

# THE ADVENTURE OF MARK SULLIVAN

## CHAPTER ONE

The desolation of the Kansas badlands was obvious and one reason Johnny Lancer didn't like coming to this part of the state; that, and the fact it was a bit too close to Dodge City, a place devoid of happy memories for the ex-gunfighter. When Murdoch had requested his younger son take the trip to inspect some bulls and one particular stallion, the only reason Johnny grudgingly went was because the ranch in question was well south of Dodge. True, he still had to pass through the dreaded city and skirt the badlands - a dry, unfriendly place thick with Indian unrest - but Johnny's interest in the stallion negated those concerns. And his father knew that, much to the young Lancer's chagrin.

When did Johnny Madrid become predictable? He thought to himself, smiling. Probably at the same time I became part of a family. Comforted with the thought he pulled his hat low over his eyes. It was a good feeling. And the stallion had been magnificent; the trip had been worth it after all.

Arrangements were made to ship a bull and the stallion by the end of September, and all Johnny had to do now was wait for the coach ride to Dodge City, where he would catch the train home to California. This was a sparsely populated area due to the harshness of the land and the unpredictable Comanche; the two day coach ride would be hard.

The trip down here was one he wouldn't forget too soon. He'd heard this small collection of buildings - the coach office, a mercantile, a tiny saloon and a livery, set on Kansas' western edge of civilization - had been burned down and rebuilt twice in the past three years. He had to admit, these people were tough if not resilient and determined.

When Johnny heard the arrival of the coach and stepped from the office, the first thing he noticed was how heavily armed the driver was. The second thing he noticed was that no one asked him to turn over his sidearm. Johnny Lancer's eyebrow rose curiously as he contemplated these things on his walk from the lonely office building to mount the coach.

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The driver looked edgy. Johnny's curiosity became overpowering, and he sauntered over to the driver and squinted up at him. "Expectin' trouble?" he asked quietly, not wanting the other passengers to overhear.

The driver's eyes flicked in his direction. "Been some trouble with the Comanche at the nearby ranches. Just not takin' any chances."

Johnny nodded. "Good to know. Want me to ride up top?"

"Nah, I think we'll be all right. It's been quiet for the last couple a days." The driver shifted stiffly. "Maybe after the noon stop? That's when we cross a section of the badlands."

"Noon it is." Johnny tapped the coach with a knuckle and headed for the door.

He was the last one to board, glad they weren't uncomfortably packed in. On one bench was a woman and a pale young boy Johnny estimated to be around five years old. A wiry, mustached man dressed like a rancher shared the second seat with Johnny.

Johnny greeted the man and tipped his hat and smiled at the woman. "Looks like there's room to stretch out. I'm Johnny. Johnny Lancer."

"My name is Lise Sullivan and this is my son Mark." She weakly returned the smile. "Yes, it's about as comfortable as it can get, isn't it? Nice to meet you."

The rancher, Stanley Beeker, grumbled his name then turned his full attention out the small window as the stage lurched forward.

Mark leaned against his mother, his eyes bright and active beneath his long, blond bangs. He studied Johnny with interest. "Are you a vak . . . vakero?" he asked, stumbling over the word.

"Vaquero?" Johnny corrected, laying the Mexican accent purposefully thick. "Well, no. I'm a rancher from California."

The boy frowned. "You don't dress like no rancher."

"Mark!" his mother chastised. "That was rude!"

Johnny laughed. "It's alright, Mrs. Sullivan. He's right." He turned to the boy now cuddled, embarrassed, tightly against his mother's side. "I was raised in Mexico, but have lived in California for over two years now." He fingered the lapel of the embroidered bolero jacket. "I still dress like they do in Mexico. It does look different, doesn't it?"

The boy nodded shyly, but Johnny could see more questions in the boy's eyes.

"Mark reads a lot," the woman explained. "He hasn't seen a lot of folks outside of our farm, I'm afraid."

"So you live around here?" Johnny tilted his head toward the window, directing the question to Mark.

"No," the boy said quietly. His eyes darted to Johnny's gun, his curiosity obviously piqued.

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“Our farm’s just outside of Well’s Crossing. It’s south of the river.”

“That’s about two days south, right? Well, you’ve come a long way already, haven’t you?” Johnny’s curiosity was also piqued as he wondered why this tired looking woman and boy were traveling unescorted in such rough territory. Beeker had arrived at the coach station well after Johnny and the woman, and hadn’t uttered a word to anyone at the station apart from the station master.

Mark nodded. “We’re goin’ to Boston.”

“Boston? Really? My brother’s from Boston. He says it’s a nice place.”

The boy looked skeptical. “You’re not from Boston.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“No, no, I’m not. My brother and I weren’t raised together. You have a brother?”

“Yup. One older ‘n me and an older sister. They’re at home.”

“You miss ‘em?” Johnny was having trouble figuring this pair out. They did not belong out here.

He nodded. “Yeah. A little.” His mother gave him a quick hug and a reassuring smile. Johnny didn’t miss the flash of sadness in her eyes.

“I miss my family, too. I’m going home now.” Johnny stretched his legs. “So tell me, Mark, what kind of books do ya read? My brother reads poetry.” Mark wrinkled his nose at that comment, and his mother let out a short laugh. “Yeah, I agree!” Johnny chuckled and reached over to playfully slap the boy’s knee. As he leaned forward, he noticed numerous bruises on the boy’s inner arms.

Mark didn’t notice Johnny’s surprised look and began to tell Johnny all about the book on the Alamo he’d just read. Johnny’s eyes shot to the woman. She had a small, haunted smile on her face as she watched her son speak. She seemed to be taking in every detail of the boy’s face as he talked, and Johnny doubted she heard any of Mark’s words; Lise Sullivan’s thoughts were a million miles away. Johnny could see a disturbing mixture of fear, weariness and hope in her hazel eyes and he began to wonder what she was running from – or to.

Johnny realized he’d been asked a question, and he turned his attention to the boy. “What?”

Mark sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. “I said, have you ever seen Mexican soldiers?”

Chuckling, Johnny settled back into the hard seat. “Oh, sure. More than I care to admit. I used to be one. How old are you, anyway? You seem to know a lot of things.”

“I’m eight. I’ll be nine next month.”

Johnny was surprised; the boy looked much younger. “Well, happy birthday a little early. You’ve never been out of Well’s Crossing?”

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“No. I don’t leave the house much. Mama’s afraid I’ll get hurt.”

“Well, it’s a mama’s job to worry.”

As Johnny and Mark chatted amiably about Mexico and the war, the woman took the opportunity to rest. She’d folded her shawl and used it as a pillow against the coach frame. Johnny could see the tiny veins in her eyelids when she closed her eyes, adding an overall impression of frailty and weariness. Johnny wondered not so much where they were going, but why.

Johnny regaled Mark with stories of the trail and ranching in California and Mexico that were somewhat embellished, and the boy absorbed it all in wide eyed wonder. Even his mother, finally looking a little rested, and the rancher chuckled occasionally at the fabrications. Mrs. Sullivan looked much more relaxed with a little laughter, and watched her son interact with Johnny with loving eyes.

Mark started running out of steam shortly before the noon stop and fell asleep. They had been traveling over three hours and everyone was anxious for the break and an opportunity to move around a bit. When the coach started to slow up, Johnny glanced out the window and frowned.

“Something wrong, Mr. Lancer?” Beeker asked, reading Johnny’s expression.

“I don’t see why we’re stopping. There’s no buildings.” The ex-gunfighter was immediately on guard as the driver called to the team of horses to stop. “Stay here,” he ordered the mother who cradled her sleeping son. He quickly and silently slipped from the coach. He scanned the area as soon as his feet hit the ground, his hand automatically falling to rest on his weapon. “What’s the problem?” he asked quietly of the driver.

The driver was chewing his lip and looking ahead. “Something’s not right,” he replied.

The road ahead dropped steadily and curved to the north, leaving a flat, wide valley for open plain. Far ahead, where the curve of the road straightened out, Johnny could see a small stand of trees, corrals, and a building.

“There’s usually smoke from the chimney and I don’t see any horses. There’s supposed to be a replacement team there.” The driver’s voice was flat and quiet.

They studied the station for a long minute. “There’s no movement at all,” Johnny said lowly, fingering the butt of his gun. “When were you by here last?”

“Four days ago. I come through here twice a week.” The driver caught Johnny’s eyes. “My cousin runs the place.”

“I’ll ride up with you. Let me tell the others.” Immediately, Johnny’s worries were for the woman and the boy, and again he wondered what pressed the woman to take such a dangerous journey with a small boy. He

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poked his head in the stage door and smiled. "I'm ridin' up with the driver for a bit."

"Can I?" Mark asked, now awake and instantly sitting up straight.

"Not this time," Johnny chuckled. "But I'll see what I can do. You folks just hang on, all right?" He could tell by the tense set of the adults' shoulders that they knew something was up.

Mrs. Sullivan gathered Mark up in her arms and tried to sound cheery. "Hey, this means we'll get to get out for a bit. You hungry?"

Mark was not doing a very good job of hiding his disappointment at having to stay in the coach. "I guess," he sighed.

Johnny nodded an acknowledgement and climbed up next to the driver.

"Grab the rifle, there." The driver indicated the weapon at his feet with a nod of his head. His hands were full with the restless team of horses. The animals seemed to feel his nervousness.

Johnny checked the weapon. "Let's go," he said lowly.

"Indians haven't been a real problem for a while. Seems there's a small band of Comanche boys that want to get back at the settlers in the area. The railroad scares 'em, I think, and now they're fightin' back. Usin' hit and run tactics. Not the raids and sieges they've done in the past." Chatter seemed to calm the driver's nerves, so Johnny simply nodded acknowledgement and kept his eyes open.

The driver relaxed the reins and the horses moved off with little urging. He kept them at a trot, saving a little of their energy and giving the pair of men time to study the area as they approached.

At first, nothing seemed to be wrong. As they got closer, however, Johnny pointed out the corral gates lying on the ground. "They're broken from the hinges," he noted in an icy calm voice. Next, they noticed the shattered windows to the building and the heavy scent of something burned.

"Oh, Louis," the driver whispered fearfully. "Louis and Carolyn are my cousin and his wife." He swallowed hard.

Johnny's eyes scanned constantly, and he was confident they weren't being set up for an ambush. Instead of pulling into the yard area, he had the driver pull up on the roadway that passed in front of the house, just short of the yard entry gate. Johnny patted the driver's arm reassuringly. "Hold here. I'll check it out." The horses danced nervously in place as Johnny jumped down.

With the rifle at his hip, he walked through the entryway. The yard gate was lying aside in the dirt, and as soon as Johnny passed it he could see the back of the building. The sight of two bloody bodies made his heart pound faster, but he kept his outer cool and kept on. When he got closer, he

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saw they were two men that had been thoroughly knifed. Part of the house was scorched in an unsuccessful attempt to burn it down. That wasn't the case with the barn; it was a pile of blackened timber beyond the stand of trees.

Johnny sidestepped to the building and skirted around the bodies on the porch. He carefully entered the building and checked every room. The house had been completely ransacked, and most of the furniture broken and torn apart. There were no other bodies; Johnny knew Carolyn wouldn't be found here. He found a pair of tattered blankets and threw them over the bodies and then quickly checked the rest of the compound.

Satisfied they were alone, Johnny waved to the driver, who then pulled through the gate and stopped.

"I'll water the horses," Johnny said, taking the reins of the lead horse. "See if that's your cousin. They'll need to be buried. There's no woman here."

The driver's eyes were shiny with shock as he accepted the shotgun Johnny offered. The coach door opened and the banker stuck his head out. "Can we come out now?"

Johnny nodded, and the man was immediately followed by Mark and his mother. The woman looked scared, and she held Mark's hand firmly. She found Johnny with her eyes as Beeker moved off to help the driver.

"You want to help me water the horses, Mark?" Johnny was already unhitching the horses to give them a much needed rest. Now that they had to take the group the rest of the way, Johnny wanted to be sure they had a little time to recover.

Mrs. Sullivan gave him a grateful smile and they followed Johnny to the watering trough. Mark led the smallest horse with his mother's help, insistent he could manage on his own. The woman stopped fussing and let the boy handle the horse, worry creasing her forehead.

"Don't let 'em drink too much. They're pretty hot," Johnny cautioned. "Maybe you and Mark should go sit in the shade, Mrs. Sullivan."

"Please, call me Lise." She glanced warily at the charred building, then at the pair of men digging graves in what was a small vegetable garden. "I . . . I think we'd rather stay with you, if you don't mind." Her weak smile was a small indication of the fear Johnny saw in her eyes.

"Okay, but we do need to eat something. It may be awhile before we get another chance."

Lise glanced back at the bodies. "When they . . . clear the porch, I'll see what's left behind." Johnny tied the horses in the shade while Mark found something interesting in the exposed roots of a gnarled tree. Lise, with a glance that confirmed that Mark was out of range, approached Johnny and lay a trembling hand on his forearm. "I really need to get Mark

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to Dodge City. It's important that we catch the train. Do you think we'll make it?"

Her voice was full of desperation, and at that moment, all Johnny wanted to tell her was that everything would be all right.

But he knew better. They were in dire straits, and he knew it. Johnny hesitated a moment, trying to decide the best way to tell her. Again, he wondered what drove her to bring such a frail boy into these elements.

"Lise." He gently took her elbows as he spoke to her. He could feel her trembling. "I'd like to say yes, but I can't. We're in dangerous country with spent horses. If we continue on, we'll be caught by darkness because we can't push the horses. On the other hand, we can't stay here, either. I don't know what we'll end up doing, but I can tell you that we are going to be late getting to Dodge City."



When the horses were watered, Johnny secured the animals in a shady spot and put Mark in charge of watching them. Then he helped the driver and Beeker bury the two dead men. The driver - Davis - was obviously concerned about the whereabouts of Carolyn, his sister-in-law.

"Comanche are known to take white women and make them like servants," he said flatly as they worked. "I almost hope we find her dead instead."

"If they took her into the badlands, your wish may come true," Beeker said lowly.

Davis fashioned two crude crosses, and everyone gathered to say a prayer. Mark leaned tiredly against his mother's side during the short service.

"I've put together a small meal," Lise said quietly when the prayers were done. "There wasn't much."

"Comanche looted everything," Davis mumbled, still shaken. "We'll leave as soon as we eat."

Johnny stayed in the background and observed his traveling companions with an appraising eye during their stop. He'd been in the badlands and knew what it was like. What he didn't know was the constitution of these people he may have to depend on for his life. He didn't like the odds so far, and hoped the rest of the trip would be uneventful.

Davis was on the edge emotionally and revenge against the Comanche was quite a possibility. Beeker seemed to be more concerned about his own safety and Johnny wouldn't put it past him to bolt if it came to a fight. Then there were Lise and Mark; Johnny still couldn't believe they were even here.

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As they readied the horses to continue onward, Johnny said a silent prayer for an uneventful trip.



CHAPTER TWO

Davis didn't push the horses and they ended up stopping right after sunset. "We normally would have been at the next station by now," he said as he unhitched the team. "I'd say we have about ten more miles to go, and the bay is startin' to favor his off foreleg. I'm gonna have to take it real easy on him tomorrow or we'll be in a bad way. They should notice we're late, but no one's gonna look for us until at least tomorrow afternoon."

"Guess we need to stop for the night," Beeker said, clearly annoyed.

Johnny scouted the area and found a secluded spot for a small fire while Beeker and Lise set up a campsite. Johnny found he had a shadow as he checked the area.

"You seen a rattler before, Mark?" he asked with a teasing glint in his eye.

"Aw, sure, Mr. Lancer. Tons." Johnny gave him an amused, skeptical look and Mark began to kick a small rock with his toe. "Well, I've seen 'em dead. Like I told ya, I don't get out a lot."

"Well, that's okay, because ya don't really want to meet 'em out here." The ex-gunfighter checked the rocks around the campsite. "Usually they just want to get away, but when you're sleepin', well, ya don't really want one in your bedroll."

"They'll really crawl in your bedroll?" he asked, wide-eyed. "You think I'll see one?"

Johnny smiled. He had to admit, the boy sure didn't scare easy. "Nah, I think we're all right here. Haven't seen any scorpions, either."

"Scorpions? Really?" Mark eagerly began looking around the rocks. "I read about them. They crawl in your boots."

"That they do," Johnny said as he threw a blanket on the ground. "Just be sure to check your shoes before you put 'em on in the mornin'."

"Mark?" Lise's voice called from the other side of the fire. "I want you to rest a bit before we eat. Get your bag from the coach."

"All right, ma." He looked at Johnny with bright eyes. "Come with me?"

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"Sure. Gotta get some more bedrolls down anyway."

Davis prowled around the edge of the campsite with the rifle, tense and ready to shoot at his own shadow. Johnny hoped he didn't accidentally shoot one of the horses, and decided to try and keep Mark's attention away from the nervous driver so the boy wouldn't become scared. Although he sure don't seem scared of anything, he thought with a smile.

Johnny hauled an armful of bedrolls while Mark hauled a bag that seemed to be heavier than it should. When Johnny threw down a blanket near the fire for the boy, he saw why the bag was so heavy - it was loaded with several small books.

Johnny sat down next to Mark and indicated the load with a nod of his head. "You read all of those?"

Even though Mark's eye's looked like hollows lined in black against his pale face, his enthusiasm for the books lit his eyes in a way that made him look less tired. With a huge smile, the boy handed Johnny one of the books with the title Southwest Stories embossed on a cracked leather cover.

"My ma calls 'em 'penny dead fulls' but I like 'em fine." Mark dug deeper into the bag and pulled out another volume.

" 'Penny dead fulls' huh?" Johnny kept the laugh at bay and reached for the second book. His brow raised in surprise at the title. Border Tales of Johnny Madrid.

"That's my fav'rite," Mark said absently, pulling two more from the bag. "If ma knew I had these, she'd probably have a conniption." He showed Johnny Bat Masterson Stories and Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday. "But I hide 'em behind pages of the books she wants me to read." The two books that obviously fell into that category were shoved aside and ignored.

Johnny didn't hold back the short laugh this time as he quickly thumbed through the tome bearing his name. "Why d'ya like these?"

Mark's eyes grew wide. "Oh, they're full of adventures! The places they go and the things they do! I've never been outta Well's Crossing." He picked the book from Johnny's grip. "See? It talks here about Mexico City and San Diego and Nogales. They sound so far away." He began to read. "Madrid's eyes pierced his opponent before his bullets. The icy blueness cut deep into Suarez's soul and he felt the chill of doom invade his heart. Doubt raised its ugly head, instant death to a gun fighter. His hand twitched a hair's breadth before he tried to clear leather and Madrid cut him down in . . .

"Gimme that!" Johnny snapped, snatching the book from the boy. "Who the heck is Suarez?" He flipped the pages. "I never heard a him . . ."

"Suarez was the scourge of Tecate! Men feared him and women and children cowed at his . . . his pr . . . prow . . ."

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Johnny picked up the thread from the book's introduction. " ' . . . his prowess for evil.' Who writes this stuff?" He searched the cover.

"Ain't they great? I knew you'd like 'em!" Mark said excitedly. "Lookie here . . ." he reached for the book but froze at his mother's call.

"Mark! You're supposed to be resting!"

Quickly the boy stuffed the books in the bag and threw Johnny a wide eyed look of fear as he scrambled.

"Ah, it's my fault, ma'am." Johnny looked at her, his body hiding Mark's frantic movements. He gave her his winningest smile. "We were lookin' at this book about the, uh . . ."

"Alamo!" Mark whispered.

"The Alamo! Very interesting."

Two sets of innocent eyes turned to the woman standing with her hands on her hips. She looked skeptical. "That's very nice of you, Mr. Lancer, but Mark does need his rest."

Johnny rose to his knees and ruffled Mark's hair affectionately. "Yeah, partner, you do need rest before continuing on this adventure." Mark's eyes followed him with a dawning look of realization.

"Guess I *am* havin' an adventure, huh?" He settled down on the blanket with a happy expression.

"I'd say so." Johnny stood and brushed off his pants. "See ya later, kid."

Lise fell in beside him as they walked to the fire. "He loves those horrible books," she said with a short laugh.

"So you know about 'em, huh?" Johnny's eyes glittered in the firelight as he grinned. "He's a good kid, though."

"Yeah," she sighed. "He is."

Beeker and Davis squatted by the fire starting coffee and heating some beans for their meal.

Lise veered away from the fire to watch the stars emerge from the thinning silver clouds. "He's aching for adventure, all right. I just hope . . ." her voice hitched and she hugged herself tighter as she watched the sky.

"What's wrong with him, Lise?" Johnny asked quietly. "I saw the bruising and he tires pretty quick."

It took her a moment to speak. When she did, her voice was pitched so it wouldn't carry. "The doc in town doesn't know, but he does know that there ain't much hope for him in Well's Crossing. He said some docs in Boston may be able to help. It's like he's withering away." Her voice caught again, and she covered her mouth with a hand. Her eyes became shiny as she stared at the heavens as if looking for an answer. With her tears under control, she continued. "He was normal until he was almost six. Then he began to lose weight. The doc says there's probably something wrong with

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his blood. There's a hospital in Boston that knows more about it. That's where we're headed."

Johnny rocked on the balls of his feet and stared at his toes as he listened to the anguish in Lise's voice. To watch your child simply wither away before your eyes without knowing why; he put a sympathetic arm around her shoulder, and she quickly wiped the gathering tears from her eyes.

"As soon as we heard about the train coming through Dodge, we started to put away money. We've saved for over a year. There's only enough for Mark and me. It was so hard leaving Len and Krista and Billy. We have to make it to the train, Johnny. If we miss it, we can't wait for the next one. Mark doesn't have the time and we don't have the money." She turned her distraught eyes to meet his. "We have to make it to Dodge on time."

He gave her a quick hug. "He'll be on that train, Lise. I'll see to it."

Lise gave him a tired smile, thanks in her eyes. "Let's go see if those two can cook," she said lightly.

Johnny laughed and they returned to the fire.



Johnny elected to stand third watch that night. Their campsite was away from the road and on enough of a rise to see anyone approaching. There was a pair of boulders large enough to obscure the horses' outlines. It was a near full moon and the territory that surrounded them was awash with enough light to see clearly for miles. They kept the horses close to them, but the coach was left alongside the road and quite visible.

Davis was nervous about the coach being away from the campsite, but realized it did stick out like a sore thumb out here. They all hoped that any roaming Comanche would consider it abandoned.

Mark was enthralled with the whole situation, and Johnny was glad. He didn't want the boy to be afraid.

"Does he know how sick he really is?" Johnny asked Lise as they watched Mark set his bedroll as close to his new friend's as possible.

Lise sighed. "We haven't told him directly, but somehow, I think he knows. I think that's why he shows no fear. He's already facing death." Her voice caught on the last words as she pressed her knuckle to her lips. She finished in a whisper. "He hasn't had a normal childhood for the past few years. I hope we can still give him that."

Johnny bowed his head and pursed his lips as he resolved to do what he could to give the boy a chance. "Well, ma'm, we'll do our best, won't we?"

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She nodded, and turned to make her own bed. Johnny joined Mark by the dying fire.

"We ain't gonna keep the fire going all night?" Mark asked, adjusting his blanket.

"Too dangerous. It can be seen too easily."

"Oh. Didn't think of that. I've never camped out before." Lack of a campfire didn't seem to dampen his spirits. "I feel like a real cowboy!"

Johnny had to smile as the boy settled down. His eyes, although bright with excitement, were still surrounded by deep shadows of weariness or pain. Johnny couldn't figure which, and at that moment realized that this boy probably didn't distinguish between the two. He'd lived with this for a long time now.

Lying next to Mark, they studied the stars together and listened to the sounds of the night. Johnny quietly named off each of the animals he heard and told the boy a little story about each one. It wasn't long until even breathing told him that his audience was asleep.

Johnny heard Lise and Beeker settle down, and waited until the fire was just an undulating orange glow within the circle of rocks before he allowed himself to relax. He didn't know how long he'd been asleep before being jerked awake by the sounds of cursing and stumbling feet.

Instantly, he was on his feet and crouched in a ready position, Colt in hand.

"Damn Indians!" he heard Beeker hiss.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lise move quickly to Mark's side and pull him in close. The boy mumbled sleepily, still half asleep. Johnny moved like a shadow to Beeker's side where they overlooked the road.

A tower of flame marked the location of the coach.

"I saw two riders runnin' from the fire," Beeker said quietly. "I think they were scouts."

"Where's Davis?" Johnny snapped.

"I spelled him a couple of hours ago, but he didn't seem to be able to sleep. I think he went to guard the coach."

Johnny's eyes were burning with anger when he turned them on Beeker. "You let him go?"

"Hey, I couldn't stop him," the rancher shrugged. "What was I supposed to do? Tie him up?"

"Stay low and quiet," Johnny barked. "I'm checking on Davis."

Johnny didn't give Beeker a chance to protest, and figured he wouldn't anyway. He was right. Stealing from shadow to shadow, Johnny made it to the coach in a zig zag pattern, quiet as the night. The flames crackled and spit eerily in the quietness of the night.

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The coach had been pulled to the center of the road. Due to the stillness of the air, the fire stayed contained to the coach's framework. The flames' arms reached skyward like a greedy waif. Momentarily averting his eyes from the conflagration to regain his night vision, Johnny began to scan the surrounding area for any sign of Davis. Finding none, he circled around to the other side of the fully engulfed coach. The light of the fire showed that the door was standing open.

That's when Johnny saw a pair of legs sticking out of the doorway. The only things not alive with flame were the soles of Davis' boots.

Johnny tightened lips to keep his stomach from lurching into his throat, and quickly retreated back to the campsite. The horses shifted nervously on his arrival, uneasy with the smell of fire and the tense atmosphere now surrounding them. Beeker's expression was unreadable, which made the ex-gunfighter's instincts tingle. The rancher would have to be watched.

"Let's grab some food and hit the trail before dawn," Johnny said quietly. "We're gonna have to ride bareback with minimal supplies.

"Mr. Davis?" Lise queried softly, Mark tight against her hip, blinking away sleep.

Johnny's eyes flicked from her eyes to the boy's, then back. "There'll be four of us," he replied, "but only three horses. Davis was right - the little bay is favorin' a leg. We could use 'em as a pack horse, but he's gonna slow us up. We'll just cut him loose."

"You plan on followin' the road?" Beeker asked in a neutral voice.

Johnny ran his hand through his hair, uncomfortable with the whole situation. If he was on his own, he knew what he'd do. Could he take the gamble with these badland greenhorns? "I'm not sure the road is any safer at this point," he admitted, reluctant to toss out his other thought.

"So what are our choices?" Lise said bluntly.

Johnny hesitated before speaking. "Well, the road is probably the safer way to go - and like I said, I can't guarantee that - but the faster way is to cut through there." He raised his hand and pointed directly into the flat treachery known as the badlands. "The road skirts the flatlands and Indian territory, which adds a lot of miles. We can save nearly a day cutting across."

"Mr. Lancer, that's the most ludicrous suggestion I've ever heard!" Beeker's voice held the most animation any of them had heard to date. "You can't go through Comanche territory like that! Look at that coach!"

Lise's head automatically tilted in the direction of the flaming coach, whereas Johnny held his stare on Beeker.

"I've done it before and I can do it again," Johnny said lowly. "I know what to expect."

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"Well, I don't, but I know what I've heard! I refuse to go along with this idea!"

Johnny turned his steely blues to Lise. When she turned to look at him, he noticed how her eyes reflected the moonlight like still pools of cool water. He looked closely, experienced at reading people, and was only a little surprised at what he saw. Lise Sullivan's eyes showed a quiet desperation without a trace of fear. That's where Mark gets his fearlessness, he thought instantly.

"I'm willing to go whichever way is fastest," she said flatly. "I don't have the luxury of time, gentlemen."

Johnny quietly approved with a short nod. Beeker sputtered in anger and opened his mouth to speak.

"Two to one, Beeker. The lady's vote counts. Let's pack up."

Mark had been as quiet as a jackrabbit during the discussion, his eyes darting from one speaker to another. As soon as he realized the decision was made, the boy grinned crookedly at his new friend.

"I get to ride?" he said. "I haven't ridden a horse since I was four!"

Johnny was amazed at the boy's reaction and chuckled shortly. Then, with an affectionate ruffling of the boy's hair, sent him off to pack. Johnny stopped Lise with a hand on her arm as she turned to follow her son. "He can ride with me," Johnny said. "The horses aren't really saddle horses and may be a little difficult. Can you handle that?"

She gave him her first true smile since they'd met and her eyes sparked with life. "Used to help daddy break the horses on our old ranch. I can ride, Johnny, I just haven't done it in a while!"

Finally, something's goin' our way, Johnny thought with a quick grin. "How's he taking all this?" he asked Lise quietly. "I mean, three dead men so far and he hasn't blinked an eye."

The familiar haunted look came to Lise's eyes and she ducked her head, regarding her braided fingers as she spoke. "I've come to realize that Mark and death have an understanding. I think they've made their peace." She hesitated, and again turned her determined eyes on Johnny. "It's me who won't give up."

### CHAPTER THREE

The light of the full moon made the flatlands ahead of them look like a crazy checkerboard of quicksilver earth and shadowy brush. When the ex-gunfighter wasn't altering tack for riding, his eyes were scanning the expanse for any signs of life. The sounds of owls and coyotes scavenging for a meal occasionally punctuated the air, the openness making it difficult to pinpoint exactly where they were. The occasional loose cloud that would drift across the moon's face did little to dim the glow of the land.

Johnny always liked nights on the open range. There was a sense of freedom that made one's blood tingle, and adding a full moon only increased the feeling. Right now the danger that was out there was not obvious, but Johnny knew better than to be fooled by the inviting openness. Danger could lurk in any of the shadows.

With a final splice to a shortened pair of reins, he had makeshift tack – minus saddles – for three horses. His inspection of the lame horse dashed the idea of using him as a pack horse once and for all, and he turned the bay loose. The horse didn't go far, reluctant to leave his stable mates.

Mark approached Johnny and hefted his bag. "Here's my stuff," he said.

Johnny took the bag and whistled lowly. "You got any clothes in here at all? This feels like it's all books!"

"Ma's got our clothes. This is all I need," the boy said in a tone of finality. "I made a sling outta one of my shirts so I can strap it to my back. See?" He took the bag and slipped it on, holding his arms out to the side to show off his work.

Chuckling as he slowly shook his head, Johnny handed the boy the reins to their horse. "Hold this while I make sure the others are as prepared as you."

Lise was ready, a similar bag strapped to her back. "I couldn't leave his books," she explained. "I have our clothes. We don't need much." Johnny gave her a leg up on to the bare back of the horse. The animal shifted



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uncomfortably, not used to this role. Lise calmed him immediately and Johnny nodded his approval.

Finally, he faced Beeker. Johnny had felt the tension emanating from the man since the decision was made to cross the badlands, and knew a confrontation was coming. He just didn't know when. Before now, Johnny hadn't given the Colt Beeker wore a second glance. Unlike a gunfighter, the gun had been high and tight on the rancher's waist, easily covered by his jacket. Now, Johnny saw that Beeker's jacket was draped back, exposing the gun for easy access.

Instinctively, Johnny moved aside to insure Lise and Mark were well out of any line of fire. Beeker's eyes followed him as he made a half circle around, the man's hands continuing to ready his horse. Johnny's gut tingled in warning. The makeshift bag of any remaining food and water was at Beeker's feet.

Johnny stopped about six feet from the rancher. "Ready to go?" he asked in what he knew was his Madrid voice. Johnny had felt the persona overtake his posture with the gut instinct warning, and now stood in a deceptively relaxed pose with his hands resting on the double buckles of his holster.

"I'm ready." The rancher replied, his eyes flicking over the length of Johnny's frame. "I'll just take the . . ." he reached for the bag with his left hand, his eyes never leaving Johnny.

"No," Johnny said quietly. "I'll take that. You take your things." He motioned to another bag off to the side with a nod of his head.

Beeker slowly straightened. "I don't think so," the rancher replied darkly and he shifted slightly to face Johnny.

For a moment, they regarded each other. The sound of a coyote pack falling on its prey peppered the night, their yipping abruptly starting at the same time Johnny saw something in Beeker's eyes.

After a tense second the rancher's hand touched the butt of his gun. In an instant he looked down the barrel of Johnny's Colt. Beeker froze, realizing he'd never seen the motion.

The coyotes' voice reached a crescendo as ownership of the kill was decided, then abruptly fell silent.

"Wow!" Mark's whispered exclamation carried easily in the suddenly quiet night air.

"I'll take the food," Johnny said simply. "You take your personal things. And mind you, save the bullets for a real emergency. Are we clear?" The unsaid message implied that Beeker would not get a second chance if he tried to use his gun against them again.

The rancher swallowed hard and nodded shortly, moving his jacket to cover the weapon. Johnny's gun disappeared into his holster as quickly as

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it had appeared. He waited for Beeker to grab his personal bag and mount before he picked up the food. It was an alarmingly light load.

As Johnny went through the motions mount up, he felt the eyes of his traveling partners follow his every move. His hopes that the previous encounter would simply pass were dashed when the boy reached his side.

“Wow, Johnny, you’re the fastest gun I’ve ever seen!” Knowing he’d probably be chastised by his mother, Mark kept his voice in a low, but excited, whisper.

Johnny prepared to mount. “And how many fast draws have you seen, exactly?”

“Well, none, really,” the boy admitted, but his excitement was not quelled. “But I read all about ‘em! I bet you’re as fast a Johnny Madrid! He’s supposed to be the fastest gun alive!”

Biting his inner cheek to keep from laughing, Johnny swung up on the jittery chestnut gelding. It took a moment to quiet the horse with a few, low Spanish words. That done, he instructed Mark to stand at the horse’s left shoulder, facing the animal’s rump. Then Johnny twisted, his right arm reaching behind his back. “Grab my forearm with your right hand, and I’ll grab yours.” Mark did as he was told, and then Johnny leaned slightly away from him. Before he knew it, the small boy was up behind his friend. Johnny nudged the chestnut toward the flat lands.

Mark held Johnny’s belt and settled into the rhythm of the walking horse. Johnny glanced back and saw Lise fall in behind them, her face set in a puzzled frown. Beeker brought up the rear and fidgeted with his pack in a nervous manner.

“Can you show me how to do that? Fast draw, I mean?” The boy kept his voice low so his mother wouldn’t hear.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Johnny replied. He tried to change the subject. “You need to keep your eyes open, Mark. I think we’ve seen the last of the Comanche for the night, but it don’t hurt none to be alert.”

“OK. But I think you’d probably shoot any injuns before they could hurt us. Have you been in a gunfight before?”

Johnny sighed, resigned to the fact that he was getting backed into a corner by a chatty eight-year-old. He was deciding how to dance around the facts of his gun fighting career when he heard galloping hooves retreating behind them. He pulled his none-too-happy horse into a half circle just in time to see Beeker’s form receding in the direction of the main road. The lame bay whinnied loudly and followed his harness mate in a rough canter.

The remaining two horses danced in place, eventually taking comfort in their closeness and calming. Johnny’s chestnut champed his bit

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nervously. “Well, that wasn’t much of a surprise,” he drawled. “Best o’ luck to him.”

Lise dropped her head for a moment, let out a sigh, then raised her chin and urged her mount onward. Johnny followed suit. They rode side by side, the horses more comfortable with that arrangement.

Mark, however, was like a dog with a bone. “So?” he said just loud enough for Johnny’s ears. “You seen a gunfight before?”

Johnny immediately jumped on the out the boy unknowingly gave him in the slightly re-worded question. “Yeah, I’ve seen a few.”

“You said you grew up at the border. My book says there’s lots a gunfights down there.”

“Yeah, there were a few. They weren’t too pretty, Mark. Someone died most of the time, you know.”

“Yeah, but didn’t they deserve it? I mean, a gunfight’s different than killin’ someone while robbin’ ‘em or something like that.” He hesitated a second. “It’s kinda like a fistfight, I think. They know what they’re getting’ into.”

The image of at least a dozen gunfights flew through Johnny’s head; kids not a whole lot older than Mark calling out the infamous Johnny Madrid to get a reputation the fast way. Sure, they thought had an idea what they were getting into, but they hadn’t truly faced death before. They didn’t really realize the finality of the consequences. There was the occasion where Johnny could make them face their mortality with a severe wounding, but those chances were not only risky but downright dangerous. More than once, a wounded showoff tried to even the scales with an ambush. They wound up dead, lesson unlearned.

While all these thoughts ran through Johnny’s mind in an effort to phrase a reply, Mark leaned heavily against Johnny’s back and said quietly, “At least they got to pick the way they wanted to die.”

Johnny answered without thinking. “That’s true. But I would think they would be happier picking the way they wanted to live, don’t you?”

Mark’s voice sounded tired when he replied. “Yeah, I guess. I’d like to live the rest of my life just like this,” he said sleepily. “Under the stars, free and havin’ an adventure. Just like in my books.” Johnny reached down with his right hand and lay his hand tightly over Mark’s to keep the boy from slipping off if he fell asleep. Johnny thought his partner had nodded off when he heard the question he dreaded. “Have you ever met Johnny Madrid? He grew up around the border just like you. You musta seen him.”

Lise’s gentle voice interrupted. “Mark, you need to sleep. Johnny, is he all right there to sleep for a bit?”

“Ma . . .” he tried to sound indignant, but Mark’s voice sounded like he was losing his battle for wakefulness.

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“This horse has a back like a tabletop, ma’am. Sleep for a little, Mark, I gotcha.” When the boy’s grip relaxed after a few strides, Johnny knew he was asleep. Lise rode quietly alongside for several minutes.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” she said suddenly. Her voice so quiet that Johnny barely heard over the rustle of wind-tickled brush. “My daddy’s ranch was in west Texas, near the border. I’ve seen gunfighters.” He glanced sideways at her and saw that she was staring straight ahead between her mount’s ears, lost in thought. Johnny was glad that at least he didn’t see fear anywhere in her profile.

He hung his head briefly and sighed, then also looked ahead. “I go by Lancer now. I found my family.”

“You aren’t a gunfighter anymore?”

“Nope. I’m a rancher, like I said. Haven’t been Madrid for a nearly two years.”

They rode along in silence again, the sounds of the night surrounding them like a light desert wind. When she spoke again, Johnny could hear teasing in her voice. “And I must say, you are the fastest thing I ever saw, Mr. Lancer!”

Johnny broke into a grin, and looked over to see her smiling at him. “Do you want Mark to know?”

She considered that for about a half a second. “I think we’re in the makings of the adventure of his life and every adventure needs a hero, don’t you think?”

“I . . . I ain’t no hero . . .” he stuttered, suddenly embarrassed.

“You are in his eyes. And as far as I’ve seen, if there’s anyone out there that can get us to Dodge City, I have no doubt it’s you, Johnny Madrid Lancer.” Her smile was one of complete trust.

Johnny squirmed at the compliment. “I promise I’ll do my best.”

“I’m sure you will. You have so far.” She waited a few seconds then said jokingly, “And if those darn books are right, you’re good enough to take on the entire Comanche nation!”

They both laughed out loud then shushed each other for the noise. The exhausted boy slept through the whole exchange.

## CHAPTER FOUR

As soon as the light of the rising sun painted the sky in pinks and purples, Johnny's eyes surveyed their surroundings with purpose. With the sun came the true colors to the landscape and now he could find the suggestive greens that would indicate water.

What remained in their pack would do for a breakfast on the move, and possibly even a midday meal, but if they didn't find any sign of civilization that could provide food, dinner would have to be caught. Although finding the second way station Davis mentioned would be nice, the map in Johnny's head told him that probably wouldn't happen. He also had a very strong gut feeling that the second way station had met same fate as the first. He hoped he was wrong, and that Beeker made it there in one piece, but Johnny doubted that would come to pass.

While they were burying Davis' cousin, Davis had mentioned that the other body was one of the men from the second way station. They had speculated why the man was there; Davis said the man stopped by now and again to deliver supplies. Johnny's gut told him the man had arrived with a raiding party on his tail and a warning on his tongue.

They were on their own all the way to Dodge City.

Mark was oddly silent. Johnny knew he was awake by Lise's soft inquires and the boy's acceptance of the meager breakfast. He didn't eat much, but took the water without protest.

By the time the sun was fully above the flat horizon, Johnny had already spotted two possible destinations for water. He pointed them out to Lise, discussing the possibilities of each, and had to smile when he felt the small body behind him leaning aside to see where Johnny was pointing.

"Careful, kid, don't be over reachin' your balance." Johnny leaned aside to allow the boy a better line of sight. "Well? What's your opinion, cowboy?"

"That one." Mark pointed off to the left. "That's east, right?"

"Yup, it sure is. East we go. And keep your eyes open back there. We don't want anyone sneakin' up behind us, do we?" What Johnny didn't

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mention was his concern that the water in this area was probably being watched.

"How long to get there?" Lise asked.

"Oh, not long. About an hour, I'd say."

Johnny's estimate was right on target. He motioned to pull up short of the thick stand of green brush that indicated a water source. The horses, smelling the water, shifted in place and refused to stand completely still, edging continually in the direction of the greenery.

Johnny swung his leg over his horse's neck and dropped to the ground. When he moved to secure the dreadfully small bag of supplies to the horse, Mark slid to the ground. Surprised, Johnny dropped the bag and moved to catch the boy. As he did so, controlling the descent to the ground, Mark's pant leg shimmied up past his knee and Johnny saw the line of bruises that marked his pale skin. His attention was diverted by the boy's voice.

"Why're we stopping here?" he asked, his voice more chipper than his appearance. In the harshness of full daylight, Mark looked much worse than he did the day before.

"You should stay on the horse," Johnny said. "In case we need a quick getaway."

"I wanna go with you," Mark insisted, planting his feet and crossing his arms across his chest. "This is my adventure, remember?"

"Mark," Lise started.

"Ma, you've seen Johnny draw. Don't you think I'd be safer with him than trying to control a big old horse on the run or hanging on to you trying to do the same thing?"

Johnny opened his mouth to speak, but found he had nothing to say in the light of the boy's logic. He snapped his mouth shut and tried not to laugh at the boy's expression as he looked at his mother. It was exactly like the one of extremely strained patience on Maria's face whenever she caught Johnny red-handed raiding the pantry at Lancer.

Lise was momentarily speechless as she regarded her son. Then she turned her surprised face to Johnny and they both burst out laughing.

Mark frowned. "What's so funny?" he demanded.

Johnny grabbed his shoulder and gave him an affectionate shake. "You sound amazingly like my know-it-all brother."

The boy puzzled over that for a moment, then brightened. "You mean I can go?"

"Your argument is better than mine," Lise said from her horse's back. It was obvious she had her hands full just keeping the animal still. "Give me your reins, Johnny, and I'll stay with the horses."

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Johnny handed them up to Lise and gave her a reassuring smile. She smiled tiredly back. Next, Johnny took Mark's book bag and tied it to the food bag. He slung the makeshift saddle bag over the withers of Lise's horse for safe keeping.

When they turned to go, he flipped off the leather loop that held his gun firmly in the holster. Although it was a small, well-practiced motion that was done in a fraction of a second, it wasn't lost on Mark.

"How many can you take out?" he asked excitedly.

Johnny shushed him and moved in the direction of the greenery. Mark stayed at his hip.

"I'm hopin' I don't need to use it at all," Johnny whispered. "But if I do, be sure to get behind me and hide yourself, you hear?"

The boy nodded and tried to keep up with his friend. Johnny noticed his difficulty and slowed to accommodate Mark's pace. The boy was weak, and it gnawed at Johnny's heart. To look at his body, it was amazing he was on his feet at all. Mark was thin, pale beneath the sun's blush on his face, and the areas at his wrists and ankles that were visible were dark with bruising. Lean cheeks supported dark shadows around slightly sunken eyes, but it was the hazel eyes themselves that glowed with life. Bright and clear, they were the only thing that was a window to a still active mind; well, those and his voice, Johnny mused.

Near the trees, Johnny dropped to his stomach and Mark copied him. The ground here was much sandier, indicating an old, dried up creek bed. They stayed low and quietly shimmied to a spot where they could see the feeble water source.

Two painted Comanche braves squatted on either side of the meager pool. They spoke quietly to each other as they worked their hands in the small puddle. They were shirtless, their dark, red-toned skin shiny with wetness. Long, single braids trailed down their backs, leather strings holding the black hair in place. Slashes of red and yellow paint adorned their cheeks, and worn buckskin breeches covered their legs. Knives sparkled at their waists.

Johnny gave Mark a sideways glance and saw that the boy's eyes were huge. The ex-gunfighter didn't see any fear there and wasn't surprised at this point. The boy turned to him, and Johnny put his finger to his lips and motioned that they back away.

Sure they were out of hearing range, Johnny squatted down and pulled Mark close. "I have an idea, but it's dangerous. You have to do exactly what I tell you, you understand?" Mark nodded, his eyes still huge but sparking with excitement. "If everything goes right I'll call you. In the meantime, you have to stay hidden." He took Mark's shoulders firmly and made the point clear. "You stay hidden until I call. It should be fairly quiet

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until then. If it gets real noisy or you hear me yell 'run', you find your ma and get out of here, pronto. Understand?"

"Yes," Mark whispered.

Johnny gripped Mark's shoulders and held the boy's eyes with his own for a long moment. Then, he made a decision. In a smooth motion, he removed his gun, spun it in his hand, and handed it, butt first, to Mark. Mark glanced at it and then met Johnny's eyes, waiting for a reason.

"If I use this, every Comanche around is gonna hear and come runnin'. You get it to your ma if things go bad here. I have no doubt she'll use it if she has to." Mark carefully took the piece, avoiding the trigger. It took both hands to get a good grip with the smallness of his fingers.

Johnny led him to a thick manzanita bush and dug out a hollow under the lowest branches which touched the ground. Mark wiggled in, and Johnny brushed away any evidence of Mark's presence. When he was done he wiped his hand on his pants and leaned in just close enough to connect with Mark's eyes. "You take care of that gun, now, you hear?" he whispered. "I mean, Johnny Madrid can't go around without his gun, can he?" With a quick wink, he stole away like a shadow in the sun.



CHAPTER FIVE

Before committing himself to a hastily thought out plan, Johnny decided to first see how many Comanche he was actually dealing with. He gave the water hole a wide berth and was nearly half way around when he crossed over a wide path of tracks. More than two horses had been by here, and recently.

Johnny cautiously crossed the path, finding a set of three had cut off to one side. Following them, he came across two brightly colored ponies, tri colored pintos so popular with the Comanche, looking curiously in his direction. He also noted a stocky, plain bay tethered with them, the cut of the bridle familiar - the braided reins were his own work. It was the horse Beeker rode out on.

The horses' ears twitched, and all three of them turned their attention in another direction. Johnny sank into a shadow as one of the braves walked to the first pinto, fiddling with something in his hand. Ever so quietly, Johnny slipped his boot knife from its sheath, positioned himself in a ready stance, and rustled the bushes.

He saw three sets of ears and one set of dark eyes immediately turn in his direction. Johnny rustled the brush again, and the brave moved in his direction with a curious tilt to his head. Beeker's Colt was tucked haphazardly in the waistband of the breeches.

You're gonna come across the biggest, meanest jackrabbit you've ever seen, partner, he thought as the young Indian approached. Johnny's idea that the brave expected to come across a rabbit were confirmed when he saw the Indian pull out a very short throwing spear from his waist.

Johnny grinned confidently. Throwing spears didn't work well in close quarters. He gripped his knife, waited a few heartbeats and sprung upward at precisely the right moment. The brave lifted the spear defensively, but Johnny knocked it aside and buried his knife to the hilt just below the brave's heart.

The young Indian grunted and twitched in a valiant effort to free himself. Johnny clamped his hand over his victim's mouth, and was surprised when the Indian's hands found his throat. The power behind the

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dying brave's grip was surprising. Struggling to breathe, Johnny pushed against his foe until they both went down, rolling to the horses' feet.

Hooves danced nervously by Johnny's head for a moment. He continued the roll until the brave's head was almost between the hooves of the closest pinto. Johnny felt the man's energy flag at the same time an invisible clock counted down in Johnny's mind. The second brave would be here momentarily if he heard any of the ruckus. He released the Indian and jerked out his knife, but still had to pry fingers from his throat. Johnny gasped for air.

The brave's wide, dark eyes went dull as his life drained away and Johnny felt a pang of guilt. It disappeared when he saw a flash of motion in his peripheral vision.

Johnny dove aside and the thrown knife pounded into the dirt behind him. He rolled as the second brave came at him with the biggest knife Johnny had ever seen. Johnny managed to kick him back a few feet and scramble to better footing. When he pushed off from the ground, he grabbed the hard object he felt under his hand. It was the first brave's throwing spear.

Johnny managed to get into a crouch when the second brave swung the huge knife at him so close he felt the wind of the passing blade against his cheek. Johnny swung the spear and connected powerfully with the Indian's ribs. He was rewarded with a satisfying grunt.

Johnny got to his feet, wielding the spear in one hand and his bloodied knife in the other. They both looked ridiculously inadequate next to the Indian's weapon, but the combination was enough to keep the brave from charging immediately. They faced each other, crouched at a ready stance, arms cocked and ready. They circled slowly. Johnny was panting heavily and the brave smiled slightly, realizing his slight advantage of wind.

Johnny realized too late that the Indian had maneuvered him back in to a collection of large rocks. There was no way he could dodge aside without tripping, and the Indian knew it - white teeth flashed in a quick smile of confidence. The brave feigned a lunge, but Johnny held his ground and swept the spear in an arc. When the Indian took a half step aside to avoid it, Johnny lunged with the stained boot knife. The brave easily dodged the attack, but didn't count on Johnny's excellent balance and the reverse swipe of the spear which caught the brave on the side of the knee.

The Comanche's leg gave way, and Johnny pressed his attack knowing the big blade would be difficult to handle in close, and he intended to get very close. Johnny plowed into the brave's chest with his shoulder and felt a hot sting along his side. Twisting, he drove his own knife into the left side of his foe, feeling the tip nick off a rib as it buried deep into the chest cavity.

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With an explosive exhale that splattered blood all over the rocks, the Indian collapsed, clutching his chest. As the brave fell, Johnny pulled out his knife. Panting heavily, Johnny stood with his arm pressed tightly against his right side and fought off the wooziness that made him sway. The Indian groveled, dying slowly as blood frothed from his mouth. Johnny waited until there was no more life left before he turned to go. Slowly, he wobbled his way back to Mark's location. Before calling for the boy, he caught his breath and forced himself to stand straight.

Mark burst from the brush, holding the gun tightly with both hands, the barrel leading the way.

"Whoa, there!" Johnny yelped, dancing sideways out of his path. "Hold on! Here, I'll trade ya."

He handed Mark the throwing spear as he retrieved his gun.

"What happened to you?" Mark asked breathlessly, pointing at Johnny's side. "Are you really Johnny Madrid? Where are the Indians?"

Johnny laughed and his side flared in pain. He squatted down to ease the sting and slip the gun back in his holster. "Slow down before ya run outta wind, boy."

"You really are Johnny Madrid, aren't ya? You said your name was Lancer!"

"It is. I changed it when I gave up gun fightin'."

"When did ya do that?"

"About two years ago when I found my family."

"Where's the Indians?"

"Over there." Johnny indicated the direction with a tilt of his head.

"Did one of 'em stab ya?"

"No, I think it's just a graze. Shall we find your mama so she doesn't worry herself to death?"

"Sure!" Mark headed off, admiring his spear. "Thanks for the knife, Johnny. So what's the idea?"

"Idea?" Johnny followed his excited friend, trying not to wince with the throbbing pain of his side.

"Yeah, you said you had an idea when you left."

"Oh, yeah. I'll tell you and your ma at the same time, okay?"

"I can't believe I'm friends with Johnny Madrid!"

Johnny chuckled, then exhaled sharply to extinguish the pain it caused. When they reached Lise, she was on the ground and waiting with open arms. Mark ran to her, excitedly telling her about Johnny's true identity. She pretended surprise and awe, and found Johnny with her eyes as she hugged her son. Lise stood immediately when she saw Johnny was hurt.

"No, I'll be fine. We have to get movin'," Johnny insisted.

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"We need to stop the bleeding first." She pulled a shirt from her bag, ripped it into bandages and ordered Johnny to take off his torn and bloodied shirt. The cut was long, but not too deep, and bled profusely. Lise's wrapping slowed it considerably. Mark sat quietly, fighting fatigue and unusually quiet.

"Thanks," Johnny said, picking up what was left of his shirt. "Now let's go. I have a plan."

Before they moved to the watering hole, Johnny gave Mark an appraising look. He was amazed the boy was still on his feet. Mark desperately needed to rest, but his eyes were alive with excitement.

"No need in all of us walkin' when we got horses," Johnny commented as he motioned Mark to mount up. The boy was so light Johnny's side barely twinged when he gave the boy a leg up on the sorrel. "Hang on, now."

While Lise and Johnny lead the two horses to the water, Johnny informed the woman that Beeker hadn't made it. The woman gasped. "I could have made the choice to go with him," she said lowly. "Mark and I would be dead."

"You didn't go with him, so there's no use thinkin' that way. This area's more dangerous than I thought if the road isn't safe. I think I have a way to save our skins." By the time they reached the water, he'd quickly outlined his plan. Lise grinned at the audacity of it.

Johnny left Lise to water the horses and refill the two canteens. Mark's physical appearance was getting worse; his skin had a waxy appearance and the shadows and planes of his face were sharper. Johnny had the boy slide onto his own back and he carried him to where the Comanche lay. He was a light as a feather and didn't bother Johnny's injury at the least, and most notably, was still quiet. When Johnny set him down by the remains of the Indians' fire ring, the boy fell asleep instantly.

Moving quickly, Johnny began to gather what he needed to make his plan work and conceal the bodies. When Lise joined him a little bit later, she tied the horses and checked Mark. Johnny watched as she ran her fingers lovingly through her son's hair and kissed him lightly on the forehead. For a moment, her true weariness showed in her eyes, but by the time she'd moved to Johnny's side, it was replaced with fierce determination.

"Let's get to work," she said shortly as she dug into the pile of things Johnny had collected.



Mark startled awake, momentarily confused about where he was. Then he

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remembered Johnny Madrid and everything fell in place. My spear! he thought frantically, feeling around the ground and breaking into a grin when he found it.

He tested the weight and examined the chipped rock blade with a satisfied sigh, then looked around to find his mom and Madrid. He gasped when he saw two Indians crouched nearby. One turned in his direction at the sound and it took a moment for the boy to realize one of the Indians was his mother!

"M . . . ma?" he said, shocked. When she smiled at him, he laughed. "You look just like them!"

Lise was wearing full buckskin shirt and breeches, as was Johnny, but what shocked Mark the most was his mother's hair. She'd pulled it back into a severe ponytail and braided it with the same leather strings he'd seen in the Comanche's hair. Her skin was reddish brown, and her light brown hair was now coal black!

By the time he got to his feet, she'd come to his side. Mark couldn't help but reach up to touch her hair.

"I used charcoal from the fire pit for my hair and some red clay dirt on my skin," she explained. "If I get caught in the rain, we're done for!"

Mark felt his mouth hanging open as he fingered the buckskin clothing and the knives at her side.

"Well?" Johnny asked, getting his attention. "Think we'll pass?" He rose to his feet and held his arms out, turning a slow circle for the boy. His natural coloring complimented the disguise.

"Jeepers! You scared me! I thought you were real Indians!" Mark laughed and took his mother's hand. She led him to the fire pit. "Is it my turn?"

"Sure is. We've been altering some of this stuff to fit." Lise held up a sleeveless shirt to his chest. "Had to cut off the sleeves to use for pant legs. You're a lot smaller than the former owner. Let's get this on. . ."

When Lise pulled off the boy's shirt, Johnny had to fight to keep the grin on his face. Mark's body was covered in bruises and every bone was clearly visible. The boy must be in constant pain, Johnny realized, feeling his heart breaking in his chest. At that moment, he resolved that this boy would make it to Dodge and that train come Hell or high water.

Mark's eyes were the true measure of the boy and Johnny made himself focus on them. Right now they danced with life, bright and vivid, and as a result, Johnny's smile became effortless.

Johnny returned to packing their things in the braves' carry bags, which resembled saddle bags. "There's tracks of a whole lot more Comanche that lead away from here. I think they're at the other watering hole and places between. We'll ride around them and keep our distance,

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but not actively hide. That'll make them suspicious. If we don't get too close, we can ride right through to Dodge."

"How long do you think it'll take?" Lise asked as he cinched down Mark's clothing using braided rawhide ties as a belt. She gave the boy a handful of soot to put in his hair while she worked.

"I figure we can make it just after dark if we keep moving."

"Our train leaves at noon tomorrow," Lise said excitedly, hope in her voice. "We'll get there ahead of time, just like you said." She glanced at Johnny as she fitted the tailored buckskins to Mark. "We should have risked our lives and bruised our bodies in the first place, huh?"

"Yeah!" Mark said, taking the comment seriously. "We could a hired Johnny Madrid from the git go, and been on that train yesterday!"

"It's Lancer, Mark," Lise laughed.

Mark wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Oh yeah," he said, then brightened again. "Johnny, were you really in all those places in the book?"

"I don't know," Johnny said honestly. "I haven't read the book."

"Juarez?"

"Yes."

"Sonora?"

"Yup."

"Nogales?"

"Mark," Johnny warned.

"San Luis? San Diego? Chihuahua?"

"Mark!" Johnny laughed. Lise started giggling, unable to help, and continued altering the buckskins.

"Did you really wing Ricardo 'The Whip' Escamilla to teach him a lesson?"

"Whoa!" Johnny held up his hands in surrender. "Hold on a minute, partner! I'll make you a promise."

Mark instantly looked suspicious. "Do I have to behave or somethin'?"

"I was just gonna promise you that I'd go through your book with ya and tell ya what really happened, all right? We'll go through it page by page . . ." Mark's expression was like a bright flower opening in the spring. "BUT . . ."

The boy's face collapsed. "I knew it," he muttered. "There's always a 'but' ."

"Mark!" Lise said between giggles. "That's not true!" He gave her a look that clearly expressed his response, complete with eye roll. Lise bit her lip to control her laughter, then nodded in acquiescence. "Okay, maybe it is, but this time it's serious."

"What, then?" he said with a pout.

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"You have to be quiet and rest when we say. Deal?" Johnny cocked his head aside, waiting for a response with hands on hips.

"How often will that be?" the boy asked cautiously, still looking for the downside.

"We'll see how you do, all right? That all right with you, Lise?"

"Sounds fair," she agreed. "There. You're done." She wiped her hands on her pants and stood.

Mark pursed his lips in momentary thought. "When do we start?" he asked.

"As soon as we mount up. Deal?" Johnny put out his hand for a deal-making shake. The boy looked at it.

"Don't we spit on our hands first?"

"Mark!" Lise laughed, amazed at what came from her son's mouth sometimes. "Where do you get these ideas?"

"Bill Cody's Wild West, Volume One."

"I should have known," she mumbled.

"We don't need spit," Johnny said seriously. "Just trust."

Mark nodded in agreement and enthusiastically shook hands, his small hand swallowed up by that of the ex-gunfighter's.

"Let's pack up." Johnny released the handshake and moved toward the horses.

Lise picked up the bag of clothes and books to follow, but Mark stopped her and untied his bag from hers. "I don't need these," he said, rummaging through the collection. "Just this!" The worn and dog-eared copy of Border Tales of Johnny Madrid slipped easily under his buckskin shirt as he dropped the rest to the ground.

"Are . . . are you sure?" Lise asked, stunned.

"Ma," Mark said patiently. "I know those by heart. This is a whole, new adventure!" He swung an arm around, indicating their surroundings and patted the book hidden away. "The rest of 'em can't compare!" With a brilliant smile, he pushed his bruised little body to follow his hero.

Lise watched him go, an old pain flaring in her heart as she pushed down the thought that this new adventure could still be his last.

## CHAPTER SIX

The smaller pintos were thinner than the coach horses. Johnny felt better having Mark tied to him with one of the ragged shirts, not wanting the boy to risk a fall. It also kept Johnny's hands free. Mark took advantage of the situation and pushed the limit of exhaustion reading from his remaining book as they rode.

As promised, Johnny clarified each incident. Mark was mildly disappointed to find that the first few encounters he read had been glorified beyond recognition, but Johnny managed to add his own insights and point of view and make it seem like a whole new book. The ex-gunfighter even added in new parts and incidents.

By the time they stopped for a mid-morning rest they had successfully skirted the second watering hole and a group of four Indians acting as lookouts. Johnny knew it was time to stop when he felt Mark tuck his book between his stomach and Johnny's back, too weak to hold the volume up any longer. The boy's voice trailed off, and Johnny felt Mark's head drop against his back.

Lise slipped from her horse with a grim expression and went to Johnny's side, holding her arms up to help her son. Once untied from his riding partner, Mark slid to the ground. Lise had to physically hold him up by the shoulders and walk the boy to a shady spot where he was asleep before he sat down.

Johnny made sure the boy had water, then the horses, then gave Lise and himself a few sips. While Mark slept, Lise insisted on inspecting Johnny's wound.

Riding hadn't helped. The shirt bandage was soaked with blood, and spots bled through the buckskin.

"Just wrap it tighter," Johnny said nonchalantly. As she did so, his eyes constantly scanned the terrain. Satisfied they were safe for a bit, he glanced at the boy. "I bet he misses his family," Johnny said softly, trying to see things through Mark's eyes.

"Especially his father. They are very close." She finished the wrap job and sighed. "It was so hard on Len when we left. The two of them said their



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goodbyes." Absently, Lise began to brush at the sleeves of her buckskin shirt. "He wasn't thrilled about this trip, but he saw my point. So did Billy and Krista. When they saw us off, they were so attentive and sweet, but I'm sure they thought they'd never see Mark again. I'm the only one . . ." her voice broke into a sob, and she forced herself under control. Johnny fiddled with the shirt in his hands. "After the first day on the coach, I wondered if I was doing the right thing. But now that we've met you, I know this is right." She found his eyes and held them with her own. "We're grateful. I'm grateful."

With a weak smile, Lise squeezed Johnny's forearm to drive her point home. After, she walked to her son's side and settled down, falling asleep quickly. Johnny hunkered down in the shade and kept watch.

After a quiet hour of hearing nothing but insects buzzing, scabbling lizard feet and swishing horse tails a motion in the distance caught Johnny's attention. He watched the spot with cool eyes, noting that whoever it was, they came from the heart of the badlands.

The dark patch of motion shimmered in the heat of the sun, looking like something rising from a great, undulating sea. Johnny squinted hard, willing his eyes to separate real from imagined. The dark spot grew like a lengthening shadow, and it took many minutes for Johnny to realize what it was and break into a grin.

"That explains the Indian uprising around here," he said lowly to himself.

Sitting there watching the shadow grow bigger, Johnny considered his options. Would it be better to stay ahead of that, or let it pass and follow behind? His inner clock was telling him it was time to move on anyway, so he approached the resting pair to get their input.

Lise woke with his approach, but Mark took a little longer and needed assistance to sit up.

"Got somethin' to show ya," Johnny said with a gleam in his eye.

That got Mark's attention and his eyes cleared immediately. Lise helped him to his feet and they went to Johnny's vantage point. He pointed at the dark mass. Mother and son frowned then Mark's face brightened with realization.

"Buffalo!" he said with wonder.

"Can't be," Lise said in surprise, shading her eyes. "I heard they were about wiped out around here." Quiet for a few seconds, she finally agreed. "Never thought I'd see the likes of that," she said, her voice soft in awe.

"Well, it could explain the uprising - Indians trying to protect 'em. If that's true, we can use them as a diversion."

"Diversion?" Neither Lise nor Mark could tear their eyes away from the sight of the herd of massive animals.

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"Yeah. The Indian's attention will be on them, not us. Let's get moving."

Mark was rooted. "Can I see 'em up close?" he whispered.

Lise stopped in her tracks. "Mark," she said in a warning tone.

Johnny, on the other hand, smiled brilliantly and put his hand on the boy's painfully bony shoulder. "I plan on getting' so close you can count their eyelashes. That close enough for ya?"

Mark's eyes glowed, but the energy there did not go to his legs. Lise and Johnny had to help him to the horses, but he didn't seem to notice his infirmed state. He chattered constantly about everything he knew concerning buffalo and buffalo hunting.

"Wild Bill Hickok and Bill Cody are buffalo hunters! I love my Wild Bill book!" Mark stopped abruptly and glanced sideways at Johnny with a grin. "But not as much as yours, Johnny. I still can't believe I'm ridin' with Johnny Madrid. It's like a dream!"

Not sure how to reply, Johnny helped the boy up behind his mother. Mark made sure his remaining book was secured, and then leaned wearily on his mother's back.

He's getting' smaller every hour, Johnny thought sadly, remembering Lise's words about the boy withering away before her eyes. He shoved the thought away, and swung up on his pinto. Well aware of the bright eyes that watched his every move, he pressed his arm firmly against the raw wound in his side and didn't wince. "Let's go," he said, directing his pony toward the wandering herd.

It was a herd small in number, but the size of the animals astonished the Sullivans. They approached from an angle and blended in with the stragglers that hung on the outer edge of the main group. The center of the pack was nowhere Johnny wanted to be if this herd began to run. Since they were going in the general direction of Dodge, Johnny decided to stay with them and see what happened; the creatures were good cover and concealment for now.

Mark's questions about his book fell off the closer they had gotten to the herd, and Johnny was greatly amused by his growing expression of astonishment.

"They're so big!" Lise breathed as they weaved their way among the scattered beasts.

"And smelly!" Mark added. "Their eyes look so wild!"

Johnny appreciated the detail Mark noted. Johnny had only seen buffalo once before and the eyes are what he remembered. The seemed so small for such a large animal and the white that surrounded the dark brown centers was always moving as they scanned their surroundings. They

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reminded Johnny of the colorful glass eyes of a porcelain doll he'd once seen in a shop window.

The ponies were quiet at ease around the beasts. They danced at first, expecting a hunting charge, but settled down easily. Speaking calmly, Johnny told Lise to stay close. The occasional brave he saw in the periphery marked the depletion of the Comanche. There used to be many more of them that guarded their livelihood with a watchful eye. Johnny knew that the families of those occasional braves were probably trailing the herd at a distance with all their belongings.

They stayed with the herd for almost two hours. Sadly, he knew they wouldn't get much further. The closer they got to Dodge, the greater the likelihood for white buffalo hunters and the Army. Along with the train came a demand for meat, and this small herd would be decimated in no time.

The Indian braves held a fruitless vigil; the buffalo's time was short. The thought made him glance at Lise and Mark and consider their own position at the moment.

His reverie was cut short with an instant change in the manner of the herd, and Johnny's senses snapped into full alert. His pony tensed. Careful not to rush, he worked his way out of the herd with Lise on his heels so he could see more clearly what was around them.

"Here they come," Johnny said just loud enough for his companions to hear, pointing to a dark spot on the horizon between them and Dodge City. "Time for us to leave."

"Buffalo hunters?" Lise asked.

"Wow!" Mark breathed. Johnny saw the boy's eyes flick around, and knew he was putting together what was bound to happen. When he turned his wide eyes on Johnny, the anguish there told the retired pistolero that the boy's idea of buffalo hunters being heroes was something he wasn't too sure of anymore now that he'd seen the magnificent animals up close.

"Let's go," Johnny ordered, urging his pinto into a lope.

Lise followed, trying to hold onto Mark at the same time. Johnny realized he needed to get the boy and reined in, the timing of the inevitable confrontation ticking down in his brain. A glance showed him the hunters had split to hit the herd on either side. Lise pulled up alongside, and Johnny acted instantly, pulling the frail boy onto the withers of his horse.

"Hang on to the mane," Johnny said. When Mark got a good grip, he pushed the pony into a hard gallop. Mark leaned over the pony's crest, a beatific smile on his face as he rocked in sync with the pony's neck. Johnny glanced back, pleased to see Lise on his flank and looking quite comfortable. The ponies' hooves pounded mightily as they ran.

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Johnny kept an eye on the hunters and calculated that they would be out of their way by the skin of their teeth. He watched as the hunters cut in to the herd, and was shocked when he heard the zing of bullets near them.

“They’re shootin’ at us!” Lise screamed.

Knowing the noise could cause the herd to stampede, Johnny wondered why the hunters would do such a foolish thing; then he looked the other way. The braves had grouped together and were charging the group of hunters on this side of the herd. The three of them were in the middle of a soon-to-be battle ground.

“Faster!” Johnny yelled, leaning low. The sinewy muscles of the racing pony rippled smoothly under their legs as its neck stretched out even more. The pony's ears pinned to his crest. The wind made their eyes water and whipped their eyes to tears and the only sounds in their ears were pounding hooves, rhythmic breathing and their pounding pulse. By Johnny's mental calculations, they would make it – barely.

The calls of the attacking Comanche and the sound of gunfire on top of the galloping hooves intruded their world, and the sound was deafening. Johnny glanced back and saw the small herd rumble itself into a stampede. He shuddered at the thought of being in the middle of that deadly chaos.

The sounds of fighting eventually faded away but the ponies didn't slow. Reining into a long arc back in the direction of Dodge, Johnny didn't signal to slow down until his pinto showed signs of tiring. He glanced over to where they'd come from and the only thing marking the area of conflict was a cloud of dust that hung malevolently on the horizon.

As Johnny reined in, so did Lise. When they finally slowed to a walk, the horses dropped their heads in exhaustion, blowing heavily and snorting with the dust. They were wet with sweat and froth hung at the corners of their mouths.

While Johnny had sat back up, Mark kept low over the pony's bi-colored mane. His fingers were entwined securely in the thick hair, and his cheek lay on the bobbing crest.

“Mark?” Johnny asked quietly. “You all right?”

He looked closer and saw that the boy's eyes were closed. Every reserve of energy he'd built up with their rest stop was depleted. “We need to stop,” Johnny said a little louder to Lise.

“No,” the boy's voice whispered immediately. Surprised, Johnny looked down to see the hint of a smile on the boy's lips. “Not yet. I wanna feel this a little longer.” His voice trailed off weakly, but the smile remained.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Mark slept so hard during the break that Johnny wondered if he was actually unconscious. Finally roused from whatever state he was in, the boy insisted on going over part of the Madrid book before moving on. He didn't seem as concerned about getting to Dodge City as Johnny and Lise, and while Johnny patiently went through two chapters with Mark, Lise wrung her hands and tried not to pace in the background. At one point Johnny saw her staring at the sky, her lips moving in a silent plea to the heavens.

Too weak to hold the book, the boy sat close to Johnny as his hero turned the pages. The recitation was punctuated with guffaws of disbelief, snarls of anger, blank looks of complete confusion and questioning statements of the heritage and morals of the writer. Mark usually ended up giggling with joy at the remarks or astounded by the truth. He was never again disappointed in the elaborations as before; he'd figured out something that made it all clear to him.

"These writers were never there, were they?" Mark asked after one of Johnny's several diatribes.

"Dios, no!" Johnny sputtered. That idea made him pause. "And I bet they've never left . . ." he inspected the inside cover for the printer's location. "Chicago, either. You'd do a much better job 'cause you've been here! Ever think 'o that?" He gave the boy a playful jab with his elbow.

Mark's smile matched his glowing eyes. "Yeah, I could, but I won't."

Johnny glanced over to him, not sure how to take that statement. "You won't?"

"Nah. This is my own, personal adventure. I'm not sharin' it with anyone!"

Johnny smirked. "That's my way a thinkin', too, partner." He shut the book and stood, wincing slightly as he stretched. He glanced at his right side. "Well, at least it's stopped bleedin', he realized. "Let's hit the trail."

By midafternoon the ponies were starting to drag. They were crusted with dried sweat and their pace seemed to have slowed. They had taken some water after the encounter with the buffalo but it wasn't enough to

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maintain the horses for the remaining miles. They needed water once more before Dodge.

Johnny was concentrating on the horizon ahead, looking for any indication of water. Mark sat in front of him, safe within the ex-gunfighter's arms, holding the single rope rein of the pinto. The pony was so tired Johnny knew it wouldn't give the boy any problem. Mark, however, kept nodding off, so Johnny had looped the rope loosely around the boy's hand so he wouldn't drop it. They'd been like this for several hours.

Then he heard Lise gasp. "Johnny!"

He looked back to see her pointing off to one side behind them. Frowning, he tried to make out exactly what was producing the column of dust from the spot that shimmered on the horizon. It was smaller and moved much faster than the buffalo herd, and there was the occasional sparkle that must have been made by something metallic.

Johnny pulled on Mark's hand and moved it to one side, stopping and turning the pinto to face the anomaly. Lise did the same. Squinting at the sight, he suddenly realized what it was and turned his attention to Lise. Her disguise had lasted very well and his appraising gaze told them they were in trouble. He jerked the pinto back around to face Dodge, and took over the rein as he pulled Mark in tight.

"It's men on horseback," Lise said, squinting.

"It's the Army," Johnny corrected. "We have to make a run for it."

"The Army?" Mark said, awake and alert.

"But they may have water," Lise objected, holding her horse at a standstill. The column was becoming clearer with every passing second. The standard for the unit was now easily seen rising from the cloud. As they watched, the column veered in their direction. Moments later a pair of gunshots zinged by their heads causing Lise's horse to rear in fright.

"Run, Lise!"

They wheeled around and kicked the ponies into a gallop. They leaped away without much urging, eyes rolling in fear. Another couple of shots rained around them like deadly bees.

Johnny dropped back and let Lise take the lead. He took his gun from his waistband but knew the column was too far for any kind of accuracy - they were using rifles. Going up against a column of the Army was not something Johnny was willing to take on - especially since they looked like Comanche at the moment.

After a couple of minutes, Johnny realized the column was back to their original course toward the last known location of the buffalo. He turned to yell at Lise to slow down and save the horses. He'd just yelled her name when, to his horror, her horse stumbled.

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"Ma!" Mark screamed. There was a sickeningly audible crack of broken bone as the horse tumbled head over heels. Lise was thrown clear, rolling and skidding in the unforgiving dirt.

Johnny reined around, his pony shaking its head in resistance, and hauled back hard. His pinto slid to a stop in the rising dust. Johnny held Mark tightly to his chest and they slid to the ground as one.

Lise's horse flailed on the ground, grunting and trying to stand, his right foreleg obviously broken. It blew hard and struggled gamely, eyes rolled back in pain. Johnny, carrying Mark, skirted the animal and sprinted to the woman. She was fighting to sit up as they arrived.

"Ma!" Mark yelled, breaking from Johnny's grip. He took one step and fell, and then dragged himself the rest of the way to her waiting arms.

"Lise! Are you all right?" Johnny kneeled by her side and put his arm around her shaking shoulders. "Don't get up, let's check you out first." As she held her son tight, he felt her arms and legs. All he could see was a few small torn and bloody spots in the buckskin and a raw cheek.

Relieved, Johnny left them to calm their fears and put the ailing pinto down. The animal's struggles lessened with exhaustion as Johnny stood by with a firmly set jaw. He hated to see good horseflesh go to waste, but he hated suffering even more. He pulled his Colt, and checked the horizon to make sure the Army column was out of sight and hopefully out of earshot. Satisfied, he took the healthy horse's rein firmly in hand, and aimed the Colt on his suffering companion.

Mark and Lise jumped when the shot rang out. The remaining horse danced nervously, ears twitching. Johnny holstered his gun and lay his hand firmly between the animal's eyes and spoke lowly. The cadence and tone worked wonders to calm not only the horse, but mother and son, too.

When they all appeared calm again, Johnny gathered up the saddle bags from both mounts and put them in a pile. Then he tied up their last horse and sighed.

"Looks like the last leg will be on foot," he commented. The sun half way to the horizon from its zenith and was sitting just off Johnny's left shoulder as he looked northward toward Dodge City. He only had a vague idea how much farther their final destination was; on foot, it would be daunting but not impossible.

Unconsciously, he held his throbbing side as he gauged time, distance and daylight, deep in thought as he distributed the saddlebags. "Time to turn back into farmers and ranchers," he said, shaking out his own clothes. Johnny wasn't going to miss the buckskins one little bit, shedding the top stiffly and letting it drop to the ground.

Finding a healthy stand of shrub and wild grass to shield him, Johnny stripped off the rest of the Indian clothing, as well as the blood soaked

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wrappings around his torso. He slipped on his pants and boots, then took the time to examine his wound.

The long, bloody line was at least clean-edged. The brave's knife had been razor sharp. Starting shallow in the middle of his chest the slash traversed over his lower right ribs and downward to his hip. The deepest area was in the fleshy part above his hipbone. There, the edges of the wound were the reddest and most sensitive. Johnny knew there was a good chance it would become infected, and hoped that if he kept it covered, it would delay, if not avoid, that situation.

He pulled out the only piece of cloth left in the bag - the shawl Lise had used for a pillow on the stage. Was that only yesterday? Suddenly weary, he let the fine material run through his fingers like desert sand. Johnny glanced up and saw his two traveling companions talking quietly in the tall grass. For some reason Mark was reluctant to leave his mother's arms, making it difficult for her to change clothes. Johnny could only see their heads.

Feeling that mother and son needed some time together, Johnny decided to just go ahead and use the shawl as a bandage. Carefully, he wrapped the light material tightly around his body, sucking air between his teeth when he pressured the tender part. With a little fiddling, he was finally satisfied it would stay put and dragged on his shirt. Last came the worn rig. He'd missed it for the past few hours and finally felt like himself with it back on his hips.

An exploratory glance told him Lise had finally managed to dress. When Johnny got closer, he saw that Mark had changed his shirt only, and it hung on him like the shirt of a scarecrow. On his arrival, the familiar, lively eyes belied his physical condition.

"Ma says I can wear the pants!" Mark's voice sounded as frail as his body, but was again overshadowed by his bright eyes. Muddy streaks on his face indicated recent tears as he stood to model the clothes.

When Johnny stood before the boy, he couldn't help but touch a telltale cheek with his finger. "You all right, Mark?" he asked quietly, holding the boy's gaze.

Mark blinked, his expression instantly changing excitement to sorrow. "I . . . I'm okay, Johnny. I just thought ma was dead for a second." He dropped his quivering chin and studied his fingers, weaving an intricate pattern against his stomach. "She's not supposed to die. Not yet. It ain't her time."

His heart heavy, Johnny squatted down to the boy's level and lifted his chin with a forefinger. The sorrow was gone now, controlled and replaced by an unreadable brightness that took the ex-gunfighter's breath



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away. It took him several seconds to find his voice. "It ain't yours, either, Mark. And you got me to look after ya. That all right?"

Mark nodded, and his smile was from deep within the heart and wholeheartedly sincere, but his eyes told a different story; Mark didn't believe the words just spoken to him. Not trusting his voice, Johnny just pulled the boy in tight and looked at the woman a short distance away. Did she know what Mark thought?

Damn what he thinks! Johnny thought fiercely. I'll just have to show him he's wrong by gettin' him on that damn train.

After a moment, Johnny stood. "Let's git a move on, all right?" He scooped Mark up, ignoring the boniness under the clothes, the feather weight riding on his hip and the resigned attitude of the boy's body as Mark rested his head on Johnny's shoulder. "You okay to ride?" he asked Lise in a light voice when he arrived at her side.

"A little sore, but I can make it," she said gamely, shaking out her rumpled dress. It was terribly wrinkled from the hours of being stuffed in a saddlebag, and there was a spot of Johnny's blood near her hip. She brushed at it and laughed tiredly. "I'm not too sure I'll be able to stand to wear this again after this trip," she said lightly, "but it's all I got at the moment!"

"Tell ya what," Johnny said as he plunked Mark down on the pinto's back. "When we get to Dodge, you get a new dress. My treat. Should be time enough for that, I'd say."

"Let's cross that bridge when we get to it," Lise said with a thankful smile. "We'll still make the train on time?"

"No doubt. Now get up there behind your son." He offered his hands as a mounting block.

Once up, she adjusted her skirts and took her son in her arms. Mark wiggled, and with a wobbly motion, pulled Madrid's book from under his shirt. Lise took it, seeing the tenuous grip of the boy's hand. "Here. Let me. Where were you two?" With her precious son settled intimately against her stomach, she held the open book in front of him and began to read.

Johnny tossed one very light set of Comanche saddlebags over the pony's withers, picked up the rope rein and started walking with the horse in tow. They began the final leg of their journey with Johnny correcting the details of Madrid's encounters in Juarez, Mexico.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Johnny walked for a couple of hours, the pinto following with its nose close to the ground in exhaustion. He was amazed at Lise's voice as she read the ridiculous book. She changed the cadence and tone to match the action of the story, and as a result made it mesmerizing to listen to. When Johnny corrected the action or added more information, she weaved it in like it was already on the pages.

Mark was entranced and delighted. From his frequent glances at the boy, Johnny could see the little guy was too weak to speak, but as usual, his eyes were as bright and expressive as ever. As the hours crawled by, however, Johnny began to see a distant quality grow in Mark's expression. The ex pistolero couldn't put his finger on it exactly, but it made his gut tingle in apprehension.

They split the last of the water amongst them, including the horse, at their first stop. Huddled in the shade of a healthy manzanita, mother and son leaned against each other for support both physical and emotional. The pony nuzzled the boy's ear; Mark smiled tiredly.

"I think that pony's adopted you, boy," Johnny said with amusement. He adjusted the wrapping under his shirt with a wince. The area just above his hip seemed to be getting more tender with each passing hour.

Too weak to pet the horse's nose, Mark just smiled. Soon, he was asleep. Lise combed his hair with her fingers and hummed softly, the sound apparently comforted the pinto, too, as its eyes drifted shut as it stood with its head low and next to Mark's shoulder.

Johnny plopped into the dirt in a pitiful circle of shade a few feet away, fighting to stay alert. His throat was dusty, his feet hurt and his side throbbed, but he was soon in a calm place in his mind.

When he jerked awake, it was dark. The waning moon peeked from the horizon casting eerie charcoal shadows across the plain. A quick glance showed him that Mark and Lise hadn't moved. The pony had wandered a short distance, grazing. Johnny slowly rose and moved to collect the pinto, ignoring the burning in his side. He knew he had the start of a fever - that

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odd, floating feeling he connected with a rising temperature came over him as soon as he stood.

Johnny spoke in low Spanish to keep the horse calm as he walked in its direction. He ignored the needles in his feet and his less than straight path; the pony just watched him with one ear cocked curiously in his direction. When Johnny bent over for the rein he thought he would keel right over but managed to keep his feet and return to his traveling companions. The pony followed obediently, dragging its feet.

"Johnny?" Lise's voice carried easily in the still air. "I must have fallen asleep."

"Me too," Johnny replied. "Is Mark awake? We should be movin'."

"He's awake." Lise struggled to her feet and pulled Mark to his. The boy leaned heavily against her, holding her skirt tightly for balance.

Johnny's attention was focused on the pair, noting their weariness even in the weak light of the moon. Mark's face was fully illuminated; his paleness made him glow in a ghostly fashion. Lise took a step away from the shrubs, and in his struggle to stay at her side, Mark's eyes fell to the ground in front of them to see where he was stepping. That's when Johnny saw the boy's eyes suddenly widen. Johnny was suddenly on alert.

"Hold still!" Johnny barked at the same time the snake's rattling began.

Lise froze with a gasp. There was a tense few seconds where nothing but the rattler's tail moved. Mark tore his eyes from the snake, less than a yard from his mother's feet, and turned them to Johnny.

It was the first time Johnny saw fear in the boy's eyes and he hated the way it looked on him. Johnny also saw the boy's knees start to give out, and the automatic motion of his mother's reach to keep him from falling - it was all the snake needed to zero in for a strike.

The gunshot was loud in the night. The pony jumped and pulled on the rein. Lise abruptly screamed in surprise and hugged Mark tight as the smell of gunpowder stung their noses.

The snake writhed in the dirt, its head blown from its body, as Johnny eased his gun back into his holster in a smooth motion. "Easy, pony, usted está caja." He spoke lowly to the horse and stroked the tense, arched neck until it relaxed. "You two okay?" Johnny cocked his head in Lise's direction as he soothed the animal.

"Yeah," she shakily replied. Then in a lighter tone, added, "That's some shootin', Mr. Lancer. Thanks."

Mark didn't speak but his grin could be seen as easily as the moon in the sky. When things had calmed, Johnny put the still smiling Mark back on the pinto.

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"Um, maybe I should walk awhile," Lise offered with an appraising eye on Johnny. He moved stiffly, obviously favoring his injured side.

"Nah, you need to be with your boy. Come on." Johnny offered to give her a leg up. Lise hesitated, and then slowly reached out and brushed his cheek with her fingers.

"You're hot," she said quietly, her eyes bright.

"I'm okay. Believe me, I've had worse. Now mount up."

She did so easily, settling on the pinto with a familiarity of motion forged from experience. She leaned down and kissed the top of Mark's head. "It's too dark to read, honey. I'm sorry."

" 'sokay," he said in a voice as faint as moth's wings. "Can't think of anything more I need to hear or see, anyway." The words seemed to take the last of his energy, and the satisfaction in his tone held the same finality as an epilogue. He clutched his prized book to his chest with both bruised arms, trusting his mother's embrace to keep him aboard the pony.

And so they walked.

The night sounds of coyotes, owls and other unseen night creatures now offered its own kind of comfort. The noises told them they were not alone here, that there was life everywhere and it simply continued on no matter the circumstance.

Lise's soft humming was as natural as the native noises to Johnny's ears. It was hypnotic in an energizing way and gave him reason to go on mile after mile, hour after hour. Just as Mark trusted his mother's embrace, Johnny trusted the night noises and his fine instincts to warn him of any trouble as he fell under the spell of her song.

The night passed like every other night in the badland's past millennia of existence. It took the pony stumbling to break the reverie and jerk Johnny back into awareness. "Whoa!" he choked in a hoarse voice to stop the pinto, realizing in the same second that the mounted couple was slipping dangerously sideways. Johnny dropped the rein instantly and caught both of them in his arms, then eased them slowly to the ground. The three of them collapsed in a pile.

Now loose, the pony veered away from them in a lurching gait.

"Hey!" Johnny croaked, struggling to his feet and tripping after the pinto. He went about four steps before his legs gave out and he tumbled face first into the dirt. A little put off at his weakness and inability to get his balance, Johnny dragged himself to his feet and stumbled a few more steps before falling to his knees. Gasping for breath, he looked for the pony and saw it forging into a river, muzzle deep in the water as it drank. He barely noticed the faded stars in the horizon before him and the pink of a new day dawning behind him.

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Johnny blinked, momentarily dazed - Water! - and then he blinked in another realization. What took him aback for those few, confused seconds was the skyline on the other side of the river.

Dodge City.

"We made it," he whispered from cracked lips. He struggled to his feet and turned to Lise, announcing in a stronger voice, "We made it!" but the scene laid out in front of him forced him to pause. Frowning, Johnny swayed to keep his feet as his fevered mind found it difficult to absorb what his gut was screaming at his brain.

Lise was unmoved by Johnny's proclamation. Her full attention was focused on the bundle cradled at her breast. She rocked gently with a peaceful expression of acceptance as she looked down at her still son.

"No!" Johnny's voice was a plaintive plea edged in anger. "We're almost there!" He waved an arm at the skyline. "Look, Dodge City!"

"I know." Her voice was a feathery whisper. Venerated adoration cloaked her now as she lovingly stroked Mark's pale, cold cheek with her fingers.

"No," Johnny shook his head in denial. "It can't be. We're too close."

The words fell from his mouth with the last of his bravado as his legs wobbled under him. Stubbornness was the only thing that kept him upright; his heart, now both weary and broken, simply couldn't accept anymore. Johnny dragged his eyes back to their goal - the one he had convinced himself would save the boy - and realized it might as well be at the other end of the Earth.

With an unaccustomed sting in his eyes, Johnny turned back to the quiet and calm form of a mother gently rocking her son in an intimate embrace. Her face was graced with the love a mother could only show a child combined with relief that his suffering was over. He couldn't hear the words she murmured; he didn't need to. They were private and personal, and just the tone was enough to rip his heart out.

Johnny's vision swam. It was a picture of what he imagined motherhood could be like; something he never experienced. And now it was wasted.

Johnny dropped to his knees, suddenly too tired to go on; there was no reason to now. Anger smoldered deeply in his gut and he pulled his eyes away from the mother and son to glare at the heavens where quickly vanishing stars were erased by the light of a new day.

"Why?" he growled between clenched teeth. He felt a warm tear trickle down one dusty cheek. "We were almost there!"

The plea for reason fell on deaf ears as the Kansas badlands woke up from the night.

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"Thank you." The soft-spoken words made him look up. Lise held her boy close, her chin resting on Mark's soft hair, and smiled at Johnny. "Thank you for all you've done."

"I haven't done nothin'," he said quietly. "I didn't get us there in time." He felt a light touch on his sleeve and closed his eyes in defeat.

"You've done exactly what you said you would do and much more, Johnny Madrid Lancer. You let my son live." Her voice made him open his eyes again and look at her in confusion. "He's been more alive in the past two days than in the past four years," Lise explained simply. She smiled, and held his eyes as she squeezed Johnny's arm. "And for that I can't thank you enough. This adventure will always be in my heart."

Suddenly his arms were too heavy, much like his heart. On his knees in the dirt, his entire frame slumped and his head fell tiredly forward. He ignored the hot tears now running unabashedly from his eyes; he was too weary to wipe them away. Instead, he listened to the quiet murmuring of mother to child. Vicariously, the calm monologue eventually eased his hurt and ever so slowly brought him to the same level of acceptance as Lise.

Anger drained away, the unanswered 'whys' dry on his tongue.

## EPILOGUE

In the end, they didn't have to walk the rest of the way to Dodge City.

Refreshed, the pinto had showed its true feistiness and refused to be caught. Then its spotted rump disappeared back to the badlands it called home when spooked by the arrival of a group of wagons on the opposite shore. On their way to Dodge City for supplies, the hands driving the wagons obligingly gave them a ride to town after quiet condolences and introductions.

Lise held her son's body in her lap while Johnny listened to the news of how the Army had put a halt to the recent Comanche uprising the previous day. It was the only reason the hands felt safe coming to Dodge for supplies. And word had it that buffalo meat was in good supply.

The information had little effect on Johnny and Lise's hearts. It seemed the only way things could have ended - another chapter closed.

Johnny stayed with Lise until everything was settled and she was ready to return home with her impossibly small wooden coffin. She refused to leave until Johnny's wound was cleaned and stitched, and the signs of fever abated enough to satisfy the mothering part of her.

Each having the other for support, they were able to complete the steps that enabled them to depart from Dodge City. Albeit still in a surreal, dazed state, they were finally ready to go their separate ways.

"At least your trip home will be safer," Johnny commented. When they reached the side of the stage, he dropped his new saddlebags to the ground to help the grieving mother into the coach.

Lise accepted his help with a wistful smile. "That's true, but it's going to be a lot lonelier, too." Her voice cracked slightly, and she swallowed hard to collect herself before speaking again. "Then again, I don't think I can handle an adventure like that none too soon," she acknowledged. "Farming has never looked so good."

Once she was inside, he climbed up to the top of the coach to make sure the pine box was secure. After testing the ropes, he momentarily laid

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his hand on the spot over Mark's heart. "Finally got to ride up top, partner," he said softly. "Guess the adventure continues, huh?"

The busy bustle of Dodge's main street suddenly seemed too loud and way too far from home. Johnny paused and looked down on the city as he gathered his thoughts for a moment, then carefully climbed down and secured the coach door. Lise leaned from the window and offered Johnny her hand. They shook solemnly, their eyes locked in a meaningful stare.

"Thanks again, Johnny," she smiled, pulling her arm inside.

Johnny picked up his saddlebags and slung them over his shoulder. "My pleasure," he answered. Then his eyes opened wide in sudden realization. "Wait, I almost forgot. . ." He fumbled with the buckle of his new saddlebags and fished about inside before pulling out a familiar, worn book. "Here's some readin' for the road." With a warm, knowing grin he handed *Border Tales of Johnny Madrid* to the surprised woman. "It's a signed edition now. May be worth somethin' someday, ya think?"

Lise looked at the worn cover for a moment then held the book against her heart. When she looked back at Johnny, her eyes glittered. "It's worth somethin' to me right now, Mr. Lancer."

Johnny stepped back as the driver yelled an order to his team. Johnny waved, and Lise disappeared into the dark coach. He moved to the boardwalk and watched the coach disappear from the main street of Dodge City in a cloud of dust, wondering exactly how much of this adventure he would be able to tell his family.

And then he smiled to himself, knowing immediately that every second of this story needed to be relayed in clear detail. *The Adventure of Mark Sullivan* deserved to be told and a young boy's spirit remembered.

*In Memory of Cameron (1998 – 2004)*