.

SCOTT

*smiling*

I don't want to change you, Johnny . . . I just want to add a little polish.

JOHNNY

I ain't an' ol' boot to spiff up for the night. I am what I am . . .

SCOTT

*encouragingly*

Come on, just try it.

MURDOCH

Come on son, you can do it.

JOHNNY

*sighing heavily*

Thuh rain . . .

SCOTT

*interrupting*

No, wait . . . you're saying 'thuh' rain. You're not enunciating it properly.

JOHNNY

I don't plan on announcin' it to anybody!

SCOTT

Not 'announcing' . . . enunciating! You're saying 'thuh' instead of 'the' . . .

JOHNNY

No I ain't.

SCOTT

No, you 'aren't' . . .

MURDOCH

Yes, he is.

*JOHNNY AND SCOTT TOGETHER: turning to*

*MURDOCH*

What?

MURDOCH

He's saying 'thuh' rain . . .

SCOTT

I know.

JOHNNY

No, I ain't . . .

SCOTT

No . . . you 'aren't'.

MURDOCH

*frustrated*

Scott, he is.

SCOTT

That's what I said!

JOHNNY

*growling and starting for the stairs*

Dios! I'm goin' to bed!

SCOTT

*grabbing his arm as he passes*

No, you can't give up now. You haven't really tried. It's a simple matter of phonetics.

JOHNNY

*muttering under his breath*

Nope, I think I'll shoot him instead.

MURDOCH

What?

JOHNNY

*dropping his head a little*

Nothin' . . .

SCOTT

Then let's try it one last time. You have to say 'the' . . . not 'thuh' . . .

JOHNNY

. . . thee rain . . .

SCOTT

*shaking his head in frustration*

No, not 'thee' . . . 'the' . . .

JOHNNY

thuh rain . . .

MURDOCH

He's saying 'thuh' again!

SCOTT

*eyeing Murdoch impatiently*

I know. Johnny listen to how I say it . . . the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

MURDOCH

It's not hard, Johnny... the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

JOHNNY

*glaring from one to the other*

If I say it, can I go to bed then?

SCOTT

*apparently taken by surprise by his request*

Of course!

JOHNNY

Good, 'cause I'm tired o' this...

MURDOCH

Just try saying it, then.

JOHNNY

*bored and annoyed*

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

SCOTT

*shocked – to MURDOCH*

He's got it!

MURDOCH

*stunned*

He's got it!

SCOTT

*excited*

By George, I think he's got it!

JOHNNY

*looking back up and frowning*

Hang on, who's George?

SCOTT

*turning back to him and laughing*

There is no George . . . it's just an expression.

JOHNNY

*angrily*

Well, dammit, why bring him into it then?

SCOTT

*still excited*

Forget George! Johnny, you got it!

*ENTER TERESA . . . unaware of what is happening*

TERESA

What's he got?

*She looks at Johnny and sees his discomfort so she walks over to him.*

TERESA

*demanding*

What's going on?

SCOTT

We thought it would be a good idea to teach Johnny how to speak correctly before going to the Cattlemen's Ball.

*She frowns and looks first at him, and then at Murdoch.*

TERESA

I don't see why. There's nothing wrong with the way he talks.

*Johnny smiles and sidles up to her.*

JOHNNY

See, told ya I didn't need no fancy lessons. Now, I'm goin' to bed.

*Teresa looks back at Johnny, curiously.*

TERESA

Well, perhaps . . .

SCOTT

Just a few simple linguistics exercises – nothing hard. And he's already getting the hang of it, isn't he, Murdoch?

MURDOCH

*clearing his throat*

Ahem . . . Yes, he's got the pronunciation down, I admit . . . But we have to get him to use the correct grammar. You see the difficulty . . .

SCOTT

*Putting his index finger over his mouth and considering Johnny carefully.*

Yes, I see what you mean. We have to get him to talk grammatically correctly. The mere pronunciation is easy enough. And, then there's the dancing . . .

JOHNNY

*horrified*

Dancin'?

TERESA

*Scrutinising Johnny*

Of course, you should think about his clothes too . . .

MURDOCH

Yes, definitely . . . his clothes too . . .

JOHNNY

*muttering to himself*

I'll have to shoot the lot of 'em!

*No one notices his muttering... they're all engrossed in their discussion. Johnny starts towards the staircase. Scott finally notices and turns to speak to him.*

SCOTT

Johnny, we're not done yet. Where are you going?

JOHNNY

*curtly*

We're done . . .

SCOTT

But we don't have much time. The ball is next month and there's a lot for you to learn.

JOHNNY

*still walking towards the staircase and doesn't turn around.*

I ain't goin'!

SCOTT

But you have to go! They all know Murdoch has two sons. He can't show up with just me!

JOHNNY

*stops and turns around*

Then take George . . .



## HORSES FILL IN PUZZLE

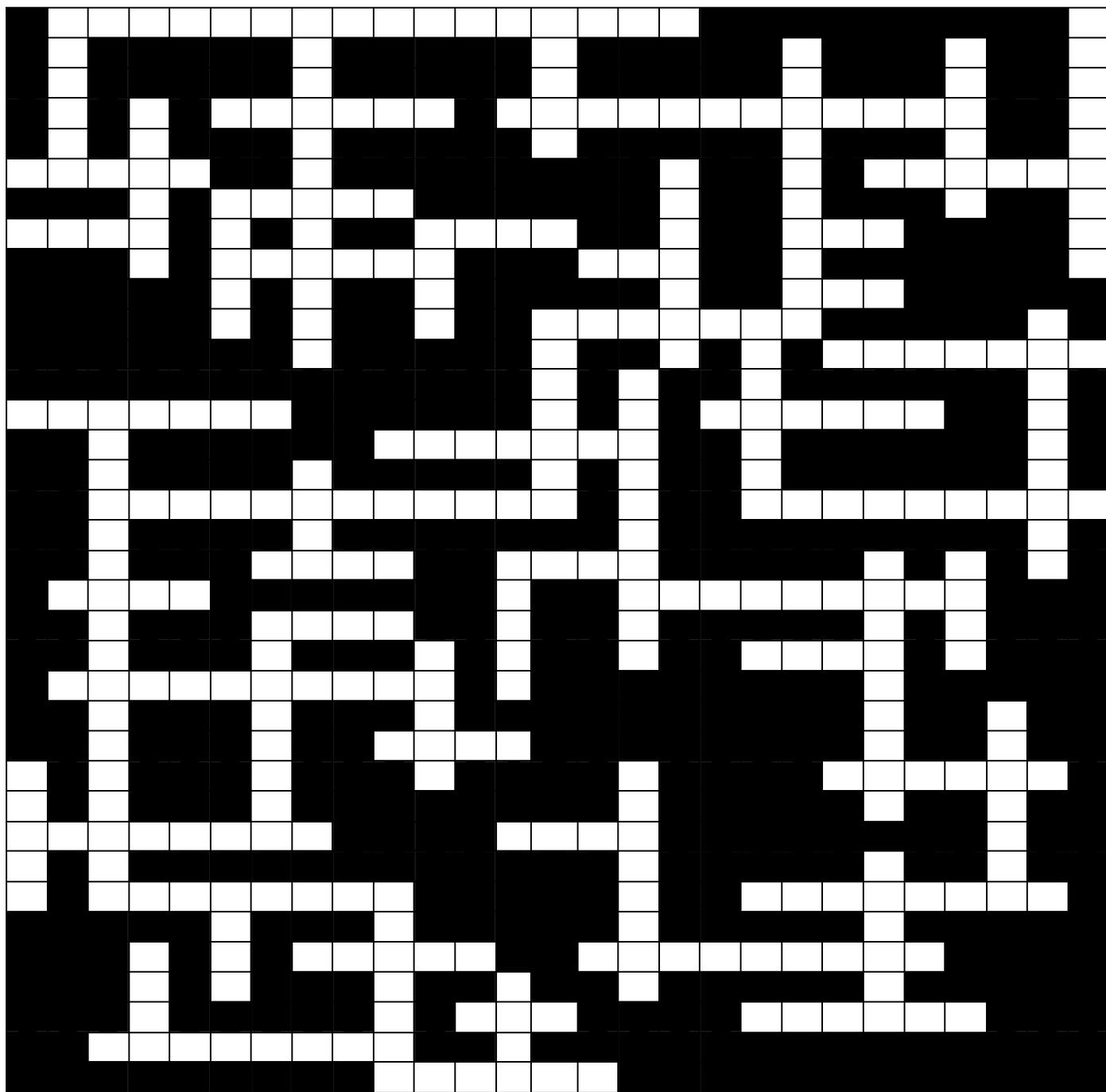
### BY JANET BRAYDEN



Are you the Horsey Type? Fill in the blanks from the word list. It only fits one way!  
Solution on page 185



Albino	Cart	Gallop	Lasso	Shaft
Bald	Chestnut	Gelding	Lope	Shetland
Barn	Clydesdale	Gig	Mare	Pony
Bay	Collar	Gray	Morgan	Shire
Bit	Colt	Hackamore	Mule	Snip
Black	Connemara	Hackney	Mustang	Socket
Blaze	Cow Pony	Halter	Palomino	Sorrel
Bridle	Chincogeague	Saddle	Percheron	Stagecoach
Buckboard	Pont	Harness	Pinto	Stallion
Buckskin	Donkey	Hitch Rail	Reins	Standardbred
Buggy	Filly	Horn	Saddle	Star
Cantle	Foal	Jog	Saddlebags	



## FURTHERING ACQUAINTANCES

### BY FAY

*This story is a sequel to "Stagecoach Encounters" written for the 2005 Homecoming Souvenir Fanzine. Without giving too much of the previous story away, Johnny met a young lady during an eventful stagecoach ride in which he was wounded.*



**C**hicken. That's what it smelt like. But why was there a chicken in his room? Why was there a chicken in his thoughts at all?

Not a real live chicken. A dead chicken. Cooked chicken to be precise.

He groaned and he opened one eye. The eye he thought was closest to the chicken.

Seated in an armchair drawn up to his bed was not a chicken. It was yellow, though. There were no feathers, but it had a head of yellow blond hair. Messy hair, too, which was unlike his tidy big brother. His brother was lying quite untidily, in fact. He was sprawled with both long legs spread apart, the lower extremities disappearing into the cavernous depths under Johnny's bed.

Scott's head was propped on one hand, his elbow leaning on the armrest. The pressure of Scott's head pressing into his hand had scrunched the skin of his cheek into a deep fold, which distorted his partially open mouth by pushing his lips askew. Very genteel snores emanated from Scott's fish mouth.

The sight of his brother sound asleep, but at his bedside, brought a smile to Johnny's lips.

He endeavoured to lift his head up to better survey his brother, but pain lancing through him begged him to reconsider his rash move. He could not prevent the groan escaping, which instantly alerted his brother as it broke him from his slumber.

"Johnny!" breathed Scott, sitting up with a jerk and brushing his hand across his hair.

"Hi there, Scott!" Johnny whispered.

He was surprised that his voice wasn't stronger. He coughed and winced again at the agony coursing through him. Perhaps staying still was the safest and most painless option at the moment, Johnny reasoned.

Scott's grin, hovering above him, was like a salve to Johnny's wound. There was something about the sight of his lanky brother which always perked Johnny up.

"Water?"

Johnny nodded. Scott eased his hand beneath Johnny's neck and helped him lift his head. Johnny took several sips, but then closed his eyes and let the weight of his head drop back into Scott's hand.

"How are you doing?"

"OK. I'm . . ."

"Fine," Scot finished for him. "I wasn't talking about the standard meaningless response. I want the truth."

Eyes remaining closed, Johnny grinned weakly.

“As long as I don’t move, I’m fine. Honest.”

Scott rested his hand on Johnny’s shoulder. Johnny relished the contact and felt himself relaxing into the welcoming softness of his bed, before realization hit him. He jerked and paid for it dearly.

“Lauren!” he simultaneously cried out and moaned with the resultant shaft of agony.

“Take it easy, Johnny,” calmed Scott, applying a little pressure to keep Johnny from moving too much and tearing the stitches Sam had inserted.

“Where is she? Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. Don’t panic.”

The ghost of a smile danced at the corners of Johnny’s mouth.

“Is she here?” he asked hopefully.

“No. She’s at her aunt’s.”

“Oh.”

Johnny’s disappointment was palpable.

“We sent a message to her aunt the same time as we notified Sam,” Scott explained.

Again, a quiet ‘Oh’ greeted Scott’s information.

What Scott didn’t tell him was that the aunt was on their doorstep *poste haste*, claiming her niece back to the bosom of her family. Scott had been awestruck at just how mighty those bosoms had been, too.

“She didn’t seem overjoyed at her aunt’s haste,” Scott offered. “I think that she would have preferred to have waited until you were better.”

Johnny’s mouth had definitely broadened into a grin. A remarkably self satisfied grin for someone who had been so ill.

“But her aunt droned on about Lauren imposing on our hospitality and us needing to concentrate on you rather than a houseguest.”

Scott felt a pang of regret as Johnny’s smile disappeared.

“Well, at least this way you’ll get a chance to get your strength back and maybe work on a haircut and shave before you see her again.”

Scott was relieved to see Johnny’s mobile lips in action as they framed his even, white teeth. His brother almost beamed in anticipation. Scott was also a little curious, but decided that a little nourishment was the next step before Johnny fell asleep again.

“Now, Teresa has left some of her chicken broth here. You started stirring about fifteen minutes ago, so she left some heated up for you.”

Johnny didn’t reply, but Scott was determined to achieve his mission. He removed the cover from the jug and poured some of the broth into a bowl, then turned his attention to Johnny.

“Come on. Let’s get you sitting up a little.”

Johnny shook his head to protest, but Scott would have none of it.

“Eat some and I’ll leave you in peace!” Scott promised.

Johnny sighed. He didn't want to eat. He wanted to sleep.

Scott dipped the spoon into the still warm broth, wiped the base of it fastidiously on the side of the bowl and raised it to Johnny's lips. Not having the energy to argue, Johnny decided to be obedient.

He sipped and found that it went down quite well. He also discovered that he was hungry, after all.

Scott methodically fed his brother, watching him carefully as his sibling dutifully swallowed. He frowned in concentration, much as an artist ponders the success of his brush strokes.

Johnny's appetite waned rapidly, but Scott was satisfied that he had consumed at least half the bowl.

"Get some beauty sleep, brother, and then I want to hear all about that young lady you managed to find in your travels."

Johnny's eyes were closed, but the crinkling which radiated out from them indicated to Scott the happy thoughts occupying his brother's mind.



Voices murmuring softly broke through the barrier erected by his tired and sore body.

Johnny prised open his eyes. Murdoch sat in the armchair next to Johnny's bedside, but his body had swivelled around so that he was looking toward the window.

Leaning his elegant rear end on the window sill, Scott stood facing his father, arms folded across his chest.

Johnny didn't stir or draw attention to himself. He merely enjoyed the peace and security of knowing that his father and brother were watching his back while he had been out to it. There was a certain safety in their discussion, too, which revolved around cattle. Cutting out stock, breeding, stud bulls and fence lines.

It was his grin which drew Scott's attention.

"Hey, Johnny!"

"Hey!"

The response was quieter, but no less heartfelt.

"Son!"

Murdoch had turned to Johnny when Scott had spoken. He reached out one of his immense paws and ever so gently stroked Johnny's fringe off his forehead.

"How goes it?"

"Fine," the usual reply was offered.

"Just what are you grinning at?" Scott demanded.

"You two, but particularly you."

"Pardon?"

"If ol' Harlan could hear his gentleman grandson now, sprouting off about cows and bulls and breeding, he'd have a pink fit. That sort of discussion ain't fit for polite society. And such a lewd topic would give all your lady friends palpitations!"

"Well, neither he nor those ladies are likely to hear me from Boston, and that's just the way I like it!" Scott retorted.

“You’ll get no arguments from me, brother.”

Murdoch smiled at the banter he had missed so much, then got down to brass tacks.

“Do you think that you could manage some food, John?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether it’s fit for a man to consume. I don’t want no tame lily livered broth.”

“It was chicken, not liver,” Scott interrupted.

Johnny’s icy Madrid stare had no effect in quashing Scott’s cheekiness. His brother did not cringe at all, sadly.

“I want something with meat on its bones and a bit of taste to it. I’m starving.”

Scott and Murdoch smiled broadly. Johnny must be on the improve to have his appetite back.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Johnny sighed gratefully.

“Thanks, Brother.”

“But on one condition.”

Warily, a tentative frown on his forehead, Johnny groused.

“What condition?”

“That you tell me about the lovely Lauren.”

“Ain’t nothin’ to tell.”

The very cockiness of Johnny’s tone implied quite the opposite, bringing a smirk to Scott’s face.

“I still want to hear it, Johnny.”

Scott exited, leaving Murdoch to see to Johnny’s needs and to make him more comfortable.

The movement evinced a hiss of pain from Johnny.

Murdoch froze as he hovered, uncertainty warring across his features.

“Is it bad, son?”

Johnny looked into his father’s blue eyes.

“I’m OK. It’s paining me some, but it’s bearable.”

Murdoch knew that Johnny would be playing it down to some extent, but he appreciated Johnny’s partial honesty. He did look stronger, however. The pain lines had receded and were not etched so sharply around his mouth as had been evident, even as he slumbered. Only the slightest of temperatures was detectable.

Teresa breezed in, Scott in her wake.

“Johnny! Good to see you awake. You’ve been asleep so long. I’ve brought some beef stew and mashed potatoes. Just make sure that you take your time and chew it well,” she gushed, excited to see Johnny conscious again.

Johnny smiled warmly.

“Hi. Teresa. You’re a sight for sore eyes. It’s good to see you again.”

She dropped a kiss on his forehead.

“Here, let me feed you,” she offered.

“I’m fine. I can manage by myself. Honest.”

A doubtful frown passed over her smooth skinned face. She stood irresolute next to the bed, holding the tray as though unwilling to deliver it to the invalid in case his words were mere bluff.

Scott decided for her, gently prising the tray from her grasp.

Murdoch, in the mean time, decided that Johnny needed more propping up.

“Teresa, could you place those two pillows on the blanket box behind Johnny, please?” Murdoch asked, diverting her thoughts from the food tray.

It worked. She had something else to do which satisfied her longing to nurse Johnny back to glowing health.

“Don’t worry, Teresa. I’ll make sure that he eats up,” consoled Scott as he guided her deftly towards the door. “Perhaps if he has less of an audience, he might do proper justice to your meal.”

Teresa’s glare of annoyance at being excluded was softened as Johnny praised her cooking.

“Thanks, Teresa,” he called softly. “My mouth’s got a hankering for this stew and my stomach doesn’t want to be left out, either. You did real fine,” he complimented her.

Her genuine smile transmitted her pleasure at his obviously improving condition.

“You’re welcome, Johnny. It’s always good to see you recovering. Just make sure that you do it fast, OK?”

“OK, Querida.”

Murdoch watched Scott settle in next to his brother and smiled as well. Seeing Johnny get

better from a wound or an illness perked them all up.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it, boys.”

Speaking to Johnny, he added further advice.

“Eat, son. You need to rebuild your strength.”

“I’m trying,” answered Johnny around a mouthful of food he had already scooped up from his plate.

The door closed softly as Murdoch left. Johnny dutifully concentrated on feeding his hungry stomach, relishing the flavoursome sustenance, which reassured his body and mind that he was home safe with his family.

Johnny appreciated the fact that Teresa had cut the meat into small, exceedingly tender chunks, which mixed effortlessly together with the potatoes and the vegetables in the gravy. Halfway through, his inclination to eat waned, however. His fork began making patterns with the food. Brown gravy swirled through the creamy, vegetable dotted mash.

“You OK, Johnny?” Scott asked, immediately on the alert that all might not be well.

“Fine. Just can’t manage any more at the moment.”

Johnny dropped his fork onto the side of the plate and pushed it away. The tray was straight away removed by Scott who plonked it on the dresser.

Johnny’s sigh breathed gently into the room. He closed his eyes and relaxed.

“Need anything?”

“No, I’m pretty good, considering.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I’m waiting,” prompted Scott.

Johnny’s eyes remained closed. A light smile graced his lips and heralded a warm tenderness in the laughter lines radiating from around his eyes.

“Waiting for what?”

But Johnny knew and Scott didn’t bother elucidating.

A peaceful silence soothed them. Both were aware of how lucky they were to be reunited as a family back home at Lancer. And they were both conscious of how close they had come to losing each other.

Scott let the quiet envelop them. He was an astute tactician and had earned early respect from his superiors when in the cavalry. He would not let his brother win this time, although he knew that he was facing the grand master in strategic manoeuvres.

One magic blue eye finally opened to cast a searching gaze his way.

“You gonna let a man sleep and recover from his injuries?”

“No. Not yet.”

A resolute sigh.

“When, then?”

“When you’ve fulfilled your end of the bargain. I managed to organize more than broth to bind your ribs together, don’t forget.”

Johnny snorted softly, the rush of air lifting several strands of his hair off his forehead.

“Listen! You and me both know that once Teresa and Maria make their minds up over an

invalid’s supper, no amount of pleading will budge them. You went downstairs and you got lucky, is all.”

“I think that you’re the one who got lucky!”

Both deep blue eyes now opened and were greeted by Scott’s broad grin.

“I’m referring to the food department, Brother. Menus and so on,” Johnny replied dryly.

“I know you were, but I wasn’t.”

“I ain’t gonna get no peace, am I?”

“No.”

Even more of Scott’s even teeth were exposed as his grin burst its banks in anticipation.

Scott was surprised, though, that Johnny capitulated. His pang of guilt that Johnny must indeed be sore and tired dispelled almost immediately. His curiosity overrode his concern.

Johnny launched into the narrative. Offering something tangible was the best way, he decided, to get his brother off his back.

“We were on the same stage, as you know. We were held up, as you also know.”

A slight pause followed before he continued.

“They wanted something that another passenger had. Knowledge of a map and some sort of stashed loot. So they took this man off and went.”

Johnny’s mouth tightened into a grim line as he remembered further.

“She slapped one of them for manhandling her, so he pistol whipped her. I got so mad, I went for them and they shot me. When I came

to, she was tied up opposite me. We were in a shack. Then they threatened to do things to her when they got back. I knew that we had to get away. I was surprised that they left us alone in the first place and we needed to get out while we could.”

He swallowed, his brow wrinkled as he remembered. A drink of water offered by Scott gave him enough of a rest to summon his thoughts and continue.

Shaking his head from side to side, he looked into Scott’s grey-blue depths.

“She’s really something, you know?”

Scott nodded. She must be, to be the recipient of Johnny’s praise. It was not something he dispensed frequently.

“She got us out of there. She saved my life. Twice, in fact.”

His soft voice was full of awe and his solemn look seared itself into Scott’s soul. Any woman who would do that for his brother was automatically received into Scott’s heart. And Johnny’s, if Scott surmised correctly.

“Twice?”

“Yep. First of all, she got us out of that shack. We were all trussed up like turkeys for Thanksgiving, too.”

Scott was sceptical. Perhaps his brother was suffering from delusions.

“If you were tied up, how did you get away?” he asked, unconvinced.

Johnny bestowed his stunning grin on Scott.

“Beats me, but she did it! I wouldn’t have thought that it was possible!”

Johnny’s head shook for emphasis.

“So, how did she do it?”

“Well, she sort of did this shoulder stand thing with her hands tied behind her back. Her feet were up in the air. She’s got the nicest turned leg. Slim ankle and muscly on the calf without going overboard. And she had the prettiest pantaloons. Lacy and feminine, but not too frothy, you know?”

Johnny confirmed with a glance that Scott did indeed know.

Scott remembered back to the night when she had arrived pantaloon clad, but didn’t dwell where his mind shouldn’t be. He found Johnny’s erratic explanation to be intriguing. Watching his brother, he noticed that he was lost in thought. Carnal ones, if the grin tugging at his lips was any indication.

“And?” Scott attempted to redirect his waylaid brother.

“She used her feet to knock a bottle off a ledge, then she used the broken glass to cut her ropes.”

Johnny gulped, his face distressed.

“She hurt herself. The glass would slip and it would slice into her. I could always tell, but she kept going!”

Scott nodded and grimaced in sympathy with Lauren’s plight.

“After she was free, she got us out of there on that horse. And when it was safe enough to stop, she dug out that bullet!”

Johnny’s mouth was etched in pain. Current or remembered pain, Scott was not sure. Leaning forward, he touched a hand to Johnny’s arm.

“She did a good job, too, Sam said.”

Johnny nodded. “It was hard on her, though.”  
“Digging out a bullet’s tough on anyone, let alone a woman,” Scott agreed.

“She looked after me real good.”

Fact and awe were combined in Johnny’s statement.

“And we sure appreciate it, brother!”

Scott added his own information.

“When you both arrived here, she was hanging onto you as tight as she could, but she was so tired. It was like she was frozen in place, but she still kept holding on to you so you didn’t fall.”

Johnny drank this tidbit of news like a man seizing a canteen in the desert.

“She did?”

“She sure did.”

A fond smile graced Johnny’s handsome face, erasing some of the pain and easing his drawn features.

“She wouldn’t have left Lancer, either, if her aunt hadn’t arrived on the doorstep.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. In fact, I would say that she was mighty disappointed that her aunt came almost as soon as we got word to town.”

“Oh.”

The downward inflection of Johnny’s voice mirrored his disappointment at her departure, even though he had been unconscious at the

time. A pause, then his face was suddenly stricken.

“She had it rough. Was she all right, Scott?”  
Scott did not ask for details. His smooth face bore a genuine smile.

“Once she knows that you’re on the road to recovery, she’ll be fine! Her injuries were minor. She was more worried about you.”

This piece of information seemed to both please and upset Johnny.

“She’s a good looking woman, Johnny.”

Scott’s praise had the desired effect in placating his younger brother.

“Ain’t she, though!”



Sam had given reluctant permission to let Johnny get up. Reluctant because he knew that once Johnny was up and about, he would be pushing any limits set him. But Sam gave permission nonetheless. He felt so sorry for Murdoch, Scott and Teresa who were battling a recovering, but bored, Johnny who had enough zest for life to match ten stallions.

Johnny was pushing his breakfast food around on his plate, a surly expression marring his good-looking features. Growing despondency settled on his as he listened to Murdoch issuing the day’s orders.

“I realize that you won’t be back until lunch-time but in the afternoon I want you to go to the east pasture and check those calves. On the way, take a look at Willow Creek and the lower dam.”

Scott grinned at Johnny. “It’s not the same without you at my side, Johnny. Murdoch’s

working me into the ground. I can't wait for you to get better and join me."

"No time like the present," Johnny responded.

Murdoch's head snapped up, his brows sharply slanted and his forehead furrowed into cavernous depths.

"Don't even think about it!" he barked.

His roar demanded respect and obedience.

Johnny wasn't about to give either.

"I can go into town with Scott and keep him company. He has to take the wagon, anyway."

"Sam said no riding."

"No riding on horseback on a saddle," Johnny corrected petulantly.

"It's still riding."

"No, it ain't. It's sitting on a bench, just the same as I'd do here at the hacienda. The only difference will be that the seat will be travelling."

"Travelling!" contradicted Murdoch. "More like jolting and jarring you! The movement will shake your wound apart. You're staying here and that's final!"

Johnny's mutinous expression warned of the explosion about to happen. Scott's quiet voice contained it, however.

"I think some fresh air is just what he needs, Murdoch. I'll take it slowly," Scott promised.

And the look of gratitude from his little brother warmed the room with its glow. Trust his big brother to comprehend his ulterior motive.



Scott was as good as his word. His took it as easy as he could, avoiding obvious potholes and ruts, but the best of intentions could not prevent Johnny suffering a good deal of shaking and jolting, as Murdoch had predicted.

Johnny's mouth became a thin line at the roughest spots. His jaw clamped shut, his facial bones becoming more pronounced the more the wheels lost their purchase on the occasional smooth patches of the road.

From time to time the bumping of the wagon threw their bodies into contact with each other. It felt good. For Scott it reminded him how lucky he was that his brother had escaped the latest scrape he had been in. Their brushing of shoulders brought out his protective instincts.

Johnny was in some pain, but he wouldn't admit that he had been rather impetuous in his decision to go to town with Scott. But he would admit to himself that he was comforted in a way he would never have expected by the incidental touch of their shoulders.

Town couldn't arrive soon enough for Johnny, however.

Relief washed over him as they passed the first homes. Some were adobe, Mexican style structures in the earth's buff colours or whitewashed in an insane attempt to disguise the dusty environment. Others were wooden cottages in varying states of repair. Several were painted neatly but the majority were long overdue for a spruce up, paint peeling off in despair after years of exposure to the relentless Californian sun. The straggle of dwellings gave way to the town's businesses, not all of which were in alignment as the road curved to accommodate some trees which had

been left standing in surprisingly unlikely locations.

It was at the general supply store that Scott stopped. He slowed down as carefully as possible, easing the horses to a standstill. Methodically, he applied the brake, tied off the reins and stripped off his yellow kid skin gloves, finger by separate finger.

This served to give Johnny a breather. He wiped his face on his sleeve in what he thought was a surreptitious manner, but he should have known that Old Eagle Eyes would miss nothing.

“Do you need to go to Sam’s?”

“No.”

“Shall I help you down?”

“No.”

“Do you want to sit on the veranda while I take care of business?”

“Nope.”

“Little Mr Independent, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll hand the order in, then, and keep you company.”

Johnny’s look of exasperation rewarded Scott, who decided that he would see how far his little brother would let him continue to aggravate him.

“I promised Murdoch I’d keep an eye on you. You might faint or something.”

A laconic lopsided smile answered him to start with, before his efforts were again repulsed.

“Scott, if you don’t give some space, it sure ain’t gonna be me with my face breathing the dirt on the road. I’ll be fine for a little while. And Teresa has given me a message to run, anyway.”

“Yes, I know. And I know how much you hate going into women’s clothing stores. How about you grab a beer at the saloon and I’ll do it for you?”

“Have you got more annoying since I’ve been sick, or is it just my imagination?”

“Must be your imagination, Johnny. I’ve never been annoying to anyone that I know of.”

Scott’s false sincerity saw Johnny truly relax. Johnny shook his head, but grinned broadly and good naturedly.

“You don’t let up easy, do you?”

“Not where my brother is concerned.”

Johnny’s face sobered. He studied the sudden seriousness of his brother’s face.

“And I appreciate it, Scott. I ain’t always had someone to watch my back. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Emotion surfaced in Scott’s response. Johnny knew that Scott had been teasing him a minute ago, but now Scott’s anxiety about Johnny’s wound was palpable in the morning air. He also knew that Scott would be berating himself that he had not been present to protect his younger brother the way he had vowed to do so shortly after Day Pardee’s death.

“I’ll go check out that lace Teresa wanted, then meet you in the saloon, OK?”

“Sure.”

Johnny dipped his head and turned to make his way down the street. He only took a few steps when Scott called out to him.

“Hey, Johnny!”

Johnny pivoted and walked backwards for several paces.

“Yeah?” he called back.

“I don’t think you should make any impulsive choices all by yourself. Why don’t you consult Lauren and ask her to help you decide on a suitable style of lace? It pays to let a woman assist in these major sartorial decisions.”

Johnny’s infectious grin was back, plastered all over his mouth and growing by the second.

“Yeah, that’s a good suggestion, Scott. I might just do that!”

“I’m sure you might, Johnny! Just don’t take too long or I might have to check up that you are managing all right. I’d hate to interrupt any really serious, um . . . discussion. Women don’t take too kindly to having their, er . . . train of thought interrupted.”

“That’s a fact, Scott, so I suggest you don’t make any sudden appearances. It mightn’t be healthy for you.”

Scott cocked his head, deep thought lines marking his forehead as he pondered Johnny’s suggestion.

“I’ll take that under advisement Johnny.”

A knowing smirk followed by a casual salute and then Scott turned to tackle the ranch business.

Johnny walked confidently in the direction of the shop. He crossed the road, dust rising and wafting around his boots as he strode forward

to mount the boardwalk. His hands adjusted his rig as he walked, then tugged at his belt, aligning it absentmindedly. They roved to his shirt sleeves and methodically brushed them. His collar was fidgeted with and next his hat was clutched in one hand as he ran his fingers through his hair in the absence of a comb.

The determined thump of his boots on the wooden planks began to slow and falter. Johnny found himself in the ridiculous situation of standing immobile in front of the shop, next to the door. He swallowed and waited. The doorknob beckoning, but fright detaining.

The fearless and great Johnny Madrid was cowed for one of the very few times in his life. Only this time it wasn’t the threat coming from the whim of a rogue gun ready to take him down which caused this reaction. It was a door, combined with his imagination, creating an obstacle of momentous proportions in his mind.

And it nearly succeeded in stopping him. Until he got a grip on himself, however, bursting in before the delay dragged on, weighted by second guessing.

His momentum propelled him noisily into the shop and into the gigantic chest of Mrs McClelland, a vitriolic widow with a razor sharp tongue sharpened regularly on any unfortunate person silly enough to stray her way. Submerged in her magnificent mounds, he struggled like a fish caught in a net. Finally, placing one hand on each of her shoulders, he recoiled back. He panted in shock after his near smothering. Panting gave way to yelping, as he was walloped by her parasol.

“Get your groping hands off me, young man! Show some self discipline and keep your desire to yourself!”

“Yes, Ma’am! Sorry! I didn’t see you.”

“How could you not see me?” Her snort of indignation was truly like one of Jelly’s sows.

A good point Johnny conceded in his mind, but it wasn’t his fault if her bulk had ambushed him.

“I was just intent on my errand, Ma’am. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“My person has been assaulted!”

“Well, your stunning hat just captivated me, Mrs McClelland. It is so becoming I was blinded by the sight of it. You look ravishing, not that I had that in mind, of course! I was merely dazzled by your appearance. I hope you can forgive a young impressionable man who knows when he is in the presence of true beauty.”

Johnny bowed, flourishing his hat theatrically in a wide arc.

When he straightened up, Mrs McClelland was standing ramrod straight, staring into his intensely blue eyes.

A transformation slowly took place before his eyes. Her mouth formed a soft curl as she fairly began simpering at him. Her eyelids fluttered knowingly and suggestively.

A fat hand patted his arm. The vibrations of her actions transferred up through her body to her multiple chins, which wobbled alarmingly as she moved.

“Why you young scamp! Perhaps I’ll see you next time I’m in town? Come around and I’ll feed you some of my apple pie.”

“Why, thank you, Ma’am! I’ll keep that I mind if Murdoch ever lets me off the chain.”

“See that you do!”

Johnny ushered her out, his teeth aching as he gritted them hard to dispel the thought of paying a social call on the old cow. Closing the door with a firm clunk, he turned to face the counter.

What he saw made his stomach leap to his mouth in concern. Behind he counter, leaning heavily on the shelving behind her, stood Lauren. She was trembling visibly. Shuddering, in fact. Was she in pain?

After initial paralysis, Johnny leapt into action. He bolted around the counter in several breathtakingly fluid strides, side wound be damned.

“Lauren! What is it? What is the matter?”

His arms were around her waist, gently turning her to face him. Her tear streaked face and ragged breathing tore his heart in two.

“What is it? Did that dragon hurt you? Has your aunt passed away?”

Her mouth was distorted in some sort of private agony. Her lips quivered and her body was experiencing sporadic little convulsions.

“Honey! Tell me!”

Her discomfort appeared to increase and control slipped further from her grasp.

Johnny began to panic.

“What’s happened? Please be all right!” he prayed out loud. “I’m going to get Sam. Here, come and sit over here and I’ll be right back.”

He started to manoeuvre her over to a straight backed chair next to the counter, but she protested and grabbed his upper arm.

“No! I’m all right!” she finally managed to gasp.

She did indeed seem to finally regain her normal demeanour and just when he thought that she had recovered from her attack, she seized his shoulders and giggled up a hefty storm of chortles.

Johnny was puzzled. Her comportment was erratic. Things were not normal.

“Oh, Johnny! That was the funniest thing I have ever seen. That old harridan has made my life miserable since I have been here. She is a bossy old witch and as ugly as sin to boot . . .” Here she broke into to laughs again, “And she made a pass at you!”

Johnny smiled broadly, a smug smirk of self satisfaction wreathed over his face.

“What’s so surprising about that? Don’t you think I can turn a head or two?”

She fell silent then. Her wide eyes looked at his and right deep down into his core, stripping him bare. And he was conscious of her chest rising and falling rhythmically to the beat of her breathing.

And silence, other than their breathing, wrapped up their world for a good long minute.

“Oh, I know you can,” she murmured softly.

Her fingers felt light on his shoulders, but even her soft touch burnt two hot spots down through his skin and seeped in to warm his bones beneath. Her face was serious under his gaze, as he searched her for a clue to his next action.

‘To hell with clues!’, he thought as his head lowered itself to the magnet attracting him. It was simply too hard to fight off the pull.

He could feel her soft breath as his lips dropped to hers, about to make contact. The

sheer physical intimacy of her body just brushing his sealed his fate and stole any reserve he had been battling. His lips plunged the last inch to lock on hers.

But they never reached their destination.

A shrill order gouged its way across the room and plunged into their private world and space, tearing their heads asunder.

“Remove your hands from her this instant, you ravisher!”

Both jumped at the unwelcome and unexpected intrusion as their cosy cocoon was ripped apart.

“What hands?” Johnny wondered.

Their faces were no longer intimately close, but her fingers clutched at his coat and it suddenly dawned on him that he had one hand on her slim waist and the other was cupping one of her bottom cheeks. He did not remember just when his hand had strayed down there to draw her sensually to him, but he raged at the unfairness of being interrupted from his compelling mission.

The cheeky face he pulled at Lauren released some of the tension in her pinched features. He leant over to whisper in her ear.

“Caught!” he drawled, “Or almost.” He thrust out a petulant bottom lip, before blazing a grin of promise at her.

Reluctantly, he removed his hands from Lauren’s attractive assets.

“Ma’am, I believe that you have been unwell. It is a pleasure to see you up and about now,” Johnny soothed oil over the old lady’s brittle attitude.

“That’s right, sonny. I’m up and about now and I’ve got my wits about me to make sure that you keep your distance!”

“Well, that is good news!” he drawled. “Feeling back to normal, are you?”

“Yes, enough to chase you with my broom if you make any more unwelcome visits.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. However, seeing you are feeling so spritely, you’ll be quite all right to take over the shop for a short time while Lauren here helps me discuss some lace for Teresa’s new dress.”

And Johnny grasped Lauren’s hand and drew her to the door.

“Just hold it right there, young man! Did you hear what I said?”

“Why yes, I did. I’m going seeing you don’t want me visiting.”

Johnny beamed, then tipped his hat at the old lady.

“Bye, Ma’am!”

And he left with his prize before Aunt Flo could think of some sort of lame excuse to delay them further.



They walked past the throng in the main street. Past perspiring ranch hands heaving supplies with a thud onto dusty buckboards, past the womenfolk ostensibly visiting town for the sewing circle, but in fact arriving for their weekly fare of gossip, and past the assorted buildings providing all the essential services for the area. The saloon, barber’s, general mercantile, the bank, milliner’s, grain feed store, the gazette, stage office and school

house all went about their business. Johnny had different business on his mind.

His boots thudded rhythmically, and keeping pace with his were Lauren’s lighter steps.

Neither said a word, but Johnny’s senses were on high alert. Lauren’s hand was burning hotly into Johnny’s. And Johnny could hear the swish of her skirt and petticoats as they swung from side to side around her fast moving legs. From the corner of his eyes he could see her profile as she strode next to him. Her tilted nose, full lips and clearly defined chin were etched into his vision. And he could smell her.

The smelt clean and fresh. Like flowers. All scrubbed compared to the last time they had been together. And suddenly Johnny wondered if he smelt clean. Probably not. He had had a bath the night before and had cleaned up a little in the morning before setting out, but he had just stepped off a bumpy wagon where he had spent over an hour in the warm sun. He suddenly doubted the sense of standing too close to her, which is what he had in mind. Perhaps he should maintain some distance? But at least he wasn’t straight in from the range after wrestling some stupid cows which had got themselves stuck in some place even a dumb cow should avoid. Cows could really make a man stink. A cloying, nauseating manure and urine stink. He really should have borrowed Scott’s cologne, even if he kept telling Scott that it was unmanly to put perfume on. And his armpits were starting to get moist as he considered what he should say and what he should do. He could feel trickles of perspiration wending their way drunkenly down his upper arms, making the sleeves of his shirt soggy with the wetness of it all.

This wasn’t a good idea. He should have waited. Maybe he should have had a bath at the hotel? He could have booked a room and

freshened up. The last time they had been together, he can't have smelt too sweet. He was probably pretty rank, if he thought about it. He had been travelling and he had been wounded. The stench of blood and perspiration had mixed with the smell of desperation as they struggled to survive their predicament. And being ill makes a man's breath smell. He had probably been breathing foul odours on her the whole time while she was fixing him up and holding him in the saddle. Hot, stale, sick breath was enough to make even the toughest of cowboys turn their heads away in disgust and make them want to puke the reek away.

So why was he being so stupid? What possessed him to grab her and run like this away from the prying eyes of the town? What if she didn't want to talk to him? Hell, he was just an ex-gunfighter cum newish rancher who had been a useless millstone around her neck when they were captured. HE hadn't been the hero rescuing her from a fate worse than death. HE hadn't nabbed the horse and guided her away from the site, away from possible pursuers. What notion had provoked him to seek her out without first testing the waters, so to speak? Johnny Madrid had survived because of his sixth sense and instinct for danger. He must have left both back at the shack where they had been kept prisoner, because they were not anywhere around him at the moment. He was about to put himself, or his ego, into danger without reconnoitring the lay of the land. A cardinal sin in any respectable gun hawk's or rancher's book.

He swallowed hard and as his throat constricted and dried up, his Adam's apple bobbed painfully without the spit it needed for lubricant. Just what had he got himself into? And how could he escape unscathed?

But his options ran out as they arrived at the little copse of trees on the outskirts of town.

A shaded haven from the relentless sun. An attractive little spot which filtered the odd puff of wind, allowing cooling breezes to thread fitfully through the tree trunks and dark green foliage. A little oasis of peace and coolness and privacy away from the activity in town. A trap, too. Johnny felt like he had walked blindly into a trap. He had created the trap and he had snared himself. And he had no backup plan.

His heart was thudding as his mind went blank and he couldn't think of the first thing to say to her. So they stood in the clearing in the middle of the trees. They stood facing each other under the branches swaying lightly overhead, creating a dappled light which sprinkled over their heads in a play of light and shade.

And Johnny couldn't think how to start.

So he looked at her clear eyes. Another trap for a man. He studied the way her skin contoured her cheek bone. He noticed some wisps of hair which wafted down under her ears and danced on her neck. And his eyes drifted down her neck to her shoulders which disappeared under disappointingly opaque material. And he noted how her shape changed and swelled out against the fabric of her dress in all the right places, before her body shrunk becomingly in at the waist. And the waist in turn gave way to generous hips before the rest was lost in too many folds of annoying skirts.

Then his eyes drifted back up to her face.

But she wasn't returning that gaze. She was carrying out her own inspection, in the direction of his hips. Damn! Maybe he should have taken his gun off? Maybe it was putting her off. She would have no doubt heard all the gory and shocking rumours about his past since her arrival in the town.

He watched her gaze rise, seeming to examine the embroidery on his shirt, particularly where the toggles had been left unfastened. Where his chest was visible between the front seams of his shirt. Where a light thatch of hairs curled up darkly and wilfully over his tanned skin.

He noticed her swallow nervously.

Self doubt flooded his being. Had he misjudged her reaction to him? Her body language? Was she afraid of him, then? She had had plenty of time over the past week to hear all sorts of stories about the unsavoury Johnny Madrid and his questionable past. She would now know all about his sordid background, something she had been unaware of during their ordeal. Maybe he hadn't given her any choice when he walked out on her aunt. Did she think that he had kidnapped her? He hadn't asked her, after all. He had taken her hand and pulled her along. But she had seemed willing and she had kept pace, he reasoned. But maybe she had been a bit too scared to protest?

As he considered this, his eyes once more made contact with hers. They were forthright, and this time they held his gaze. She certainly did not seem scared. Or was she?

His finger reached up to gently trace over her eyebrow and down her cheekbone. The remnants of her injuries remained. Some discoloration was still evident, but her skin was far less starkly marred than it had been.

And her eyes closed as her head kind of leaned in a little, into his hand. But the little tear which oozed through her closed eyelids was what undid him. It welled out into a full drop and waited, precariously attached to her eyelashes, before it finally burst out of shape and plunged downward. It slowed after its initial dive, then trickled resolutely lower, only to be stopped by Johnny's forefinger. He

dabbed lightly and stared, mesmerized, at the shiny liquid on his finger. That she could stand there so terrified that she could not move, couldn't even pull back from his hand, upset him immeasurably.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. I guess I've got used to myself and don't really see what I am, what others see and what I do that scares other people so much. Please don't cry!"

And he stood with her tear on his finger, not wanting to wipe it off, as if it gave them a connection of some sort. Knowing that he should step back and give her some space. But he didn't want to. He was sure damned disappointed that she felt this way. And once again, as he had done so often in his life, he kicked himself for letting someone breach his carefully constructed self protective armour.

Her answer was to strike him. And while he seemed docile and manageable, he guessed. Maybe she thought that now was her only chance.

So, he didn't restrain her when she thumped him on his shoulder, but he was surprised when she stopped at only one thump. And he couldn't help thinking that there was no way a woman her size could escape if a man attacked her unless she put a bit more oomph into her thumps. They really were quite useless. Just as well, seeing she made no attempt to run. But she did start yelling at him. But it was an exasperated kind of yelling.

"What sort of a cretin are you, Johnny? Don't you know why I'm crying?"

"I'm guessing that you've heard about my reputation since you came to town and you are downright frightened to death. You were staring at my gun belt kinda funny," he commented seriously, with some thought.

“I wasn’t looking at your gun belt! Yes, I’ve heard about your reputation, but I was crying because you are well.”

Johnny was confused, but mostly saddened that she could be disappointed that he had survived after all that she had done for him.

She stamped her foot. Not prettily, but with a lot of annoyance and with a big grooved frown indented into her forehead. It was a stamp that meant business.

“NO! You survived! You are alive and well, and up and about and even better than that, you are here in town . . .” she ground to a halt like a train which had run out of steam.

“And?” Johnny was a little puzzled.

“And you are here with me.”

Johnny digested this.

”Oh.”

“And it’s a very good feeling.”

“It is?”

“It is.”

He needed more clarification, just to be sure that he had the facts straight.

“So, let me get this straight. You are happy that I’m OK, you’re not scared of me, you weren’t looking at my gun belt and you are all right about being alone with me out of sight of everyone even though . . . even though I’ve got a dubious reputation?”

“Yes, more than all right, in fact.”

Johnny nodded.

“Uh huh.”

“I’ve been worrying all week about you,” she ventured.

“You have?”

There was the stamp again. A genuinely exasperated stamp of her pretty foot.

“Why do you speak in questions?”

“I guess I just want to make sure that I know how you feel about being with me. I wasn’t thinking when I brought you here. I need to know that you’re not angry with me or frightened of me.”

“Oh, for goodness sakes, Johnny! What do you think? I thought that classy hired guns were supposed to be astute and perceptive!”

Johnny didn’t answer. He stood, plagued with an uncertainty which had ripped his cocksure sense of purpose into a thousand shreds and cast them into the hungry breeze.

And for an instant, Lauren stood still before him, studying his face and the sentiment displayed there.

Johnny Madrid Lancer was rarely taken by surprise, but just occasionally he let his guard down enough for someone to launch a surprise attack. This was one such occasion. Before he knew it, her arms were around his neck and her mouth had affixed itself to his in a swift move rivalling his own speedy reflexes in finesse and exactitude.

This assault was quite different to any other he had experienced, however. Although a frontal launch, it had still sneaked up on him. And he silently chastised himself that he had not seen it coming. He was slipping. But he was really a little too busy responding to the bruising of his lips to worry too much about his failing sixth sense. He could concern himself about that later. At the moment, he

wanted to make sure that she didn't waste her energy on unappreciated efforts.

So, he placed the analysis of Johnny Madrid Lancer's ability to read people and predict their behaviour on hold. He concentrated instead on not disappointing this obviously passionate woman. He didn't want her to think that she was kissing a soggy, disinterested hunk of dead skin. He wanted her to know that he was equally full of life and passion. He wanted her to know that if she ever chose to do this again, she would not be let down in any way. And he wanted her to do it again. He wanted her to be sure that she would get a lot of man to handle. A responsive man who would get fired up by her kisses and her touch. And who could fire her up in return.

Consequently, he worked on moving his lips sensuously and expressively. Various skills from his repertoire surfaced. He teased with his mouth as he lightly sucked at her sweet lips, then used his tongue to dance a pas de deux with hers as the two of them savoured this intimate investigation and capitulation.

When he thought that he might lose control, he withdrew his mouth from hers and skimmed her skin with light butterfly wing kisses across her cheek and over to her ear, which he paused to nibble at, his breath to tickle her senses. Then he continued down the side of her neck to the base of her throat. He breathed in her scent and dragged his tongue in an undulating movement along the contours of her skin.

Her breathing became even more ragged, but punctuated by sighs of bliss which pushed him into a vortex of lust he only just managed not to succumb to. So he stopped. Their eyes met only inches apart. Chests moved in synchronisation as they gulped for adequate oxygen and air to cool their singeing body heat.

A little smile played at the corner of his mouth and was replicated by the crinkling of laughter lines around his eyes.

"Boy, I think I should tell Sam about you."

"Sam? Why?"

"Your healing powers are a mighty awesome thing to experience."

"Is that so? Well, I don't want you to overdose, so I think you've had enough for the day."

He grimaced.

"I suppose you are a whole lot addictive, so OK, Nurse Lauren, I'll do what you say for the moment. But just when is my next dose?"

She laughed back at him, and both of them were aware of the power she wielded.

"Oh, I'll let you know, cowboy."

"You will?"

"I promise."

"OK."

But he suddenly crushed her to him, anyway, for a final wholehearted kiss which her token resistance was powerless to dissuade.

"I thought I was in charge of the medicine!" she complained, even though only half hearted.

"Just checking that you got the dose right. I didn't want it wearing off too soon or I might just pass out and fall over the side of the buckboard on the way home."

She giggled throatily, which stoked his fire again.

A minute later, she pulled back. This time, Johnny did not attempt to re-engage her in their passionate activities.

He took her hand, instead and led her to the river bank. They sat companionably side by side, appreciating the soothing gurgling of the water flowing past. Both of them stared into the water which seemed to provide them with a cooling effect over their heated bodies.

Johnny turned to her, solemn faced.

“I need to thank you.”

“What for.”

“Well, you could start with saving my life. And you could add several times.”

“I did what I had to do. What anyone would do.”

“That’s just it, not everyone would have done what you did. In fact, a lot of people wouldn’t have had the courage that you did and a lot would have high tailed it out of there after getting themselves free. They wouldn’t have hung around to help anyone they didn’t know. Especially a . . .” Johnny stopped.

“A what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

Johnny looked down from her frank stare and shook his head.

“A mestizo? Is that the correct word?” she challenged.

His eyes snapped back up to hers.

“Oh, I’m a quick learner, Johnny. I’ve used my week and a bit wisely to explore my

surroundings and learn some new vocabulary. Those whalebone crushed old biddies who come into the shop are a mine of information and they don’t need any dynamite blasting to reveal their payload. But I make up my own mind about people, Johnny.”

Johnny only nodded in understanding of the truth of what she was saying.

“I found out some very interesting terminology and some quaint attitudes to boot from those old crones, you know.”

Johnny smiled warmly at this.

“I just bet you did! But my point is that you saved me. You didn’t care about my heritage. You thought on your feet . . . or should I make that your shoulders?” he amended with a flash of humour as he thought back to her perilous callisthenics back at the shack, “You got us out of there, you dug out that bullet, you kept me alive, you looked after me, you managed to keep me on horseback and you got me safely home to Lancer. Not too many people have done a quarter of what you did for me.”

His earnestness caught her breath. And so did the underlying loneliness and solitude behind the remark.

“Well, that’s their loss, Johnny. I can’t say the whole ordeal was a pleasure, especially with you being shot, but I’d do it again and do it gladly.”

“I hope you don’t have to.” And Johnny’s ready grin burst forth before he continued. “It’s kinda embarrassing, you know. I sort of regard rescuing beautiful young ladies as a man’s job. It’s a bit hard for a man’s self regard to find the tables turned.”

As quick as a flash, Lauren had a response ready.

“Well, when a lady finds a handsome man to rescue, she’d be a fool to let traditional gender roles get in the way of preventing her from furthering her acquaintance with the said handsome male.”

Johnny beamed, his even teeth flashing in the middle of his smirk.

“Handsome, huh?”

“Handsome . . . and you know it!”

“Is that a fact?”

“That’s a fact. And she’d be praying to the high heavens thanking the good Lord for her fate which put her there at that particular time.’

“Not half as hard as the needing to be rescued man, I’ll wager!”

Laughter peeled from both of them. After the tense moments of their dramatic encounter and hardship, and their separation over the past week, it felt good to talk some nonsense. It felt good to be alive. And it felt doubly good to be spending time with someone who just might play an important role in the other’s future.

Their laughter rolled to a natural finish, then Lauren picked at a leaf from an overhanging branch and twirled it in her hands.

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit you,” she began almost immediately. “My aunt was bedridden the whole time and I couldn’t leave the shop unattended other than to see in on her. I was going mad with worry, but Sam called in every day to let me know how you were getting on.”

“Sam called in, did he?”

“Yes, he knew that I was concerned, so he kept me posted.”

“He kept me posted, too. He told me that you had your hands full with your aunt and the shop.”

Lauren nodded in miserable agreement, and was puzzled at Johnny’s wicked grin which appeared out of nowhere.

“She sure looks pretty good now, don’t she? Looks like she could handle herself all right in the shop and maybe give you some time off.”

And Lauren couldn’t help but agree.

“Unless she has a relapse.”

“Yeah, but a relapse of what exactly?”

“I’m not really sure.”

“Well, as long as she stays upright, I guess you are more of a free agent, huh?”

“I guess so, Johnny.”

“That being the case, will you come riding with me on Saturday? I’ll meet you in town and show you around Lancer. You could stay the night.”

“Your father is fine with that?”

Johnny smiled his winning smile.

“He’ll be OK with you staying, but it’s the riding which might cause an argument. He’s like a mother hen, all clucking and flapping when I get hurt.”

“Yes, well just maybe it frightens him when you get hurt and he wants to see you get well fast?”

Johnny's face took on a sombre hue. He could not deny the truth of her suggestion.

"Yeah, I know, but I ain't used to people fussing over me. It's still kinda new."

"That's a pity. It should have been your right to have family caring for you all your life."

She reached over, placing her hand softly on his.

"Well, if you can talk him around, I'll see you Saturday," she promised.

"It's a deal."

And he leant sideways to give her a kiss. Soft, gentle and lingering, it would have to last until next weekend.

One thought came to Johnny's mind as their kiss ended.

"If you weren't studying my gun belt, just what were you looking at, then?"

Her cheeks bloomed a becoming rose red which spread quickly down her neck and along her throat.

"Never you mind. They were kind of private thoughts."

"You're not going to give me a hint?"

"No way!" was her firm response.

Sighing deeply, he hauled her to her feet.

"Come on, my lady, I'd best get you back before I ruin your reputation."

It was her turn to be wickedly cheeky.

"It's a bit late for that now, Johnny. We spent a night together, remember!"

"But that doesn't count! I was shot! And I was unconscious for part of it!" he protested.

"You could have been shot and left to dangle from a tree limb hanging over a cliff, and tongues would wag about the shenanigans you could have got up to," she assured him.

Johnny's shoulders squared as he stood straight and met her gaze evenly.

"Have people been saying things to you?"

"Not directly, but they have been hinting."

There was that giggle again. Johnny was surprised that she would find this funny.

"I had no idea how many ways people could hint at something without actually coming out and saying it. The last week has been an education."

"And just what were they hinting at?"

"Oh, this and that."

His bland look told her that she was expected to say more.

"There were hints about sleeping arrangements, toilet arrangements, bathing arrangements, riding double and so on. To be quite frank, I had no idea that elderly women were so obsessed by bodies. Bodies contacting bodies, bodily functions, body shapes, male bodies versus female bodies and the purposes of such!"

Johnny's bark of laughter interrupted her.

"I guess that I have been missing out by going to the saloon when Teresa comes to town. I might accompany her to buy her dress materials next time."

"I hope you do."

The invitation and the promise were there. That was adequate for the moment and would have to suffice until Saturday.



Johnny and Lauren made their way back. Both were tarrying. Lauren was in no hurry to return to the shop. Her aunt had looked hale and hearty only a short while ago and, if she dared admit it to herself, she had needed to get away from her cloying demands.

But more to the point, she was enjoying Johnny's company and his quick wit. She had not spoken to him greatly on the stage, and then after he was injured he had been in no real state to converse much.

Johnny was intrigued by the woman by his side. She had seemed acerbic and brusque when the fates dropped her at his table in the café. She had not been overly forthcoming during the trip, either, although he had been impressed with what he noticed. Her manner with the dog at the way station brought a hint of amusement to his mouth. You learnt a lot about people from the way that they treated animals, he had decided. Those with a mean streak towards animals usually dealt with humans in the same way, cruelly and thoughtlessly and too sadly often, vindictively. In Johnny's opinion, those who treated an animal with consideration and kindness would generally treat their fellow man the same way.

Lauren had certainly treated him well. Not only had she been resourceful, she had bravely continued to hack through the ropes, even after her skin was decimated and bloodied by the jagged piece of whiskey bottle. She had reacted with determination to rebel against her imprisonment and had been the instigator of their escape. And she could have fled, by herself and much faster, had she left him behind. But she hadn't abandoned him.

And she was so damned attractive.

He had kept the picture of her alive in his mind for the past week, but renewed health had not really preserved a true image in his mind. On seeing her again, she was even more compelling a person. He was attracted to pretty women all right and his father had previously alluded to the affinity of Lancer men for pretty women. But he knew that there was more to it than that with her. He just knew.

On reaching the door of the shop, he held it open for her and ushered her through with a broad sweep of his hat. She laughed at his antics, her face flushed with pleasure.

But it took just one sentence from her aunt to wipe her happiness from her glowing face.

"How dare you!"

"Pardon?" they responded in unison, before giving each other a light smile to acknowledge their twin answers.

"You heard me! Have you no respect for convention?"

Johnny felt his teeth clamp together and his jaw tighten. The same story that had dogged him all his life. He wasn't fit company. He wasn't good enough.

"Yes, I do dare!" Johnny replied, rage punctuating each word. "I needed to thank the woman who saved my life and I wished to do so privately!"

"I was actually addressing Lauren. Have you no idea about protecting your precious reputation? It has already been sullied by your escapade last week. You should be distancing yourself, not compounding your social gaffes by flaunting social etiquette!"

Johnny's head swung to regard Lauren.

"Aunt Flo, I have not compromised my reputation whatsoever. This is the first time that I have seen Johnny and we had some matters to discuss. May I suggest that you not meddle in my affairs!"

Johnny swung his head the other way as Aunt Flo replied, her vehemence evident in her rigid body posture.

"While you are staying under my roof, your affairs are also mine!"

Johnny's head focused back on Lauren to await her reply with interest. He did not have long to wait as her anger burst forth before his eyes had barely alighted on her.

"May I remind you, Aunt Flo, that I am of age and as such can make up my own mind as to whom I wish to frequent."

It was here that Johnny decided to intervene before his head swivelled off his neck.

"Ladies, please! I think that it is admirable that your aunt cares so much for you, Lauren. And I am certain that your aunt does not mean to treat you as a minor. She is no doubt still anxious after your brush with death last week. I'm sure that she doesn't mean to tell you what to do."

He did his swivelling act and looked from one to the other, then walked up to Lauren's aunt.

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure to see you recovered and I look forward to seeing your continued good health."

Bending over slightly at the waist, he reached for her hand and kissed it lightly, his Latin charm oozing from every pore of his presence. He completed his performance with a disarming smile, before turning to Lauren.

Equally chivalrous, he reached for her hand. This time the kiss was not quite so light and not nearly so brief, and his fingers lingered holding hers.

"And you, my dear, I will see you Saturday for that ride. Murdoch and Scott are anxious to get to know you."

The dazzling smile he bequeathed her shone brightly with positive energy. The wink he directed her way was hidden from Aunt Flo's view, as was his intention. It was an intimate gesture meant only for her.

And he left, just poising at the door to wave a casual salute to the two of them.

An indignant "Well, I never!" reached his ears as he closed the door firmly on the consternation he had created. Consternation for two distinctly different reasons.

Johnny was stepping on air. Lauren had agreed to a date for Saturday. He contemplated his favourite places to ride and his favourite sections of Lancer. Maybe he could butter Maria up enough to get her to rustle up some really special food. Johnny did not want to do things by halves. He wanted this to be special and he didn't know exactly what salacious gossip had been delivered to her to gorge on from all the 'well meaning' old dragons in town. She might be having second thoughts by then. He hoped not, but undoing the damage of fallacious remarks could be a delicate job.

His mind running riot with possible impediments and more fanciful outcomes, Johnny approached the batwing doors of the saloon. At his favourite back table sat his brother, loosely lounging on a bentwood chair as it tilted back against the wall. Raising his beer in greeting, Scott took a swig. He licked his lips, but couldn't hide the smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. The irritating smirk

stayed there as Scott pushed off the wall and seized the beer jug. Taking an empty glass, he poured Johnny a cool offering topped by a white head of froth.

Johnny nodded in thanks at his brother's forethought. Hooking a chair with his foot, he swivelled it around so he could straddle it and lean his forearms on the chair back.

"Thanks, Brother!"

"You're welcome. How has your morning been?"

"Fine, thanks."

"I hope it wasn't too strenuous."

"Nope."

"I saw you go for a walk with Lauren. How is she?"

"Fine."

"You didn't tire yourself out, did you?"

"Nope."

"Well, I hope that you didn't bore the good lady stupid with the variety of your conversational gambits, Johnny. 'Nope' and 'Fine' can grate after a while, you know."

Johnny took a cooling sip and sighed as the first beer he had tasted in several weeks glided refreshingly down his throat.

"I didn't hear her complaining any."

Johnny's voice was full of smug humour and sparked boyishly live energy in his eyes. Scott grinned fully now.

"Perhaps I should call on her and demonstrate the true art of genteel conversation? I'd hate her to miss out on a most satisfying life skill."

Johnny put his glass down with precision, then raised his sapphire blue eyes to the blue grey of his brother's. His voice was matter of fact and totally self assured. Scott could even have called it cocky.

"Scott, I ain't never left a woman wanting for satisfaction and I sure ain't about to start now!"

Scott laughed, relaxed and happy. Bantering with his brother was always a precious time for him. He found out more from his brother in these moments than at almost any other time. And their bond was sealed further with a warmth and humour that Scott had really not expected to feel for another man after the cruel and often violent exposure to human failings which he had witnessed during the war.

The men downed their beers, totally at ease with each other and enjoying the pleasures of brotherhood. All the more precious since Johnny's near miss with tragedy less than two weeks ago.

The jug provided a second beer and just enough lubricant to keep the dust at bay until their arrival back at Lancer.

By unspoken accord, they both finished their drinks, adjusted their hats snugly on their heads and headed out to deliver the supplies back to the ranch.



Saturday didn't come soon enough for Johnny. He had filled in his days with Jelly doing some very light odd jobs such as mending tack and fixing the corral gate. He enjoyed the old codger's company, and he

appreciated the warmth underneath the exterior grumpiness.

Sam had visited and had allowed him a horse ride on the Saturday providing he didn't do any galloping. A gentle pace was allowed, but that was all. Johnny wasn't happy with Sam's edict, and neither was Sam. Realizing that he had at least been given the opportunity of seeing Lauren alone, Johnny kept his counsel and resisted making too much of a protest. Sam, knowing Johnny's penchant for the fast and the furious, was not happy that he had succumbed to Johnny's plaintive look of desperation. He just hoped that if he allowed Johnny a little slack, he would at least respond with some degree of common sense.

So, Saturday afternoon saw Johnny setting out both to enjoy his freedom as well as the delights of some female company. And not just any female company at that. This woman had grit. And a sense of humour. And other undeniably charming feminine charms.

He grinned broadly at the promise of the afternoon. A light wind ruffled his raven wing hair and cooled his warm skin. Wanting the sun on his face for a bit, he allowed his hat to dangle drunkenly down his back from the hat strings around his neck. Barranca snorted with impatience for a good run, but he held the stallion in check. He knew he wasn't as strong as he had made out to Sam, and didn't want any falls to spoil the day.

Clouds decorated the azure blue sky, casting the occasional shadow over the pasture. The different greens of the trees contrasted with the even more different shades of greens and near greens of the paddocks, and in the background was another palette of nature's colours. Yet more greens were interspersed with blues and mauves and browns. Lancer was truly paradise to Johnny. God, how he loved the place!

He arrived at their meeting place at the road fork on the edge of town and dismounted while waiting. Ground tying Barranca, he allowed the animal to nuzzle the ground in search of tasty treats while he alternately sat on a conveniently fallen log or paced, depending on how much the anxiety had built up before he caved into nervous energy.

Hoof beats finally beat a rhythmic cadence on the hard packed ground, heralding a rider approaching. As she came into view, his heart thudded and a broad smile lit up his face and eyes, eradicating the worry lines which had embedded themselves in his usually smooth skin.

She was almost off the horse before it had stopped and was in his arms before he knew it. He had intended to take it easy and get to know this lady slowly, so he could find out all the subtleties which made up her complex personality, but his good intentions flew out the window as she flew into his embrace. He lifted her up and twirled her around, her feet off the ground. They both whooped in happiness, decorum taking a back seat to delight.

Depositing her on terra firma, he stayed close, their bodies touching lightly as he kept his arms around her waist while she looped hers around his neck. The protests of birds, disgruntled at the interruption to the peace of their day, and the distant lowing of cattle wrapped their meeting place. Closer, the horses had nickered in greeting and snorted the occasional expulsion of air through their nostrils. And at the core, Johnny and Lauren were silent apart from their quick breathing. Johnny brushed a strand of hair from her face and gently curled it around her ear in a soft caress. He did not speak, relief that she had not stood him up simply taking away the words.

It was Lauren who broke the silence.

“Cat got your tongue or did you just damage your wound again in that energetic greeting?”

Johnny looked down. Not a good idea, as it brought his line of sight onto her bodice, with her delightfully rounded breasts pulling the fabric taut. He looked up again, screwing his mouth up in chagrin.

“I just didn’t know if you would show or not. I was beginning to think that you had changed your mind.”

She shook her head.

“No, I didn’t, but Aunt Flo sure worked on me. When she gets a bee in her bonnet, she just doesn’t stop buzzing with words. If they had a nagging competition at the next fair I swear that she would nag and badger her opponents into surrender before you could draw and fire in the shooting competition.”

Her words were accompanied by dramatic eye rolling and gestures as she complained about her aunt’s tongue. Johnny laughed with relief and also with amusement at her frankness.

“So just what in particular has Aunt Flo got a bee in her bonnet about?”

She looked at him, then tilted her head. A light smile graced her lips.

“Let’s go for a ride first, then sit and talk. I really need to experience some open air after being cooped up in the shop for most of the past two weeks. Do you mind?”

Johnny’s grin answered her.

“You’re a lady after my own heart!”

He held her mare while she mounted, then after two preparatory hops, slid into his own saddle on Barranca.

They headed for Lancer, taking their time, mostly just trotting and walking their horses in order to give them the chance to chat, but occasionally breaking out in a canter. This was as fast as Lauren would go. Even though Johnny could tell that she was quite a capable horsewoman, she refused any further turns of speed and Johnny had to wonder whether it was because she was being cautious on her unaccustomed mount or whether she was removing temptation for him to race at an all out gallop. He somehow thought that it was the latter. Maybe Sam had had a word in her ear, breathing fire and brimstone about Johnny needing to take it easy and not taking any strenuous risks.

She seemed fascinated in this part of the ranch. It was a genuine interest, Johnny decided. He felt so proud showing her the ranch his father had created from scratch with his own hands. The very same ranch that he and Scott now worked, the manual labour uniting them into a common purpose. The work had bonded these two men from disparate pasts. Now, they were not only brothers, but best friends. Things were not always harmonious at the ranch, particularly between Murdoch and Johnny, but they were getting there. What bemused Johnny is that on viewing the Lancer land he was starting to feel the same inordinate feeling of elation experienced by his father. His enthusiasm did not go unnoticed by Lauren, who threw back some pithy comments at the starry eyed look in his eyes when he spoke about the ranch.

After an hour of sightseeing and conversation, Johnny led them to a quiet brook on the property. Shielded by deep green foliage, the banks provided them with a shady and private retreat from the world. Deftly untying the knots keeping his bedroll from unravelling, Johnny flapped it to open it out fully to provide a picnic rug. From his copious saddle bags, he retrieved a lunch pail containing apple cake and some strawberries

from Teresa's garden. A bottle of lemonade appeared from the other side, along with two mugs.

Pouring them both a drink, he then placed the bottle in the water to keep cool.

Picking up his cup, he offered her a toast.

"To a very brave lady. Thank you."

He chinked his mug against hers and took a slow sip. Lauren, however, did not move immediately to drink hers.

She seemed to have trouble with rogue tears, this woman. He swallowed then reached over to wipe it gently from her cheek.

"Hey, you're leaking again!"

Her laughter greeted this remark before she, too, sipped the cool liquid.

"I'm just glad that you are all right and that we got out of there OK. I guess while you were recovering, I was blocking from my mind how it all could have gone wrong. Seeing you here, makes me realize how lucky we both are, I guess."

She stopped for another sip before adding another thought.

"And I guess I am still in a state of shock that you survived my surgery. Just admiring my handiwork, I guess. I'm pretty proud of my efforts, you know!"

"So am I. Maybe you have missed your calling?"

"I don't think so. That one time was enough to tell me that I couldn't bear to see people suffering so much. Fabrics are easier to sew and much less gory, gaudy and shocking."

"Remind me to get you to tell Scott that some day," laughed Johnny at a perplexed Lauren.

"Pardon? I'm not with you," confessed Lauren.

"Never mind, Lauren. But Scott will get the connection," replied Johnny evasively as he considered his brother, his brother's aversion to Johnny's loud shirts, particularly his variety of rose red ones.

"How about we talk about something other than what happened? When I think of your injuries, I get pretty scared. Things could so easily have turned out differently."

"Sure, how about you tell me about Aunt Flo, then?"

"She's my great aunt on my mother's side. When she wrote saying she needed some help because she had been ill, I thought I'd come out here. I needed a change of scenery after my sister's death. So, I've offered to help her with the business for a while and look after her if her health plays up."

"I'm sorry again about your sister. I can't imagine what it would be like if something happened to Scott."

Her mouth betrayed her grief and she struggled briefly to maintain her equilibrium.

"Sarah was my older sister and we used to do most things together. She'd let me tag along. She'd look after me and boss me around, but we liked the same sorts of things. She told me that big sisters had to look after little sisters. That was her role and she took it seriously. That's why her death hit me so hard. She was always there, and now, because of that worthless piece of slime, she's not."

Her lips pulled tautly to prevent them wavering, but her chin trembled in sadness.

The parallels between Sarah's relationship to Lauren and Scott's similar attitude to his brotherly duties did not escape Johnny. His heart ached for her that she had that supportive contact cut short so prematurely. He pulled her over to lean on him. He patted her back as she gave in to the tears, huge drops which welled up and flowed freely. Her shoulders heaved and sobs racked her frame as she clutched the lifeline that was Johnny. One hand was around his shoulder, while the other grasped a fistful of his shirt, creasing it thoroughly.

His rocking and quietly uttered words of comfort finally soothed her. With a sniff and a hiccuping sob, she sat straighter, away from his embrace. Finding a handkerchief in a pocket, she gave her nose a hearty blow and dried her eyes.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "I haven't gone riding with you to leak water all over you. Let's change the topic, shall we?"

Johnny nodded his heads in acquiescence. He recognized that she needed to get onto a topic not so dependant on her past.

"Well, what did your aunt Flo have to say about me? Not good news, I'll bet."

She dipped her eyes to her mug, running her finger around the edge and pondering her response before she again raised her eyes to his.

"Where would you like me to start?"

"Wherever you feel like. At the beginning?"

"OK, then. She said that you were a gunslinger and a killer with a more than suspect past. She said that you have only been here two years and that beforehand you were busy raising hell on the border towns and in Mexico. Your body and soul are corrupted by

a life on the fringes of humanity. You had no hand to guide you so you ran wild and consequently lack the proper morals, ethics and etiquette of the more gentlemanly locals."

Here, Johnny's snort of derision was highly audible, but it did not interrupt her serious recitation oh her aunt's comments.

"Therefore, I couldn't possible consider meeting you unchaperoned. I needed to consider my reputation, already seriously tarnished by that sadly 'unfortunate' night I spent with you. If I wanted not to be treated as a social leper, I needed to put the whole event behind me and foster relationships with the more acceptable talent in the neighbourhood. If, however, I sought your company out, I would be an outcast, not welcome in any respectable home in the area."

Johnny was shocked. Not at what she had said, but at the way that she had not dissembled in any way. Not many people, let alone women, would call a spade a spade and tell it like it is.

"Well, I'm glad you sugar coated it for me. I don't know if I could have taken the unembellished truth!"

And he grinned his devastating grin to let her know that he was not upset at her frankness.

"So, why did you come, then?"

"I told you before. I can make up my own mind and judge people the way I see fit. You're not any of those things, Johnny."

"What if I was?"

"If you were, there were extenuating circumstances and I don't think for a moment that it is as cut and dried as all that. The vague facts are there, but I know that there is another side to it. You're no murderer."

“How do you know that I am not planning to do you in right now?”

“Because I know. Simply that.”

“A person’s instinct can be wrong, you know.”

“Not in this instance,” she replied firmly, “So, why don’t you tell me a bit about your past? Then I won’t be relying on one of the many distorted versions of the truth doing the rounds in town.”

So Johnny talked and they ate the cake sporadically. He told her about his childhood, his Mama, his hate for Murdoch as a child, and his gun hawk days after his mother’s death. Then he moved on to his homecoming, his meeting with Scott and Murdoch and then end of Day Pardee. And she was a good listener, only interrupting very occasionally.

Quiet seemed to descend on the valley after he had finished. Sometime during Johnny’s retelling of his past, he had ended up prone on his stomach, leaning on his elbows. Lauren had also ended up horizontal, but on her side, her head cupped in her hand and supported by her elbow on the ground.

Both were lost in thought, Johnny in past memories and she in empathy for the hardships he had endured.

“You know something?” she quietly said in to the fading light.

“No, what’s that?”

“I’m just wondering how you turned out to be the man you are with everything that happened to you.”

He turned his head, his eyes regarding her kindly.

“It wasn’t that bad. Just sounds it.”

“It sounds it and it WAS it!”

Reaching out his hand, he traced a line along her upper arm.

“I got it good. I’m alive and I got a home, which is more than I expected at my age. And I’ve got me a family. Scott, Murdoch, Teresa and Jelly. I’m a lucky man.”

She shook her head, bemused at his slant on reality.

“You sure got a positive outlook on life!”

“There’s no point in wasting energy and pain on what can’t be changed. You just gotta take life, live it and get the most out of it. It mightn’t be here tomorrow.”

Lauren’s astute eyes and ears discerned the impetus behind his attitude and her admiration grew even further.

“I like your way of thinking, Johnny.”

“Is that all you like?”

The words had left his mouth before he could prevent them. In annoyance at his own clumsiness, he suddenly moved to start packing up. His question was gauche and he was embarrassed at the lack of his usual finesse. She didn’t answer, which further confirmed his belief in the ineptness remark. She let him finish tidying up after their picnic, and it was only as he held her horse for her to mount that she spoke.

Holding the reins in one hand, her foot on the stirrup, she leaned into him just before she mounted. With her lips close to his ear, she answered with a silky huskiness.

“No, that’s not all I like . . . and you know it!”

His ear rang with her words and burned with the warmth of her breath on his skin. Involuntarily, he reached up to touch his ear, hoping vainly to retain her words, her warmth and her meaning.

But then she was gone, laughing at him over her shoulder as he stood at first rooted to the spot, before scrambling to hop on Barranca. He whooped and gave chase before she could attain too great a lead. Her laughter mocked him just out of reach, so he spurred Barranca on to lessen the distance. Although the chase was exhilarating and liberating, it was over almost before it began, for despite Lauren's teasing, she knew to hold her horse in check to prevent it galloping too far, and more importantly, to prevent Johnny from breaking out into full speed. He caught her up easily, and they both laughed with the pleasure of it all. Slowing their paces, Johnny regretfully directed them homeward to the ranch before it got too late. He wanted to give her time to freshen up before supper and he sure didn't want to spark one of Murdoch's famous temper tantrums if they were late. It had been a good day and Johnny was feeling the most content he had been in some time.



After seeing to the horses, Johnny hoisted both their saddle bags on his shoulder and headed for the hacienda. The last time they had headed for the front door together, circumstances had been remarkably different. He only felt a slight discomfort from his wound now, but more importantly he was entering his home under his own steam . . . and with this intriguing woman. He was looking forward to presenting her to his family more formally and was quite excited, if he paused to think about it, at the prospect of sitting down to dinner both with his family and with Lauren.

Opening the door for her, he ushered her through as Murdoch's voice reached the two of them. But he was talking to someone else in the room.

Stepping down into the Great Room, their glowing smiles faded. Murdoch was in his favourite armchair by the fire. A comfortable chair which had moulded itself to his contours over the years and which never welcomed anyone else quite so enthusiastically or comfortably.

Scott stood near the fireplace. One strong arm leant on the mantelpiece and he had crossed one foot in front of the other. His clothes were immaculate as always and he had obviously just recently emerged from the bath tub, his hair slightly damp still and his deep blue shirt still crisply ironed and wrinkle free. It was the look on his face which drew an appraising glance from Johnny. His expression was grim. Smouldering even.

And the cause was doubtless the third person sitting in the room. Prim, proper and ramrod straight, Aunt Flo sat in the centre of the couch, a glass of sherry in her right hand. She held it as all fastidious women did, between her thumb and forefinger, with her little pinky sticking out, seeming to strive to escape the rest of the fingers on her hand. Her nose was decidedly slanted upwards, nostrils flaring and pinched, and her mouth was squeezed tightly into prune wrinkles. Extraordinarily arched eyebrows greeted the new arrivals.

Silence descended into the room as appraisals were made and thoughts stifled before they tumbled out with disastrous consequences.

"So, you defied my orders and went out for the day. Unchaperoned, I might add!"

Lauren fairly bristled. Johnny could feel the tension soaring through her as she stood by his side, but barely touching.

“Good evening, Aunt Flo. What a pleasure to see that you have managed to get out for some fresh air today. But what is this about orders? I was not aware that when I offered to come out here to visit you and help you out that I was enlisting for the army!”

Her frosty reply to her aunt’s greeting kept all three Lancer men stilled. Not wanting to interfere in their family business, they waited to see what would develop. They did not need to wait long.

“I warned you about the inappropriateness of going out for a ride unescorted.”

“But I was escorted, Aunt Flo.”

“You know precisely what I mean. You are flagrantly ignoring convention by spending the afternoon alone with a man, and not just any man at that!”

All three Lancers stiffened at what they perceived to be a slur on Johnny’s character, but before any of them could say or do anything in defence of Johnny, Lauren was quick with a riposte.

“Yes, for once we are in agreement, Aunt Flo. Johnny is not just any man!”

Aunt Flo blushed, unsure just how Lauren intended her remark.

“I suggest you remember yourself, young lady.”

“I’m sorry. You are quite right.”

Lauren turned to the men.

“How remiss of me. It is so good to see you again, and under much better circumstances. I’d like to thank you so much for having me stay the night. It is very much appreciated.”

Johnny took this as his cue. Clearing his throat, he took her elbow.

“Murdoch, Scott, I’m sure you remember Lauren.”

Appreciating the blast of fresh air she exuded, both men jumped forward to take her hand and wish her welcome.

“Lauren, we can’t thank you enough for what you did for Johnny. You were not only brave, but Sam says that you are a fine surgeon,” Murdoch greeted her.

“I’m simply glad that I was there and able to help.”

“And we couldn’t agree more strongly,” chimed in Scott, taking her hand to kiss it and then cuffing Johnny lightly around the ears.

“He’s a bit of a pest, but I’ve grown accustomed to him and wouldn’t like not to have him around. Besides, my workload would double and I’d end up with no free time at all!”

For the first time, the Murdoch and Scott heard her laugh and witnessed a more relaxed and happy expression on her face. This cemented the impression they both had that this young lady held a special attraction for Johnny.

“Johnny! You’re back!”

On seeing Johnny, Teresa quickly placed some plates on the table and hurried over.

“And Lauren, it’s good to see you again! Did you have a good ride?”

“Yes, Johnny showed me around the western part of the ranch, then we had a picnic by one of the creeks. Johnny said that you and Maria

made us the cake and lemonade. Thank you so much. They were delicious!”

“You’re welcome! It’s good to stop for a breather and take some refreshment. I had my doubts that Johnny would let you stop at all. Once he starts riding, it’s hard to get him off his horse!”

“He behaved himself, actually. Sam told me that he wasn’t to do anything too strenuous and he followed doctor’s orders.”

“That’d be a first!” muttered Scott so that everyone could hear.

“Well, I can follow orders if I need to. I just don’t like to,” grinned Johnny. “Besides, this staying put is driving me mad. I’m hoping Sam will let up on me next week.”

“So am I,” Scott intoned solemnly. “It’s about time you got off your rear end and gave me a hand with the chores!”

“Need some muscle to help you out, do you Scott?” teased Johnny.

“That, and I miss having someone to boss around!”

Scott’s retort drew exaggerated eye rolling from Johnny, but giggles from the girls.

Murdoch, relishing the boys’ foolishness, gave a soft chuckle. “Let’s just leave it up to Sam, shall we boys? He’s the professional and I’ve never known him to be wrong.”

“But he sure does fuss!” grumbled Johnny disconsolately.

“Well, everyone, dinner will be in thirty minutes,” interrupted Teresa. “How about you all clean up and organize yourselves?”

“Thank you, darling,” uttered Murdoch. “Flo, let me assist you to your buggy while they clean up,” suggested Murdoch.

“Oh, no! It is far too late now. It will be dark by the time I arrive back in town. I fear that I will need to spend the night here. I couldn’t possibly travel back now.”

Deafening silence greeted her proclamation. Nobody really knew what to say, until Lauren spoke up.

“Nonsense, Aunt Flo, if you leave now, you will be fine.”

“Oh, goodness me no, my dear. I get nervous at dusk!”

Her assertion depressed them all. Good manners and etiquette demanded that she be offered a room for the night, but no-one could quite bring themselves to do it.

It was Johnny who spoke, glancing ruefully at Lauren in the process.

“Well, I guess that you had better spend the night. We have plenty of guest rooms.”

“Goodness, there is no need to mess up another room. Lauren and I can share a room. That way we will not cause any trouble.”

Lauren was stricken. White lines of annoyance radiated from her mouth and her body posture was as rigid as the Lancer Arch. She clenched her hands into tight fists, but seemed incapable of speaking.

The other occupants of the room were equally taken aback by the woman’s brazen effrontery. They groped in their minds for a plausible way to get rid of her, but could think of nothing workable. It was Johnny who filled the void. Everyone else was happy to take the coward’s way out and stayed silent,

hoping someone else would think of something clever to say which would deviate this woman from her all too transparent path.

“Oh, ma’am, I wouldn’t suggest sleeping with her. You know, that time we spent the night together was a nightmare. It’s bad enough being shot and suffering such agony, especially after she dug the bullet out without any anaesthetic, but it was the snoring which really took its toll. It was like lying down next to the Cross Creek afternoon special. Lots of hissing and snuffling and whistling. You won’t get a wink of sleep. I know I didn’t. I really wouldn’t advise it, Ma’am.”

Johnny’s head was shaking from side to side, a sorrowful look on his face as he emphasized the miserable memories he hoped to convince her of. As Johnny had started to speak, Lauren had opened her mouth to comment, but the light had dawned and she wisely stayed silent, allowing Johnny to continue with his saga of nonsense.

Scott suddenly found his voice.

“When I was a prisoner of war, do you know that some men were driven mad by the sound of snoring? When you want to go to sleep and all you can hear is snoring, you sort of focus on it. It seems to get louder and sneaks out to attack you just when you think the person is going to settle down. Our captors managed to get some top secret information from some of the sleep deprived prisoners. It’s a perfect torture method. Deprive someone of sleep and they will become willing to spill the beans on anything.”

Scott turned to Johnny, commiseration painted sympathetically on his face.

“I’m impressed that you pulled through, Brother. I can see that the most attractive option could have been to succumb to the wound, pain and loss of blood.”

“Well, I guess us Lancers are made of stern material, Scott.”

Johnny’s bland and stoic face seemed to consider his ordeal and near death by proximity to snoring.

Teresa, quick on the uptake, added her thoughts before Aunt Flo could comment.

“I have already made up Lauren’s room, but it does catch the early morning sun . . . and that darned rooster’s crowing. There is another guestroom downstairs which is cooler in the morning because it is on the west side and it is as far away from Rocky the rooster as you can get. I think that you will be much more comfortable there. I’ll arrange it after supper. Speaking of which, if anyone wants to wash up, do so now!”

Quite efficiently and with a no nonsense approach that was hard to argue with, Teresa had Aunt Flo organized.

The wind taken out of her sails, she became flustered and mumbled some thanks before Teresa set off to set the extra place at the table.

Supper was not the meal that Johnny had hoped for. In between imbibing on Murdoch’s exquisite wines, Aunt Flo held the floor as she expounded on the merits of her niece. But worse, she directed herself at Scott. The woman was determined that if her niece were to make a decent match out in the wilds of California, it would be with the Lancer son she deemed to be the more eligible.

“My dear, did you hear that? Scott was a lieutenant in the cavalry. My goodness, he must have been real officer material to be promoted so young. His superiors must have recognized his qualities at an early age.”

“Yes, Aunt Flo, I did. Mr Lancer must be very proud of Scott, as we all are,” Lauren commented.

And Lauren followed this assertion with a surreptitious squeeze to Johnny’s hand, which lay resting on his thigh. Johnny felt compelled to add his own praise of his brother ... and simultaneously an answering squeeze to Lauren’s hand.

“We’re all real proud of Scott, Ma’am. It’s not everyone who gives up a safe and privileged way of life to fight for his beliefs.”

Scott accepted the compliments with humility, but could not let the situation pass without mentioning his younger brother.

“If you want to meet someone who fought for what was right when he could have just walked away, then you should consider what Johnny did for the poor and downtrodden in Mexico. He could have turned his back at any time as many others did, yet he chose to put his life on the line time and time again.”

Johnny studied his wine glass, rotating it softly, to a thunderous silence from Aunt Flo who was busy taking a hefty gulp of her own wine. After some time though, he glanced up at his brother and gave a tiny salute with his glass at his brother before taking a sip.

Teresa joined Scott in praising Johnny.

“Murdoch hired the Pinkerton’s to find Johnny and he was literally snatched in front of a firing squad. He was a hero to too many, and the rurales wanted to make an example of him. He was too dangerous to the corrupt officials and they needed to get rid of him. We bless the Pinkerton agent’s timing every day.”

“I’m sure you do, my dear, but one really must consider the whole nature of life in Mexico. Any man in front of a firing squad is not going

to be squeaky clean, anyway. Besides they are a corrupt, heathen bunch down there. I prefer not to think about their petty squabbles.”

Aunt Flo effectively closed the topic, took a more delicate sip than before of her wine and turned to Scott again, cutting off Murdoch’s intended answer in defence of Johnny’s heritage.

“So tell me about Boston and your time at Harvard University, Scott,” she encouraged.

Scott caught his father’s eye and took up where he thought Murdoch was heading.

“Well, while I was living in the lap of luxury with every amenity, Johnny was fighting the very same corrupt society you just mentioned. He was a victim of circumstance, but this should not lessen the very courage it took for him to survive down there. I was in blissful ignorance of the difficulties he faced in his life, but I look back now and squirm at the meaningless frivolities which constituted my week’s activities. And while I engaged in the theoretical hypotheses of the philosophers, Johnny was engaged in the reality. I consequently do not feel overly proud of my years there.”

“But you accomplished studies to a high level and passed rigorous examinations.”

“Yes, I did, but once again, the pursuit of, say, the knowledge of Latin may have been an enjoyable exercise for me, but it was hardly a useful skill to acquire. Ultimately, the best knowledge can often be learnt by life experiences. Harvard was not truly representative of the lifestyle of your average American.”

Scott continued, giving only a sketchy outline of his life there, inwardly fuming that she could again denigrate Johnny and have no desire to find out more about him.

Aunt Flo was in her element.

“Lauren, dear, did you ever hear such a thing? That anyone with so much money, and I mean buckets of money, would actually go and study at college? And Harvard, no less. And all the time he could have just sat back and enjoyed the prestige his wealth brought him. It must take a special man to make his own mark in the world, don’t you think, Lauren?”

“Indeed so, Aunt Flo. And it must be in the make-up of these Lancers. Scott was determined to make his own way in the world and Johnny had no choice BUT to make his own way in the world. They are quite a pair.”

And so the evening continued, with Scott the obvious target for some serious matchmaking by Aunt Flo, much to his embarrassment and the aggravation of the other diners.

Murdoch plied her regularly with some more wine, but surprisingly the woman could hold her liquor. He was hoping that the alcohol would have some sort of somnolent effect on her so they could bundle her off to her room, but this was not evident until nearly an hour after they had all left the dining table.

It was Teresa who pounced at the right time. Noting that Aunt Flo was finally becoming heavy lidded, Teresa offered to show her to her newly made up room, obviating the necessity for Lauren to sleep in the same room and bed as her aunt. She firmly accompanied Lauren’s now rather unsteady aunt to her room under the guise of showing her the amenities, while at the same time waving to Lauren and Johnny that they should make good their escape for a breath of fresh air while they could do so unscathed.

They disappeared fast and headed for the corral. Lauren leaned on the railing, her back to him and did not turn when he spoke.

“Hey, are you all right?” he enquired.

It was only as she turned her head and he glimpsed first her profile and then her face full on, that he saw how upset she was.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

“What do you think?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be asking you, if I knew.”

Lauren sigh a despondent sigh and looked sadly at Johnny.

“Aunt Flo. She’s a cattle stampede all on her own. She took over the dinner conversation. Heck, she shouldn’t have even been here for dinner. She wasn’t even invited. And she put you down all evening. And now she’s staying the night. I’m just so furious with her!”

“Look on the bright side, at least she’s not sleeping in your room! And Scott has sure had his ego flattered. If she’d praised him any more, I swear his angel wings would have lifted him upstairs without the need for taking the stairs!”

“Yes, Scott sure did seem to take it well. But he wasn’t comfortable, you know. He didn’t like her putting him up on a pedestal.”

Johnny considered her, his head tilted on its side.

“Yeah, I know he was embarrassed and annoyed, but he’s still gonna have fun over the next few days telling me how good he is! But seriously, he’s taken what she said with a grain of salt. He and I are fine. Don’t you pay no mind to your Aunt Flo’s ramblings and wishful designs.”

“That’s a big ask!” She sighed again, still uncertain about the negative effect her aunt had cast over the dinner table conversation.

“But I do need to thank you for saving me tonight. Sharing a house with her in one thing, but I am not too keen to share my room or my bed!”

“Well, we work as a team here. Teresa and Scott had a hand in it, too, you know!”

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“That I snore?”

Johnny looked at her, amused.

“Not that I noticed. If you fell asleep that night, I didn’t hear a sound. You didn’t really think I meant what I said, did you?”

She shuffled awkwardly, before giggling.

“I really wasn’t sure. I didn’t think that I had fallen asleep that night at all, as I was looking after you, but then I wondered if I might have dozed off in exhaustion. And if I was asleep, I wouldn’t know that I was snoring.”

“You got no complaints from me on that score.” Johnny paused, deep in thought. “I WAS unconscious for a bit, though. Maybe you do snore. I guess we’ll never know . . . unless we experiment in some way.”

His face was composed into a serious expression as he made this suggestion.

“Why, Johnny Lancer, I think that you have just made me an indecent proposal!” she exclaimed, then grinned back at the cocky grin which had burst out on his face.

“Ain’t nothing indecent about spending time with a pretty lady!”

“Well it won’t be tonight!” she replied firmly, blushing hotly in the evening dark. “I am going to hit the sack . . . alone!”

“Can’t blame a man for trying,” he commented, knowing full well she would not have obliged him and that he really wouldn’t have wanted her to at this stage, anyway. “Well, come along then. I’ll escort you safely to your room, and hit the sack myself . . . in blissful peace and quiet.”

His laughter was interrupted by an ‘ooph!’ as she firmly dug him in the ribs with her elbow, after taking good care to do so on his good side.



Nothing short of stunned described the sentiment of the Lancer clan as they made their way to the kitchen for breakfast. Aunt Flo was already ensconced in a chair and was being waited on by an unusually sour and dour Maria. They had all been hoping that she would be suffering a hangover and that they would then be left to partake of a leisurely breakfast together.

“Well, how do you think that you are all going to get to church on time if you sleep in so late?” she chastised them all.

Murdoch had not intended to go to church this particular Sunday, but thinking on his feet and noting the thunderous expression on Johnny’s face, he cut in quickly.

“Why, we have plenty of time, Flo. You just eat up and I’ll have your buggy and horses readied. If I tie Champion to the back, I’ll be able to drive you in” he offered.

“Well, that is kind of you Murdoch, but it would make more sense for Lauren to accompany me. That way her dress won’t get all mussed up for church.”

“Well, Lauren is going to ride out to the northern perimeter with Johnny to check on the fence there, so they won’t have time to go to church today.”

“What! Johnny has no time for church? I presuming that you are jesting!”

“No, Ma’am, I am not,” stated Murdoch firmly, as he reached over to slather some butter and jam on a biscuit. “I need Johnny to check the fence today so we can work out the supplies we need to purchase in order to repair it.”

“So, you would have him work on the Sabbath against the good Lord’s wishes?”

“Well, he wouldn’t actually be doing the repairing, so I don’t think that the good Lord will hold a little reconnaissance against him.”

“Well, I will! And I will not have Lauren’s soul tarnished in the same manner.”

Lauren added her own weight to Murdoch’s argument for Johnny’s surprise ranch chore that morning. In similar vein to Murdoch, she took a biscuit and smothered it purposefully with butter and honey.

“Aunt Flo, my soul is just fine. All it needs is a little fresh air! And Johnny shouldn’t be riding alone just now. He’s not quite fit enough.”

She took a generous bite and chewed in pleasure.

“Maria, these are the best biscuits I have ever eaten!”

“Gracias!” replied Maria with a smile of affection which softened her features.

Murdoch issued orders for his horse and for the buggy to be prepared, then set about his own breakfast. He decided that he would need some sustenance if he was to survive the

drive into town with this overbearingly bossy woman.

Breakfast over, Murdoch manoeuvred her into her buggy with some alacrity. He bade his family goodbye in record speed, and whisked her out through the arch before she could come up with some excuse to join the younger members of the family for the day. With effort, he blotted out her mindless prattle and creative digging into Johnny’s past, and endured the journey into town, hoping that Johnny was aware of just how big a debt he owed his long suffering father.



The next few weeks saw Johnny and Lauren meet up whenever possible after work. Their time alone was reduced a little as Johnny became fit for active chores on the ranch, but they were nevertheless creative in finding some precious moments together.

Aunt Flo’s negativity and condescension continued, but just occasionally Johnny’s charm worked its way through the iron lady’s haughty armour. She had thawed slightly late one afternoon after he arrived to fix her store roof. A deluge that morning had damaged some stock when the roof sprang a leak. Several leaks, in fact. It was Teresa who had informed him after she had returned home from town. Armed with a hammer, nails and new shingles, he had turned up and after helping to clear some stock out of the way, he had set to work. It went against every grain in her stiff body, but she had thanked him and even offered him a drink of lemonade for his efforts. A drink that he made sure that he sniffed before consuming. It didn’t pay to be too careless.

Johnny conceded that she was a hard nut to crack. His natural charm had not had its usual effect. Quite frankly, his charisma had been a total failure. Most women would have been

simpering at him by now, batting eyelashes and casting coy glances his way. They would certainly crack a smile. But not Aunt Flo. At least not where he was concerned. It was a different kettle of fish when she met up with both Scott and him in town. An effusive side to her burst forth like a flower racing to unfold each petal as the sun's rays hit it, but that flower closed and shrivelled up as soon as Scott was out of sight.

Johnny was pragmatic. It didn't really matter what Aunt Flo thought. It didn't matter that she had her sights set on Scott as a match for Lauren. It was Lauren who dominated his thoughts, but it sure would be easier if Aunt Flo softened just a little towards him. Lauren was having to be very strong to assert her independence, but Johnny didn't see why every outing had to create a battle of wills and words.

One thing, at least. Aunt Flo had given up foisting her imaginary illness on Lauren as guilt trip. Lauren aimed to help her aunt out, but not be bonded by an unnecessary and contrived obligation.

And had they but known it, Aunt Flo was gradually and begrudgingly coming to terms with Lauren's headstrong attitude. Secretly, she admired her niece's feisty nature, but it wouldn't do to divulge this and give the girl an undue sense of her own importance.



Johnny was mulling over the past few weeks as he waited in line. He was not normally one for waiting patiently, but his mind was pleasantly taken with day dreaming about Lauren. Occasionally the sour expression on Aunt Flo's face reared its ugly head, but basically he managed to chase those thoughts away and concentrate on his planned picnic next Saturday and calling in on Lauren after he had finished his banking business. It would

be a surprise visit. Murdoch was to attend to the banking, but had come down with the 'flu, so Johnny had snatched the opportunity to go to town with unseemly haste. With Murdoch under the weather and some good luck coming his way, a protracted stay in town might not be noticed.

He was finally nearing the head of the queue, so he grudgingly broke from his reverie and organized his thoughts around the banking transaction he was to make. It was then that the hairs stood up at the back of his neck and he slipped into alert mode. Looking around, he noticed that two people were at the counter. One was Mrs Trevaskis and the other was Theo Parker. They were going about their usual business in every way. Mrs Trevaskis was as slow as always, milking the contact time with the available clerk, Zac Greenslade. She had been widowed for a decade and made it her goal in life to seduce the forever prevaricating Zaccariah Greenslade. A slip of a man, he was dwarfed by her bulk and forceful personality, but oddly, he seemed to blush engagingly whenever she was nearby. Unfortunately, he stopped short at openly returning her blatant affections. Theo was a grim faced man, punctilious to a fault, and offered no frills. What you saw was what you got, with no time wasting. Johnny could see that he was in his usual hurry to get away. His unease did not centre on the counter.

Casually, he looked around. Behind him was Emma Solomon, the minister's wife and a cowboy he didn't recognize. The cowboy was in need of a shave, and his clothes were in need of a good soaking. He had been on the trail, that much was obvious. Johnny could not see his eyes, and that worried him for some reason. There was something slippery about this man. In reaction, Johnny's right hand reached down to his thigh. It hovered, waiting to see if anything was to eventuate.

He groaned inwardly, as the door opened and a well known face entered. Aunt Flo bustled through the door, all business and determination. She took her position at the end of the line, behind the cowboy, before she realized who was three people ahead of her. A curt nod was signalled, but she made no effort to openly move forward to say hello after he had greeted her.

The door opened again to admit another, larger cowboy who appeared to have been travelling. Studiously avoiding his colleague, he looked around the room, eyes darting incessantly. Johnny's sixth sense was screaming. He did not like the look of the two men, and it wasn't just because they needed a bath. They were trouble. His gut told him so.

Theo made his way out, striding purposefully after a farewell to Johnny in passing. Johnny shuffled forward along with the others, but his senses were totally tuned in to the two cowpokes. Mrs Trevaskis finished her business, and left the bank, accidentally brushing against Johnny's arm in passing.

"Ooh! I'm so sorry for bumping you," she crooned. "No harm done, I take it?"

"Not at all, Ma'am," Johnny assured her.

She patted his arm, her fat, sweaty hand lingering over his shirt, the heat seeping through uncomfortably into his flesh. And Johnny seriously wondered if her finger was caressing his arm ever so lightly. It gave him a slightly nauseated feeling, so he gave her a firm good-bay with a nod of his head thrown in to discourage her attentions and to encourage her departure. But her cloying closeness threw him, despite his heightened senses. So much so, that he was not able to react with the speed he was renowned for when the cowboys made their move.

Aunt Flo was grabbed from behind and a gun thrust hard against her forehead as the other man drew on the room as a whole. Aunt Flo squealed a strangled cry, which petered out to a whimper. Her eyes, bulging in fear, sought out Johnny's. That she expected him to do something was obvious, but with that gun against her brain, Johnny's options were severely limited.

"Get against the wall or this woman gets it and you're all next!" snarled the man holding Aunt Flo.

The room was in silence apart from a strange raspy wheeze coming from Aunt Flo in between her whimpers. The bank clients and workers were frozen to the spot, gazing at this violent turn of events. No one moved, terror gripping them and depriving them of their motor functions.

"Move!" the man screamed, digging the gun harder against Aunt Flo's head and making her cry out in fear.

A shuffling movement exploded from the bank's patrons as they finally hastened to obey, fearful of the consequences if they delayed any further. Backs against the walls, they did not need to be ordered to raise their hands. The robbers smirked in satisfaction. All was going well, and soon they would be rich beyond expectation.

Time was suspended as the group waited for the next events to be dictated to them. Hands up, Johnny watched the proceedings, waiting and hoping for an opening to make a move.

One of the men, the one unencumbered by Aunt Flo's presence, made his way behind the counter and approached Zac. Zac was in a lather of sweat. He wiped his hands on his pants and then pulled out an enormous polka dotted handkerchief to wipe his forehead, which was beaded with sweat. The fact that

he was shaking was visible from where Johnny stood herded with the other customers. Johnny had a sick feeling in his stomach that Zac was a loose cannon which was about to inadvertently have its fuse lit.

Johnny glanced at Aunt Flo. The woman was clearly terrified. Her look at Johnny beseeched him to do something. Anything. He looked back at Zac. Yep, he was about to crumble. It was not yet evident which form it would take, but it was imminent.

Then it happened. Johnny watched as Zac made his poorly judged move. His hand groped under the counter and both robbers seized on his suicidal action. The one closest to Zac raised his gun, while the one holding Aunt Flo swiveled his pistol away from her head and towards Zac. In a fluid movement which seemed to end before the eye translated that it was happening, Johnny cleared his gun from his holster and fired before the latter man could aim at Zac. He was falling dead to the floor with a hole drilled into his temple as Johnny was already turning to the other assailant. Johnny fired twice, spinning the grubby cowpoke as he spiraled downwards. Delayed by his shot at the first man, it was not, however, immediate enough to prevent Zac being shot at such close range. The clerk screamed, clutched his shoulder, looked at the blood and fainted dead away. As he slumped downwards with gravity's pull, Johnny lithely hopped the counter by placing one hand on the flat surface and effortlessly sailing his legs over. He checked the second cowboy, who had also gone to meet his maker, eyes already glazed and distant.

Snatching a bandana from the neck of the deceased cowpoke, Johnny wadded it to make a pad to press on the wound.

"Mrs Solomon!" Johnny called. "Go fetch Sam! Hurry!" Johnny turned to the other teller, Percy O'Donoghue, who was standing,

uselessly, staring at the fallen bodies. "Percy! Keep this on Zac's shoulder to stem the blood until Sam gets here!"

Following orders, Percy relieved Johnny of his position on the floor beside Zac. Deftly, Johnny scooped up both robbers' guns and placed them over the counter, before turning his attention to Aunt Flo. She was standing there, her face still registering horror at the carnage she had witnessed from such impossibly close quarters. She was splattered in blood and brain matter and was rapidly going into shock.

Johnny retrieved his own bandana from his pocket. Using some water from the carafe on a desk behind the counter, he moistened it before approaching Aunt Flo.

"Here, let me," Johnny spoke soothingly, as he began dabbing at her face to clean off the blood spatters and clumps of tissue. He spoke to her the whole time in his low, melodic voice, reassuring her that she would feel as right as rain after a good hot bath and a cup of tea. The bandana was not large enough to deal with the copious residue, however. Scouting around he found a hand towel in the back office. He dampened it with more water from the carafe, and was able to wipe her face more thoroughly. He brushed at her dress, removing the excess from the more obvious stains. Next, he poured a hefty wallop of brandy from the decanter in the office into a small glass.

"Drink up!" he ordered.

Aunt Flo was still frozen,

"Down the hatch!" he insisted.

Aunt Flo did as instructed. The alcohol hit her immediately. Her face suffused a deep red as the brandy burned its way down. After a grunt of surprise, she coughed and spluttered. The alcohol did the trick. It seemed to have an

effect in breaking her out of her reverie. Looking at Johnny, her eyes misted in tears and her lips began to tremble. She wrung her hands and she clutched them to her chest.

“Johnny!” she gasped, the tears spilling over. “You saved my life! Oh, thank you! Thank you so much, my dear, dear boy!”

Before his brilliantly honed gunfighter’s reflexes could stop her, she flung her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest. It was all too much for her. Great heaving sobs racked her body as her terror, relief and gratitude spilled out. It was impossible to disengage her, attached as she was like a tick to a cow’s hide, so Johnny patted her back and smoothed her hair muttering all the right things to comfort her. They stood in the middle of the floor, as the growing crowds began to mingle around them for a good gawk at the dead bodies splayed starkly on the bank floor. And Aunt Flo continued to heave racking sobs and to hiccup great gulps of air as her tears soaked through the material of his shirt and drenched the skin beneath. Like a dam unleashed in a furious storm, her outpouring of emotion didn’t look like ending any time soon.

But suddenly, a voice could be heard above the din of the sightseers, not because of its loud nature, but because of its proximity. A dulcet and charming voice which released all the tension from Johnny’s rigid shoulders. The voice broke through Aunt Flo’s noisy suffering as hands pried the woman loose from Johnny. Aunt Flo turned to Lauren’s welcoming arms and continued to heave out her distress.

Lauren uttered soothing phrases and looked over her aunt’s shoulder at Johnny, a frown of worry creasing her face.

“Are you all right, Johnny? Did you get hurt?” she anxiously enquired.

“No, Querida. I’m fine. Your aunt had a tough time, though.”

Aunt Flo’s crying eased quite suddenly. She pushed away from Lauren and fossicked in her reticule for a handkerchief which she dabbed at her eyes.

“He saved me, Lauren. That wonderful young man of yours saved me and stopped anybody else from getting hurt. I have never seen such speed and accuracy. Incredible! It was like they were dead before Johnny even moved. All I saw was a blur. An extraordinary feat. And so brave with him outnumbered two to one.”

Lauren and Johnny gaped at her and then at each other. Had they heard right? Had Aunt Flo said something nice about him? Had she been positive?

Johnny ruminated over what she had said. “That wonderful young man”. Things were looking up.

Lauren contemplated her words as well, focusing more on the end of the sentence. “That wonderful young man of yours.” She liked the sound of that.

Johnny and Lauren grinned broadly at each other.

“Come on, Honey, let’s get your aunt home and a nice cup of tea into her,” suggested Johnny.

So they stood either side of Aunt Flo, each with an arm around her as they left the bank.

Catching Lauren’s eye, Johnny gifted her with a cocky wink, acknowledging his relief at the arrival of a new era in his relations with Aunt Flo . . . and her niece.

## SCOTT'S PRAYER

### BY TINA

I stand here Lord  
Beneath your blanket of stars  
An officer, and a gentleman  
My heart filled with scars.

I was lost and not so thankful  
For the memories in my head  
About the time I served in Libby  
With the captured men I led.

I left the fast paced city  
For a place I'd never been  
Out west in California  
Where the air is hot and thin.

His offer, kind and generous  
A thousand dollars for my time  
To meet him for a single hour  
All my expenses on his dime.

The trip was hot and dirty  
A stagecoach I did ride  
Not knowing who it was  
That climbed in dusty by my side.

My surprise was overwhelming  
When at last I finally knew  
I had a little brother  
With eyes of vivid blue.

The man we met was battle scarred  
His wound was in his back  
His tone was less than loving  
When he spoke of his attack.

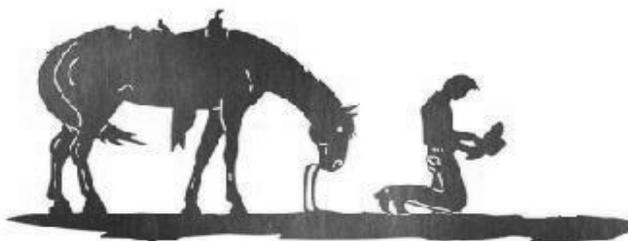
He offered both of us a third  
Of all that we could see  
If we were man enough to fight  
And bring down Day Pardee.

He wanted all that we could give  
No apology would he make  
The past would be forgotten  
If his offer we did take.

The battle has been fought and won  
The ranch is safe and sound  
Though I nearly lost my brother  
When he bled upon the ground.

I'm supposed to sign a contract  
A promise I will stay  
As long as he can call the tune  
With each new dawning day.

So thank you Lord for all your help  
And for all my battles won  
Cause I'll be an older brother now  
And Murdoch Lancer's son.



## JOHNNY'S PRAYER

### BY TINA

Here I sit oh Lord  
Beneath your blanket of stars  
A drifter, a gunfighter  
My heart filled with scars.

Lookin' for answers  
Advice if you will  
'Bout this letter in my pocket  
And the man I vowed to kill.

He saved me from a certain death  
And showed me that he cared  
I didn't know him then or now  
Our lives we barely shared.

Mama took me from our home  
When I was only two  
She said he didn't love us  
Now I know that isn't true.

He paid me to come home again  
Found out I had a brother  
We fought a war to save the ranch  
And now we live together.

I'm supposed to sign a contract  
Take one third of all I see  
As long as he can call the tune  
And all of us agree.

I want to take the chance  
But I'm scared and I'm afraid  
If I can be the son he wants  
For all the money he has paid.

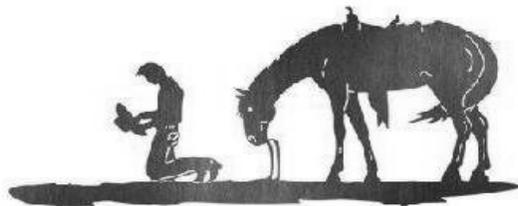
It means hangin' up my gun  
And opening up my life  
Changin' my direction  
Forgettin' all my strife.

I'm askin' you dear Lord above  
To give me peace of mind  
Take this fear out of my heart  
So I can leave my past behind.

I want to do things right this time  
Be a part of this great land  
A welcomed son, a brother loved  
The way that they have planned.

I'll have to change my name  
Take on a new and better role  
Put Johnny Madrid behind me  
And make family my new goal.

I'm hopin' and I'm prayin'  
Somethin' I ain't ever done  
'Cause I want to change my life  
And be Murdoch Lancer's son.



## THE DARKEST HOURS

### BY CAROLINE HUMPHREYS

Johnny pulled his buckskin jacket tighter across his chest and shivered. These last few days had been the coldest he had ever experienced, not helped by the intermittent rain and gusting wind. It was his first January in this part of California and it was a far cry from the heat he had been used to while living in Mexico. He looked up at the sky. It was grey and overcast, hinting at more rain to come. The wind had finally died down, leaving the air feeling heavy and oppressive. His father had told him that the weather was unusual. They expected rain, but not the chill in the air that left them huddled round the fire at night. Johnny stood on the boardwalk outside the bank and watched the townsfolk hurrying about their business. No one was loitering around, chatting with friends or browsing through the goods displayed outside the stores. He considered fetching Barranca and heading home until his eyes were drawn to the saloon. He could do with something to warm him up before he left and a couple of shots of tequila were just what he needed.

Although it was only mid-afternoon, the saloon was doing good business. It appeared he wasn't the only one wanting some fortification before heading out on the trail. He spotted a couple of his Saturday night drinking buddies playing cards at the table furthest away from the cold drafts that were pushing their way under the batwing doors. After collecting a bottle of tequila and three glasses from the bartender he wandered over to speak to them.

"Howdy, boys. Mind if I join you?" Johnny deposited the bottle and glasses on the table.

"Pull up a chair, Johnny," Eli Thomson replied amiably. "Always happy to relieve you of some of your money. Fancy playing some poker?"

Johnny pulled his hat off his dark hair and laid it down beside his glass. He rubbed his hands together to warm them up before pouring them all a shot of the fiery liquid. "Just passing through Eli. I need to get back to Lancer for supper or my old man's gonna have my hide."

"Aw come on, a couple of hands won't hurt none," Zac Wilkes cajoled. "Besides, what else is there to do in rotten weather like this?"

Johnny pulled out the watch that Murdoch had given him. It was the first timepiece he had ever owned and it was a cherished possession. Having it with him made him feel real close to his father. It was almost three o'clock and it wouldn't start going dark until around five. He put the watch away and drew out some coins which he jingled in his hand as his blue eyes crinkled into a smile. "Guess I can spare an hour. Suddenly I'm feeling lucky."



Johnny carefully sorted through his cards. Two additional players had joined in the game only to fall victim to the luckiest streak Johnny had experienced since returning to Lancer. His pile of coins was now significantly larger than when he had started

playing. The beginnings of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he pushed the cards together and waited to see if anyone was going to call him on his last raise. Disgruntled muttering from the other players heralded their capitulation and he gleefully raked in the money. He sat back in his chair and stretched to loosen his muscles. As he reached for the bottle to pour himself another drink he glanced toward the window.

“Murdoch’s gonna kill me.” A quick look at his watch caused him to groan. It was almost five thirty and there was no chance of reaching Lancer in time for supper which was served promptly at six.

Eli nudged Zac and snickered. “You afraid of your daddy, Johnny boy?”

“Damn right I am,” Johnny’s grin told a different story. “Fortunately for me, his bark’s worse than his bite.” He collected his winnings and shoved them into his pocket. “I’ll see you on Saturday.” He settled his hat carefully on his head, checked the position of his gunbelt and then tossed a coin to the bartender.

It was dark when he stepped outside and the air was very still and cold. The thought of riding home and facing one of his father’s lectures on an empty stomach wasn’t appealing. He was going to get into trouble now no matter how late he was so he turned in the direction of the cantina.

The atmosphere in the cantina was warm and welcoming. Johnny settled back in his chair and closed his eyes. The sounds and smells were a reminder of times past. So much had changed for him these last nine months, but he still sometimes missed simply being able to drift from place to place without responsibility. He had been surprised at how quickly most of his restless impulses had faded. They still resurfaced occasionally, not surprising as he had lived so long without

anything or anyone to tie him down. At first they had been hard to resist. Now their pull was getting weaker and weaker. Who would have thought that Johnny Madrid would be content to spend quiet evenings at home with his family? And that of course was the key . . . family.

The aroma of food caused him to open his eyes. Rosita laid a steaming bowl of spicy chili in front of him together with a plateful of tortillas. He murmured his thanks as his stomach rumbled loudly in appreciation. The hot food slipped down easily, leaving him feeling warm and contented and not in the least inclined to venture out into the chill evening air.

Eventually his conscience tugged at him. His family would be starting to worry about him. He collected Barranca, took a last wistful look at the light spilling from the cantina and turned toward home.



**H**aving laid down his book, Murdoch glanced again at the clock. He had been a little put out by the failure of his younger son to turn up for supper. In the early days after his sons had come home he had imposed a rigid routine which included them making an appearance on time for meals. He had told himself that it was part of the discipline that needed to be instilled into them. In truth he had simply wanted the pleasure of seeing his family together. Johnny’s timekeeping had been haphazard for the first few weeks after his recovery from the bullet wound in his back. This could be easily explained by the fact that he had never lived his life by the clock. It had only been on the day Johnny had caught that magnificent black stallion that Murdoch had realized his son didn’t even own a watch.

Life had settled down again following the incident with the Strykers and Johnny had

made an obvious effort to conform to the rules necessary to run a large business like Lancer. Scott had helped, gently reminding his brother of appointments and ensuring that he put in an appearance at mealtimes. Now if Johnny was late, Murdoch felt concern rather than irritation. At the back of his mind lurked the worry that someone would come gunning for Johnny Madrid and that Johnny wouldn't be fast enough to outdraw them. Although Johnny's prowess with a pistol still took his breath away, Murdoch knew that his son wasn't as fast as he had been. Johnny no longer felt the need to practice every day and it had been several weeks since it had been necessary for him to draw his gun in anger.

Murdoch reminded himself that his younger son was an adult who didn't have to account to him for every minute of his day. His fears were unfounded, a product of too many years when he hadn't known if his son was dead or alive. Johnny had probably met up with some friends or decided to call upon one of the many young women who seemed to vie for his attention.

The fire blazed brightly in the large hearth, warming the area where his family was gathered. He caught Scott's eye and saw the concerned look. It was almost nine o'clock and he could sense the same unease in Scott as he was feeling himself.

Murdoch stood up and walked over to the French doors, reaching out to push the heavy drapes to one side. His breath caught in his throat as he looked out at a world that was now shrouded in thick fog. Heaven help Johnny if he had been on his way home and had become caught in this.

"Murdoch?" The query came from Scott who must have noticed his father's sudden stillness. "What's wrong?"

In answer Murdoch pulled the drapes all the way back and opened the door. The temperature had dropped noticeably and it

was impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. Quick footsteps accompanied Scott's arrival at his father's side.

"We have to go and find him." There was an edge of panic in Scott's voice

Murdoch knew that having been raised in Boston Scott was used to the fog that could drift in from the sea without warning. He himself knew from experience that it could be hard enough to navigate a city in such conditions. He reached out and caught Scott's sleeve. "Even if he is out there...and we don't know that for sure...how do you think we would be able to find him in this? If he has any sense he'll find someplace to hole up until the morning."

"In this cold? Everything is wet. He won't be able to light a fire. If you're properly prepared, you might survive a night like this."

Murdoch sighed in response. Scott didn't have to add that Johnny most certainly wouldn't be prepared to cope with such conditions.

"We have to try," his son continued.

"I'm not going to ask anyone to ride out in this fog. It would be a foolish thing to do."

"I'm not going to sit around here worrying about him." Scott spoke with unshakeable determination. "If I take one of the wagons I can hang lanterns at the corners. That way if Johnny is out there he'll see the lights. I know what fog can be like...it disorientates you. I'll take it nice and slow."

"We'll take it nice and slow," Murdoch said, making up his mind and squeezing his son's arm in approval. "Go and hitch up one of the teams. I'll fetch coats and blankets."

"I'll get the lanterns ready," Teresa offered worriedly.

"Thank you, darling." Murdoch managed a smile for his ward. "And get some broth

heated up. We're all going to need something to warm us when we get back."

Scott grabbed his gunbelt, hat, gloves and coat and disappeared into the fog. As he gathered what they would need Murdoch offered up a quick prayer that his son was still safe in town and not lost somewhere in the dark.



Johnny pulled Barranca to a halt. The fog had settled around him like a damp cloying blanket. The silence was unnerving. He had spent a lot of time alone on the trail during his gun fighting days and he knew that nights were never entirely quiet. There had always been something to anchor him to the world . . . the wind rustling the leaves, the scuffling of small animals or the call of birds that were happier in the dark than in the bright glare of the sun. He had been making good time back to the ranch when the fog had blotted out the sky, causing him to lose his sense of direction. The moon and stars had been completely swallowed up by the murky darkness. For a while, he had kept Barranca moving at a walk, trusting his horse to sense his way. As the darkness tightened around them, Barranca had become unsettled and skittish. Now Johnny sat, straining his ears in vain to hear any sound that might let him work out where he was. He couldn't even be sure that they were still on the trail and he was reluctant to dismount and explore his surroundings.

The chilling wetness penetrated his jacket and shirt and he shivered convulsively. He had no experience with weather like this. Sure, he had often seen the morning mist rising from the ground and being dispelled by the first touch of the sun. He had found the sight fascinating as trees and rocks had appeared to be floating above some insubstantial river. This was entirely different and the cold hand of fear squeezed his chest.

He felt as if he was fighting an invisible enemy and a feeling of panic seized him.

This wasn't helping. He had to calm down and think. He had ridden this trail between Green River and Lancer hundreds of times. Where had he been when the fog closed in? He was certainly on Lancer and had been for some time. His best guess was that he was at least five miles from the hacienda although he no longer knew in which direction the house lay. He couldn't stay where he was; it was too cold for that. Could he find some shelter where he might be able to light a fire? Even had he been able to see his surroundings he doubted that this would be an option. The area through which he had been travelling was flat, without so much as an outcropping of rock or stand of trees. He would have to keep going and hope for the best.

He dismounted reluctantly. There were too many hazards in the dark to allow him to ride safely. He spoke reassuringly to Barranca who looked no more solid than a ghost, tightened his grip on the reins and began to walk.



'One foot in front of the other. Keep moving.' The litany repeated itself over and over in Johnny's mind. Exhaustion and cold were causing his steps to become less certain. He couldn't even be sure that he was headed in the right direction. His boots had been designed for riding, not walking, and he could feel every stone, every rut in the track. More than once he had caught himself on the verge of turning his ankle.

He felt a softer surface beneath his feet and heard the muffled roar of the river seconds before his erratic path led him to the top of the bank. His right foot slid in the mud and he gave a startled cry before releasing his hold on the reins and tumbling down to land

breathlessly, half in and half out of the freezing water.

His scrabbling fingers locked in a death grip on the branches of a small shrub growing close to the water's edge. He could feel the fast flowing water tugging at his legs, trying to drag him into its icy depths. He gathered his strength and pulled himself slowly and laboriously away from the water and onto the dubious safety of the damp, slippery bank. He rolled over onto his back, panting from his exertions. The fog hung thickly around him, pressing down so that he could barely breathe. He could hear Barranca moving restlessly above him without being able to see a single golden hair.

The presence of the river told him that he had strayed from his path, but at least it appeared he had been headed in approximately the right direction. By keeping the water on his right hand side, he should come across the fence line for the south pasture and could follow that back to the main road. His boots and socks were soaked through as was the bottom half of his trousers. He had to get moving before he froze. Using his elbows he levered himself into a sitting position. The ground was treacherous and he wasn't sure how he was going to climb back up. He quickly received his answer. He stood and his left ankle gave out, sending him crashing back to the ground. It looked like he wasn't going to be able to climb out at all.



**S**cott guided the horses through the archway and onto the road leading to Green River. Their pace was painfully slow. The light from the half dozen lanterns barely pierced the gloom and tinged the fog a sickly yellow color, casting only enough light to show them the road immediately ahead. The two men huddled down inside their fleece lined jackets, gloves warding off the chill to their fingers

and hats pulled down low over their eyes. Neither wanted to think about Johnny stranded somewhere wearing inadequate clothing.

They shouted until they were hoarse, only to have their voices swallowed by the suffocating air. Johnny could be ten feet away and never hear them. Scott pulled on the reins in frustration and brought the horses to a halt.

"This is hopeless." He bowed his head, glad that the fog would be masking the anguish he was feeling.

"Maybe not." Murdoch reached behind him and grasped his rifle. "This should be more effective." He chambered a round and fired the weapon into the air.

They waited without breathing to see if there would be any response. Seconds stretched into minutes and Scott's shoulders sagged wearily. "Nothing."

"Move the horses on and we'll try again. If Johnny is anywhere near the road eventually he'll hear us."



**J**ohnny cautiously explored the injury to his ankle. He wasn't going to risk removing his boot and could already feel the swelling. He was as sure as he could be that nothing was broken, which was only a minor comfort as the ankle was clearly not going to support his weight.

Well, if he couldn't walk he could damn well crawl. He wasn't a quitter and he wasn't going to give up this fight for survival. That it was a fight for survival he had no doubt. The cold and damp were seeping into his body leeching his strength. If he stayed where he was he would die and that wasn't something he was planning on doing. He felt aggrieved

at the unfairness of his situation. He was on his own land, close to his family and friends and this sure as hell wasn't the way he intended to end his life.

He could hear Barranca snorting and moving restlessly above him. His horse wouldn't abandon him. If he could reach level ground he would find a way to get back into the saddle and then he would have a chance. He peered upwards but couldn't see the top of the bank. How far had he fallen?

Gritting his teeth against the throbbing pain he searched for anything he could hang onto that might let him lever himself up the steep slope. He had to operate by touch as the fog was as thick as ever. His progress was painfully slow as he moved from one uncertain handhold to another. The muscles in his arms shook with the effort. His ankle throbbed in time to his heartbeat and he could feel his senses reeling. He misjudged a grab for a tree root poking out from the bank and began to slide. His ankle connected with a rock and dizziness overtook him. As his head cleared, he could hear the water and knew that all his efforts had been for nothing. He didn't have the strength to try again. Slowly his mind accepted what his body already knew. He surrendered to the lethargy spreading through him and closed his eyes.



A sound teased the corners of Johnny's consciousness. He thought that it was significant and that he should recognize it. It was too much of an effort to concentrate for long and he soon lost interest. He was drifting away again in a pleasant place where he wasn't cold and sore when the sound was repeated. He heard Barranca whinnying in response, although even that seemed distant now. He snuggled deeper into the welcoming darkness. When he heard the sound for a third time he felt irritated and mumbled at it

to stop and leave him in peace. Then he realized what he was hearing and the instincts that had kept him alive against all the odds for so many years swept through him. He groped blindly for his gun, praying that he hadn't lost it when he fell. His fingers closed upon the handle and he drew it carefully from the holster.

He wasn't sure how long it took for him to turn over onto his back. He had to use both hands to pull back the hammer and support the surprisingly heavy weight of the gun while he pointed it out over the water. The noise of the shot startled him. His arms dropped back to his sides and he knew that he would never have the strength to make a second shot. He waited...and waited . . . and finally sleep claimed him.

"Johnny, wake up."

The voice was insistent and Johnny knew better than to ignore his brother when he used that tone. His brother! Johnny was afraid to open his eyes in case it was a dream.

"You need to wake up. Stay with me, little brother."

"Scott?" Johnny asked tentatively, wondering if he had finally lost his mind.

"I'm right here. Murdoch!" Their father's name came out as a relieved shout. "He's conscious. Throw down the rope."

Johnny felt something slap against the mud close to his head. Now that he was aware of his surroundings again he found himself unable to control his violent shivering. "C . . . cold, Scott."

"Don't worry." The pressure of Scott's hand on his shoulder reassured him. "We'll have you wrapped up nice and warm soon. Where do you hurt?"

“Ankle. Twisted it . . . couldn’t get up.” He opened his eyes fully and looked into the concerned blue-grey eyes of his brother. “How. . . ?”

“We’ll talk later. I need to get this rope fastened around you then we can pull you up. It’ll be rough going if your ankle’s sore, but we’ll be as gentle as we can.”

“Be ok. Just get me out of here.”

Once the rope was secured around his chest Scott touched his arm to gain his attention. “Ready?”

Johnny nodded and listened distractedly as Scott shouted instructions to their father. He heard the familiar sounds of a wagon creaking as the team of horses were urged forward. The rope jerked and he stifled a cry. Scott steadied him as they made slow progress up the bank. As soon as he reached the top he found himself wrapped in blankets and coats, before being carried gently to the back of the wagon. Once he was settled Scott climbed in beside him and Murdoch handed over a flask of brandy.

“Drink this, Son. It should help to warm you up.”

Johnny drank deeply and then lay back against his brother’s chest. Feeling was returning to his body, a not altogether pleasant experience. “You came to find me.” That thought alone was enough to sustain him.

As Murdoch tied Barranca to the rear of the wagon he looked up at the sky. The fog was clearing and the oppressive darkness was giving way to the first hint of dawn. He looked over at his two sons. Johnny was asleep, held safely in his brother’s strong arms. Scott was dozing, worn out by the relentless worry of the night just past. He had spent so

many years searching for his younger boy . . . how would he have coped if they hadn’t found him or had arrived too late? He had hesitated to leave the safety of the house and had Scott to thank for having the courage to venture out into the darkness. Why had the cruel hand of fate kept these two apart for so long? They should have had the joy of growing up together. Looking at them now, he wondered if their bond might perhaps be all the stronger because of those wasted years.

He shook himself out of his thoughts. They needed to get Johnny home and Teresa would be worrying about them all. He should have felt exhausted, but instead, he felt exhilarated by the knowledge that they were returning home in triumph, not despair. He urged the horses forward, a smile on his face as he saw light and life returning to Lancer.



The journey home took only a fraction of the time it had taken Murdoch and Scott to reach that spot through the fog. It still took longer than Murdoch would have liked. His frequent glances behind him showed that Johnny was still shivering despite being fast asleep. He knew how deadly extreme cold could be and was anxious to get his son warmed up.

He heaved a relieved sigh as they arrived back at the hacienda. Teresa ran out to meet them, exhaustion and worry starkly displayed on her face. She had her emotions under control though, and Murdoch knew that he could rely on her to do whatever was necessary.

“We found him.” He wasted no time in providing reassurance. “He’s alive, but we need to move quickly. Ask some of the men to bring a tub of hot water to his room. Once we get him cleaned up and warm we can find out what damage he’s managed to do to himself this time.” Concern rather than irritation infused Murdoch’s voice.

Teresa nodded and walked over to peer into the back of the wagon. The voices and the lack of motion roused Johnny and he looked sleepily back at his 'sister.'

"Didn't mean to worry you," he said contritely as he tried to stop the persistent tremors running through his tired limbs.

"Oh, I wasn't worried," Teresa lied. "I knew that Murdoch and Scott would find you."

Johnny twisted round to look up at his brother. "Yeah, me too." He tried to burrow deeper into the blankets and closed his eyes again.

"No you don't," Scott ordered gently. "You need to stay awake while we get you into the house. Mind you, I'm not sure that Teresa or Maria will be happy about you dragging all that mud across their clean floors."

"You're not looking so pretty either, brother," Johnny retorted weakly.

Scott looked down at his hands and clothing. He was plastered in mud, not as badly as his brother who had been lying in it, but badly enough. "Can't disagree with you there," he replied amiably as he began to ease Johnny toward the back of the wagon.

"I'll go and heat some broth."

As Teresa turned to leave Johnny put out a hand to stop her. "Not broth," he begged. "It's breakfast time. How about some eggs, bacon and . . ."

"Broth," Teresa told him firmly. "If you don't behave I'll ask Jelly to give you one of his 'cures'."

"That's low," Johnny muttered as he slid to the ground and sagged gratefully against his father. His ankle wasn't going to co-operate

and his legs were so cold that he wasn't sure he could have walked unaided anyway. As Scott came round to support him on the other side, he relaxed and let them guide him into the house and up to his room.

"Go and get cleaned up while I see to your brother." Murdoch looked sternly at Scott who was also beginning to shiver in his damp clothes.

Scott ducked his head in acknowledgment, clearly recognizing that now wasn't the time to argue. "I'll be back soon."

Working with quiet efficiency Murdoch helped Johnny out of his wet clothes, wrapped him in warm blankets and put him to bed. Teresa arrived with a mug of hot broth which she pressed into Johnny's hands. Murdoch waited until his son had taken a few sips before turning his attention to the bath.

The large wooden tub had been placed in a corner of the room and Jelly was overseeing the relay of men filling it with bucket loads of hot water. Once Murdoch was satisfied with the water level he tested the temperature to ensure that it wouldn't scald his son.

Johnny had finished his broth and was drifting back to sleep. Murdoch shooed Teresa from the room and cleared his throat to attract his son's attention. Tired blue eyes regarded him over the mound of blankets.

"Let's get you cleaned up and then you can sleep."

Johnny reluctantly allowed his father to help him over to the tub. As he could only balance on one leg Murdoch lifted him and lowered him gently into the water. "Dios, Murdoch," Johnny gasped and struggled to get up.

Knowing too well the pain of returning circulation to half frozen limbs, Murdoch

urged, “Stay put, John,” and pressed down to keep his son in the water until Johnny gave up his fight.

Scott strolled back into the room having cleaned up as best he could and wearing fresh clothes. “He giving you any trouble, Murdoch?” he smiled at the aggrieved look on his brother’s face.

“He’s trying to boil me alive,” Johnny complained as beads of sweat ran down his face.

Scott peered at him through the steam. “You do look a little red.” He poured a glass of water and handed it to his brother who gulped it down gratefully.

As the mud washed away they could see the numerous cuts and scrapes covering Johnny’s body. Once he was satisfied that his son had thawed out, Murdoch relented and helped him out of the water and back to the bed where he was dried and, despite his protests, dressed in a nightshirt.

Johnny lay back quietly as Murdoch’s capable hands explored the injury to his ankle. He tried to force his mind away from the pain and focused his attention on the beams of light now streaming in through the window. It was difficult to reconcile the bright sunlight with the cloying darkness of the night just ended.

“It looks like a sprain,” Murdoch announced. “We’ll ask Sam to come out and check it over, but hopefully it’ll heal quickly.” He reached for the bandages and wrapped the ankle tightly before pulling the covers over Johnny’s legs. “Get some rest.”

Johnny wriggled down under the blankets until he found a comfortable position. He stole a glance at his father and brother. “Told Eli and Zac I felt lucky,” he said with a hint of embarrassment.

“Lucky?” Scott asked, incredulously.

“Yeah,” Johnny yawned and closed his eyes. “Lucky I have a father and brother to watch my back.”



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