

HEALING OF THE HEART
Sequel to Schism of the Heart

PROLOGUE

The Santa Ana wind gently rolled the loose curtains with a sigh. White moonlight sparkled through the diaphanous material and outlined her bare body as soft curves, the illuminated edges of her form glowing with a pearl-like iridescence. One of the shadows of midnight-and-moon, she flowed across the room's expanse on the warm breeze to his outstretched arms. The heat of her aura touched his sensitive fingers a fleeting fraction of a second before his hands rested on her hips. He took a moment to savor the warmth and softness against his palms. Then, ever so slowly, the flat of his hands flowed downward over firm mounds and back up to the small of her back, where his fingertips came together; she shivered in anticipation. A soft moan released from her lips as a whisper and her gaze fell to his. The spark of life in her eyes made his body burn from deep inside. She covered his hands with hers, arching her back with erotic grace as he tried to pull her down.

For a moment she resisted; then her hands lightly traced the length of his bare arms from wrist to shoulder before she gave in to his pull and tumbled into his arms. She smelled of jasmine and felt like heaven. Dark hair cascaded across their shoulders and ticked his chin as he hungrily pulled her toward his mouth, his arms engulfing her like the night's darkness.

Warm, moist, full lips brushed his and then tickled a velvety line from the corner of his mouth, along his jaw to his ear where he felt her teasing breath on the soft spot just behind his lobe. Her trembling fingers skated up the back of his neck, entwining in his hair. Her hands gently cradled his head and she whispered his name, the heat of her honeysuckle breath on his neck confirming her desire as her body pressed into his. He responded with all his heart. Then everything exploded before his eyes.

The sharp noise woke him with a jerk, the harsh light of day burning his eyes as they snapped open.

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Heated wind flapped the heavy drapes designed to keep out the hot rays of the morning sun. Drenched in sweat and shaking, Scott blinked and realized his fingers were dug into the worn armchair to the point of pain. Beyond that he saw the reason for being jarred awake - the book he had been reading was now on the floor. He released the chair instantly and leaned forward, elbows on thighs and face in his hands, in an effort to slow his throbbing heart.

After a while, his heart slowed and his breathing steadied. Scott slowly looked up and scanned the room; unconsciously, he brushed his lips with trembling fingertips.

Alexandra wasn't there and never would be again.

Instead, there was the form of his brother in a drug induced sleep, leg slung in a traction frame and head swathed in bandages. The morning's heat made Johnny's young face glisten, and as Scott's slightly glazed eyes fought for focus, the dark head rolled slowly to one side bringing the ugly nasal tube into view. Then the shaken widower realized that he had only awakened from a dream to re-enter a nightmare.

Shooting to his feet, Scott stumbled slightly as he headed to the window and pulled the drapes together to close out the rising heat. A faint trace of honeysuckle rode the breeze that trickled through. He leaned on the window's sill, his head dropped and eyes closed, and managed to bring the soft warmth of the dream back into faint reality for a brief moment. Raw grief swelled, pushing the reality away, and he choked it back. Thankfully, the aches and pains from sleeping in a chair made themselves known in painful sharpness, distracting him from both the scent and the dream memory.

"I can't think of you now, Alexandra," he whispered. "Not now. You're the past, and I have too much present to deal with. I'm sorry." The last was cut off by the tightness of his throat. His lips could only make the motions that said 'I love you'.

Not feeling at all rested, Scott Lancer shuffled to the wash basin and began to clean up for the day. The drawn drapes made it just dark enough for it to be a challenge to shave. As a mental distraction he started to map out his day while he worked up the foam and used the flat blade: Counting cattle. Checking supplies. Moving herds. Tallying not only Lancer's count, but the neighboring herd counts, too. They didn't have a lot of time until the drive to Stockton.

Wiping off the last of the shaving foam, Scott turned to the bed and watched his brother. The drapes flickered with the wind, allowing splashes of morning light to show Scott the same form he'd seen for over a week now. This afternoon, that would change and the older brother's stomach lurched at the thought.

There was a stab of guilt at the idea of his wanting Johnny to remain drugged senseless. In the past, Scott was the one that could control his fractious brother when he was forced to recoup, and Scott knew that it would be expected of him again when Johnny was allowed to wake up later today.

Pressure; Scott wasn't sure he could handle any more. The clash of times - past, present, future; Alexandra, the drive, Johnny - had worn him down to the point where he wondered if he'd ever recover himself. Tiredly, his mind thought of the three elements again - each person or event clearly represented a point in time and they fell into a natural line of succession. Then he brightened at a sudden realization - maybe he'd stumbled across the way to handle all this:

Push the past aside; it can't be changed. "I'm sorry, Alexandra," he said softly. Deal with the now; the cattle drive could not wait.

Consider, but don't dwell on, the future; that is, Johnny's healing. It would simply be a waiting game anyway, so just let 'er buck. Smiling slightly at the reference, he mentally thanked his brother for letting him borrow an attitude.

The order of thought brought an enormous amount of relief. Scott stood a bit straighter, walked to the sick bed and arranged the sheet and pillows so they at least looked better. "I'm sorry, Johnny, but that's the way it has to be," he said to the slack face and hidden eyes. He pulled a comb from his pocket and quickly arranged his brother's hair, the edges near the bandages already damp with sweat. He nodded in approval, slipped the comb away and went to the door.

It was going to be a hot one today, Scott thought.

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CHAPTER ONE

Glowing hotly in the western sky, the sun hung just above the rolling, oak-dotted hills and glared over the land. So far, it had been a mild summer, but the last few days confirmed that the dog days of summer were late this year and that autumn was just around the corner. Driving the grass-fattened cattle to market would be more uncomfortable than usual.

Murdoch Lancer gave the burning orb a squinting glance. Acknowledging its heat, he removed his hat and wiped his hairline with his forearm, the grit of the day's dirt scratching his skin. He replaced the hat with a sigh, glad he'd taken advantage of the shade offered by an ancient oak tree. From there, the Scotsman sat astride his horse and surveyed the country that was Lancer. The sight never failed to lighten his heart. Faint lowing of distant cattle and the buzz of busy insects were all he heard at this moment in time. He closed his eyes to appreciate it.

When he opened them again, he saw a figure top the rise before him. Sitting a horse in his own distinct way, Scott Lancer waved when he saw his father and reined his lanky bay toward the tree's tempting shade. Murdoch couldn't help but smile; family made this land complete.

As he watched his older son approach, Murdoch evaluated Scott's physical state and pondered his mental one. The widower hadn't had time to mourn properly before being thrown into back-to-back nightmares since the funeral. And now, the pressures of caring for his injured brother and preparations for the drive were taking a visible toll on the young man.

Scott was getting leaner by the day, the shadows under his eyes growing darker by the hour. At least the concerned father knew Scott and Johnny had been on some sort of working terms prior to Johnny's accident; before that, they hadn't been speaking and Scott had been considering returning to Boston, blaming himself for Alexandra's death. Murdoch wasn't able to pinpoint when Scott had decided to stay in the west, but knew the decision had been made from Scott's interest in staying by his recuperating brother's side. One good thing in a passel of bad, he thought.

Scott looked bone weary when he finally reined to a stop. A tap of heel brought the son's horse alongside his father's. As Scott wiped his sleeve across his forehead and reached for his canteen, Murdoch quietly assessed the blond's features and noted a subtle change; the edgy sharpness of the past few days was gone. The big man breathed a sigh of relief.

"I completed the count in the east pasture. It's just what we calculated," the young man said wearily. "That should be the last tally, right?"

"Think so."

Scott took a deep gulp from the canteen. "I saw Claude Davis at the property line. He says his count is what he estimated at the last meeting."

Murdoch nodded and adjusted his hat. "Looks like it's going to be a large drive this season. Good thing we kept those men on from the house building since Johnny can't go."

Scott's head ducked as he re-capped the canteen. Alexandra and Scott's house, Murdoch thought instantly. Maybe, someday, it will be finished and hold a family.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, appreciating the view. After the horses caught their breath, Murdoch reined around to face the Lancer arch just beyond the oak; the feeling of peace he'd had just moments before vanished. In its place was the familiar anxiety they had all been living with for the past weeks.

"Well," he sighed. "On to the next challenge."

"The only challenge I want to conquer is a good night's sleep," Scott quipped.

Scott's attempt at humor was just a bit too close to the truth to get a chuckle from Murdoch. An instant mental picture of the long, lanky figure of his older son sprawled in the armchair by Johnny's bed, stocking feet hanging over the ottoman almost nightly, came to his mind. The big Scot knew his older son didn't do much thinking as he watched his unconscious brother; it was the only time he seemed to sleep, but it wasn't restful repose.

The picture in his mind of that chair also brought thoughts of his ward Teresa. When Scott wasn't in the chair, she was. Ever since Johnny and Scott had rescued her, Teresa had no inclination to be alone. Murdoch noticed that she, too, avoided her room, preferring Johnny's chair or Scott's room with the door open. The young girl rarely left the house.

Since bringing Johnny home the household had been smothered under a blanket of shock. Everyone seemed mechanical in their actions and speech. No one volunteered to voice their feelings or thoughts, and being thrown into the preparations for the fall drive made that easy enough. It was in stark contrast to the previous week when his young ward had noisily made it her mission to bring her family together again by forcing them to interact. The big man had to smile at her determination at the time.

But now things were different. There was something unspoken that was both binding them and keeping them apart. Murdoch sighed, and, hoping they all survived the next several weeks, told himself that after the routines returned to normal, everyone could finally begin to heal. Dr. Jenkins' decision to keep Johnny completely sedated since he broke his leg kept a lid on the whole simmering pot that was currently the Lancer hacienda. Always a poor patient, the stress Johnny would bring on the house could simply be too much for everyone's nerves and cause the fragile peace in which they existed to collapse - or erupt.

Sam Jenkins would have been satisfied to keep the boy under a few days more to insure that the broken femur was well on its way to being healed, but the gunshot wound to the head concerned the family doctor. Tonight, he was going to allow Johnny to come around so he could check the vision in Johnny's blue eyes. When he

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had mentioned his plan the previous night, no one had looked surprised. They all had noticed the disappointment in Sam's face every time he examined Johnny.

Murdoch also knew everyone had an idea of what they were in for once the volatile young man came around. No one had said anything, but Murdoch knew they were all mentally preparing in their own way for the hostile handful that would be Johnny. Confined to traction and basically blindfolded, his younger son would rebel against his lack of freedom.

The quiet pair crossed slowly under the arch, allowing their mounts to catch their breath. A barn hand came out and waited patiently for the bosses to dismount. The big Scotsman swung his leg over the sorrel's rump. Muscles tugged stiffly in his back, and when his feet were earthbound, he took a moment to stretch after he handed off the reins. "Gracias," he said, getting a nod in reply. He was tired in more ways than he cared to admit, even to himself.

Scott mumbled a quiet thank you and the men were left standing awkwardly in the yard, both reluctant to go inside the house. Murdoch let his eyes wander to the elegant hacienda and felt his anxiety swell to the forefront. A nudge from his son set his feet moving.

Maria met them inside the door and pressed a tall glass of lemonade into the men's hands as soon as they entered. She took their hats and hung them up, indicating they should rest for a few minutes in the kitchen while they had a chance. Both of them took her up on the offer and gratefully slid into two chairs at the sturdy oak table. A substantial snack was laid out and waiting.

Just then Teresa entered the kitchen with a load of dirty bandages. "Hi, you two. Glad to see you taking some time to cool off." She dumped the load near the side door. "I changed the leg bandage and left it loose so Sam can look at it before Johnny wakes up. I thought it would save a little time."

"Good thinking," Scott said, closing his eyes and rubbing the cool glass on his forehead.

"Sam should be here soon," the young girl said softly, her manner becoming more hesitant.

"Yes, he should." Murdoch gave his ward a smile and gently squeezed her hand. "You ready for this?"

She smiled back and nodded. "I guess so. Sam calls the tune on this one, right?"

"Absolutely." The elder man tried to sound confident. He felt like he'd failed miserably, but the girl kept smiling. Her eyes, though, showed fear. She took a chair with them and they ate the light meal while making conversation that danced entirely around what was really on their minds. Finally, Murdoch stiffly rose to his feet. "I'm going up to wash and change my shirt."

With a light kiss to the top of Teresa's head, Murdoch made his way upstairs. As his steps faded, the young girl turned to her older brother-by-heart.

"Scott . . ." she started, and then stopped as she stared at her hands clasped together on the table.

"What?" he gently urged, taking note of her body language. "You scared?"

Teresa nodded briskly, and then choked as her eyes met his across the table, "Yes. Aren't you?"

Standing stiffly, Scott walked around to her side and pulled the trembling girl to her feet. He hugged her tightly. "Yes, I am," he admitted. "It's been a nightmare. I just want to wake up and find it all over."

She sniffed, her cheek pressed comfortably into his chest. "I feel exactly the same way," she whispered.



Dr. Jenkins brushed the dust from his jacket in the courtyard. Maria appeared out of nowhere and took his jacket while Scott took his bag. "Glad to see everyone here," the wizened doctor commented with a smile. He noted the small smiles in return, his heart yet again going out to this family.

The doctor cleared his throat and accepted a cool glass of lemonade while Scott and Teresa stood by, obviously uncomfortable. Scott mentioned that Murdoch would meet them in Johnny's room. After a feeble attempt at small talk with the waiting pair and getting nothing in return but short replies or simple nods, Sam gave up and suggested they get on with it. He handed the almost empty glass back to Maria.

Sam couldn't help but think Scott and Teresa were taking their last steps to the gallows by the way they carried themselves. At the top of the staircase, Scott and Teresa headed to their brother's room while Sam, hearing the footsteps behind him, paused to wait for Maria to catch up. She carried a pot of steaming water, so he politely stood aside and let her lead the way.

When Sam stepped into Johnny's room behind the small Mexican woman he felt like he was walking on to a stage. Jelly leaned against the window frame, arms crossed over his chest and his lips pursed; Scott perched edgily on the edge of the armchair on the far side of Johnny's bed, between it and the window, looking positively glum. Teresa stood by the bed on the near side, next to Johnny's injured leg, nervously picking at pillows stacked under the wooden splint Murdoch stood at the head of the bed looking like he'd rather be anywhere else than standing in this room.

The object of their thoughts lay quiet, his head turned slightly toward the door. A black line which was the nasal tube ran across his shoulder, jiggling slightly with every short breath the boy took. Johnny's head slowly rotated the other way as his mouth worked dryly. His arm jerked slightly when Sam plopped his bag on the dresser.

"I see he's starting to come around. We better get going, then." Sam rolled up his sleeves with a bracing sigh and turned to find Maria pouring the hot water in a basin. He thanked her and decided to talk as he washed up. "I'm going to check the

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surgery site first and get that wrapped again. Next, I'll check his head wound and eyes. After that, I'm going to use smelling salts to bring him around. Scott . . ." The young man's head rose slowly. "I want you at his shoulder on the far side. Murdoch, this side. Jelly, I want you at his leg to make sure it stays put. You too, Teresa."

"Stays put? You mean that he don't get all balled up in that contraption?" The old man made a motion at the traction device keeping Johnny's leg aligned. "Kinda hard when he's strapped to the bed!" A leather strap low around Johnny's hips kept him from slipping down the mattress, and also kept him from turning as he slept. From the first day, Jelly looked at the setup as an insult to the boy's spirit, but he grudgingly had to admit he saw the advantage.

"You know this boy. If there's a way to mess it up . . ." the doctor started.

"You sure got a point there, doc," Jelly snorted as he moved into his position.

"Teresa, you help me with the bandages, and Maria, hold this." The doc had finished washing up and handed off a pre-filled syringe to the small woman. "I'll need that pronto if Johnny acts up. I'm not going to sacrifice the headway we've made on that leg."

"*Si, senor,*" Maria said, accepting the syringe.

"Go stand near Murdoch." Sam moved to the leg and began to inspect it. "I see you were all ready for me, Teresa. Good job." She nodded a nervous acknowledgement. The doctor probed the raw looking wound and the stitches with a slight frown. It was redder than he liked, but there wasn't anything oozing from the small drain he'd left in. After a few minutes, he clucked and nodded and had Teresa wrap it up. "That looks fine," he summed up.

Sam then moved to the patient's head and removed the wrappings. The abused wound looked much worse than the thigh, still oozing a nasty substance. The doctor cleaned it thoroughly and pressed his lips tightly together as he examined the stitches. It could look better, he thought. "I think your poultice needs to be applied again, Jelly. We need to draw out that infection."

"Yessir," Jelly said, the reply uncharacteristically short.

Sam patted the wound dry. "All right, now for the next part. I think you all know what I'm concerned about. The injury and blindness he dealt with a couple of years ago may have left some residual damage that could have been re-injured. I don't like the way his eyes are reacting to light, and I need to know if the optic nerve is damaged again. If it is, we need to get him to an expert as soon as possible. That's the only reason I'm risking this now."

"If he's blind again, could it be permanent?" Scott asked. All eyes zeroed in on the doctor.

Sam paused in the face of questioning eyes, carefully considering his words. "I'm not an expert. I don't know. The last time, the treatment I did was based on a medical journal article. We can try that again if need be, but let's see what we have first, shall we?" Short nods all around were all reply he received.

Sam turned back to the restless young man and checked Johnny's eyes carefully. Then he slipped the jar of smelling salts from his pocket. One quick wave resulted in a frown and a twist of the dark head away from the offensive smell. Sam asked Scott to speak to his brother. Looking like he was being asked to stand in front of a firing squad, Scott slowly complied.

"Johnny," Scott called, gently patting his brother's sunken cheek. "Come on, brother, open your eyes."



Cinder black lightened to ash grey, and the horizon of his inner eye saw flashes of light that were edged in pain. A flash of memory recalled a more violent storm of agony, but, for now, he simply ached all over and was unable to suppress a moan.

"Open your eyes, Johnny. Look at me."

The voice was soothing and caught his attention. Johnny felt his head turn that direction, but all he saw was the same ash grey. That's when the first lightning bolt hit, striking first in his thigh, then racing through the rest of his body. Johnny automatically shied away from the sudden pain and tried to sit up.

"No, no, Johnny, don't move. You have to lie still."

This all seemed familiar, and the visceral memory was not good. Johnny felt pressure on his shoulders, confining him. He couldn't see anyone through the fog so Johnny began a frantic search in front of him with his hands for something – anything – solid and human. Immediately, a pair of hands was on his face, cradling each cheek and turning his head away from the soothing voice of his brother. Johnny latched onto the offensive hands in an effort to peel them away, but another voice cut through the pain and he froze to listen, trying to make out the words through his own heavy breathing and pounding heart.

"Look at me, John, you have to look at me. What do you see? Hold still, now." It wasn't Scott's voice and the change distracted him from his panic. "Johnny, do you hear me?"

Johnny heard the question repeated several times before he realized what the words meant. His throat hurt, his head ached and his leg, oh, his leg was making it difficult to think! Finally getting his mouth to work through the jumble of pain and chaos, he croaked, "Doc?"

"Yes, Johnny, it's Sam." Johnny felt the hands on his face relax under his grip, but fear compelled him to hang on to them. "Now listen to me; I know your leg hurts and I'm sorry. We're taking care of it. Right now, I want you to tell me what you see."

"See?" Johnny had to think about the question for a second. Even with the agonizing pain shooting from his leg, he managed to concentrate enough to force a blink. He could feel his lids moving; he knew his eyes were open, but nothing but the gunmetal grey and flashing sparks appeared to him. He released the doctor's hands and felt his face for any kind of bandages. Finding none, the stirrings of panic began

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to rise once more. He found the doctor's hands again and held tight. "See?" he rasped a little louder.



Scott's heart sank. Keeping the pressure on Johnny's shoulders, he glanced up and saw the grim expression on his father's face across the bed. Doc Jenkins continued to hold Johnny's face and speak lowly, but it was obvious to all that Johnny couldn't see. The rising panic, though, was very clear in the blue eyes and growing muscle tension under Scott's hands.

Fear grew in the older brother's heart. Sam's voice was not doing the trick. Johnny shook his head at the effort to get free of the doctor's grip, and then flailed his hands and tried to sit up.

"I can't see you!" he cried, his voice cracking. "Scott? Murdoch?"

"Right here, Johnny, you have to lie still." Murdoch's voice was amazingly calm but his face showed a different story.

Scott glanced at Jelly and Teresa working to keep Johnny's leg still. Tears ran down the young girl's face but she ignored them, too busy with keeping the traction set up from being destroyed by Johnny's flailing.

"Johnny." Scott turned his attention back to his sibling and cut in, his voice firm. "Johnny, calm down. You have to calm down. Stop it, Johnny."

"Scott?" Johnny panted, turning his head to the voice. "Don't go!" Johnny released Sam's hands and grabbed Scott's forearms. The older brother could feel the fearful tremble of his grip.

"I'm not going anywhere, brother. You have to calm down."

"Oh, God, not again. Not again," Johnny squeezed his eyes shut and rolled his head back and forth, his voice a plaintive wail. "It hurts, Scott, I can't do this. I can't . . ." His back arched and he began to fight anew as his last semblance of self-control crumbled away. The traction frame groaned with the sick man's struggles.

"Maria!" Sam barked, using both hands to press Johnny's arm to the bed. He snatched the syringe from her hands and applied the needle. Johnny's body twisted away from it, but the older man managed to hold on and complete the injection.

"No, no, no, don't . . ." Johnny begged weakly, his voice ragged.

"You'll be fine, Johnny, just relax," Scott said evenly, his tired eyes shining wetly. "Just go to sleep. I'll be here, Johnny, I won't go anywhere." The soft cadence seemed to help. His little brother turned to face him, his fearful eyes turning dull and finally slipping closed as his body relaxed with a faint sigh.

Everyone held their positions for a few seconds until they were sure Johnny was out, and then one by one, they released him. Scott turned his back on the bed and stared out the window, running a shaky hand through his hair. Teresa stifled a sob and walked quickly from the room. Murdoch sank into a straight back chair and rubbed his face.

Jelly clucked and mumbled, then went to stand by his boss. "Well, that answers that question," he grumbled.

"Guess it does," Sam replied softly. "Murdoch, I'll start the same treatment I did before while I ask around about a specialist. If it's not better in two weeks, there's nothing more I can do."

"Yes, yes, whatever you think is best, Sam." Murdoch showed no inclination to rise from the chair but instead sat, staring at his hands.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Jenkins did not trust his normally active patient, and he was kept sedated until the disfiguring swelling around the broken femur and surgery site was reduced. Only then did the doctor think the danger of re-injuring the bone was nearly past. In the meantime, the eye treatment - so successful years ago - was started while Johnny was in unnatural slumber.

It was many days before Sam decided to cut back on the daytime morphine, allowing the patient to become a little more aware each day. The night dose remained the same, however, so that everyone else in the house would get some rest. The doctor knew full well the young man would be a handful during the day when he was finally fully awake and wanted the family rested.

Each time Johnny came around, there was someone there to talk to him and keep him calm while he slowly progressed out of his twilight state. His eyes were tightly wrapped, and he was assured everything was going fine.

Sam, however, was skeptical. This injury was much more severe than the previous incident years before.

On Dr. Jenkins' orders, laudanum was administered via the nasal tube at regular intervals, keeping the patient perched on a fine line between sleep and awareness. Ten days passed before he was allowed to come fully awake and the inevitable explosion occurred.

Teresa had just brought in Jelly's lunch and a lukewarm cup of broth when she noticed Johnny's bandage-swathed head turn toward her as the door opened.

"Oh, you're awake! I wasn't expecting . . ."

"What do you want?" Johnny growled roughly, causing a dry cough. One hand automatically rubbed his irritated throat in an uncoordinated fashion.

"Lunchtime, Johnny." Teresa kept her voice light, but her hands began to shake a little at the angry tone. She set the tray on the small bedside table. Jelly, rinsing out a cloth at the wash basin, immediately locked his eyes on Johnny, wariness setting his stance.

"Just go away." Dropping both hands on the mattress, Johnny, still groggy, started to adjust his body on the mattress. That's when he noticed the restriction at

his waist. His fingers immediately began tracing the strap that held his hips. "What's this?" he snapped, his actions becoming a little more agitated.

Jelly was at his side immediately. "Just leave it be, Johnny, it's to keep your leg from movin'. Come on, I'll help you sit . . ."

Johnny's hand grabbed Jelly's arm and threw it back. "Don't touch me!" His voice was becoming clearer and stronger with his awakening. He pressed his hands against the mattress and sat up. Immediately, his head ducked and he hissed in pain.

Teresa stepped closer. "Johnny, the doc says to give you laudanum again if you aren't calm . . ."

"No!" His arms swung through the air to keep anyone away and connected with the tray on the table, sending both crashing to the floor. The motion caused the nasal tube to bounce, and his hands were instantly on it.

Teresa jumped back with a squeak, startled for a moment before dropping to the floor to push the mess aside.

Jelly grabbed Johnny's hands as the angry young man began to tug on the offensive tube. "Leave it alone, Johnny," the older man said between clenched teeth. Johnny wiggled his hands loose and shoved his friend hard enough that the older man had to dance for balance, arms wind milling. "Johnny, stop it!" he yelled as he fought to keep his feet.

Gagging forced Johnny to pause in his pulling the tube out. After a pair of hoarse coughs, the gag reflex was under control and he tugged some more. He'd managed to drag out several inches before the bedroom door flew open. It took Scott a second to see the problem and run forward, dodging Teresa and the mess on the floor.

Scott threw himself across his brother's chest. With Jelly's help, they forced both of Johnny's arms down to the mattress. Scott's voice was unnaturally calm and Jelly backed away, allowing Scott handle the situation. "Lay still, brother. Talk to me. What are you doing?"

"Get it out, Scott!" Without being able to see Johnny's eyes, the older brother couldn't quite tell if his bedridden brother was fully conscious yet. "Get off me!"

If it was the drug wearing off or his true state of mind, Scott couldn't tell, so he kept talking. "I can't do that yet, Johnny. You have to calm down. Now take it easy, brother."

It took a pair of long minutes before Johnny stopped struggling and the only noises heard were the angry young man's heavy breathing and the gentle squeak of the flour bag counterweight as it swung at the end of Johnny's leg and. Eventually, his frame relaxed with Scott's quiet murmuring. Teresa and Jelly stood together, away from the bed, afraid to move and break the spell the older brother weaved with his voice.

After a time, Johnny turned his head away from them all and pushed his brother off. Scott allowed it and stood straight, but did not step back. The prone

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man's chest rose and fell in a gasping rhythm as he obviously fought for a measure of control.

Scott asked a question. Johnny shook his head. The tube jiggled and he reached for it again. Scott's hand was immediately on top of Johnny's, stopping him. The lean blond turned to Teresa. "Send for Sam, will you?" he requested. "And Jelly, would you get Johnny a glass of water, please?"

The spectators of the drama finally moved, grateful for something to do. As Jelly stepped up with the glass he heard Scott firmly stating, "I'm not going anywhere, Johnny. Understand?"

The dark haired young man nodded once. His voice was raw. "Just you, Scott. No one else."

Scott took the glass. "Jelly, would you leave us alone, please? And shut the door. I'll stay until Sam gets here."

He was obviously miffed, but the older man simply nodded and left the room. The door closed with a loud click. Scott sat on the edge of the bed and directed his brother's trembling hands to the glass, making sure he had a good grip before letting go. "Need help sitting up?" the older brother asked brightly, bending to help before Johnny had a chance to reply. Scott arranged another pillow behind Johnny.

Johnny cautiously sipped the water and frowned. "How long've I been here?"

To Scott, Johnny sounded like a wounded, cornered and frightened animal. He could only imagine how disoriented Johnny must feel right now. The sympathetic older brother allowed the infirm man to finger the bandages around his eyes with a shaky free hand.

"It's been seventeen days. How's the leg feel?"

"Fine," was the automatic response. Johnny's voice was thick and raspy from the tube.

"I doubt that very much," Scott said in a disbelieving tone. "Truth, brother."

There was a long pause then Johnny's voice whispered angrily, "It hurts. I can manage." He handed the glass back. "How bad?" he asked quietly while his fingers moved to explore the nasal tube.

Not to be distracted, Scott put the glass down without taking his eyes from his brother's wandering hands. "You want to hear it from Sam?"

"Quit stallin'."

Scott took a breath. "Okay, then. Your thigh is broken. It's in traction to keep the bone from separating."

"Traction?" Johnny's hands dropped to the strap across his hips and Scott could see his shoulders tense up immediately. Investigating fingers trailed to the wooden splint and thick bandages. Johnny's fingers lightly traced the upper part of his immobilized limb.

"It's weight to keep your thigh muscles stretched and to keep pressure off the broken ends of the bone. You'll be out of it as soon as the bone is stronger. Sam had to

dig a bullet out of your thigh, too. That's why there are bandages." Johnny's tight lips twitched with that bit of information. Scott let him puzzle everything together while his thoughts cleared. Johnny then leaned back and carefully rubbed his temples.

"Where's Murdoch?"

"At a meeting about the drive."

"Teresa? She all right?"

"She's fine. Just a few bruises."

"They dead?"

"Yes."

With his fingertips, Johnny carefully rubbed small circles on his temples under the bandages that swathed his head. "No more medicine, Scott. I can't think." The tone was somewhere between begging and demanding.

"We'll take it slow, Johnny. An hour at a time. But Sam calls the tune on that."

The gunfighter's long, graceful fingers again moved across the outside of the bandage around his head then dropped to the dreaded tube again. Johnny's lips were still an unreadable straight line. After a moment, his hands collapsed to his lap and his head fell back deeper into the mattress, obviously spent. Scott felt his own body relax a bit. The next statement, though, surprised and unbalanced the stoic blond.

"I'm sorry about Alexandra."

Scott ducked his head and took a moment to collect himself. "I know," he finally replied in a bare whisper, not trusting his voice. He cleared his throat and stopped the burning tears from welling in his eyes. "I'm sorry about . . ."

"No need," Johnny cut him off.

Scott nodded, realizing his brother couldn't see him, but he dared not speak yet.

Johnny sighed, his fingers interlacing as they lay on his stomach. They both sat in silence for several minutes. Eventually, Scott pulled his emotions back into himself and he started again.

"Sam says your eyes . . ."

"I'm tired," Johnny interrupted. There was no anger or urgency in his tone, but Scott knew the subject was closed. "Think I'll sleep some."

"You do that, brother," Scott said, settling into the well-worn armchair next to the window. "I'll be right here." Wrestling with the grief Johnny had unexpectedly drawn out of him, Scott still had the presence of mind to realize the things his manipulative brother didn't ask about. Johnny had given up a bit too easily on the nasal tube and too quickly dismissed any discussion about his eyes. Either he was afraid to know, or he had a plan of some kind. Scott bet on the latter. It was disconcerting not being able to read Johnny's normally expressive eyes - they were a gauge Scott sorely missed at this moment.

The suddenly awakened grief made itself known and Scott made his mind think of the priorities he'd laid out for himself. Scott rested his chin on steepled

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fingers as he studied his brother. Johnny's body eventually relaxed and his breathing leveled out. The dark head slipped slightly to one side.

Scott felt himself being drawn into the lull of activity, suspended in the moment and hypnotized by the even breathing of his brother. He could hear the distant noises of the ranch drifting through the open window with the warm breeze. A horse whinnied and men's voices sporadically chattered, words unclear. Wind rustled the leaves of a tree in the courtyard and a door closed somewhere downstairs. Time went by unmarked in his mind, and soon he was asleep.



Johnny could be as patient as he needed to be. As his head slowly cleared of the dreaded medicine, he lay quietly and took stock of his body. Various levels of pain emanated from every part of him, from the general soreness of inactivity to the sharp, unrelenting throb of his thigh and head.

The quiet of the room made it fairly simple to hear the eventual change in his brother's breathing. He felt a momentary pang of guilt at his plan, realizing that his older brother was probably tired from staying at his side, but that couldn't be helped. He had to get some rules straight right now, and the first one was that he would control what went in his body from now on. It was time to take control.

"Scott?" he called softly to confirm his suspicion. No reply. He almost smiled. Immediately, his hands were on the tube to finish what he had started. It was a painful endeavor and he could feel tears squeezing from his eyes and soaking the bandages as he completed the job. Stifling the gagging was the hardest thing; the incredible burning sensation in his throat hurt, but was eclipsed by the pain in his thigh and the increasing pain in his head. Grinding his teeth until they squeaked, he managed to silently extricate the offensive tube and moved to throw it across the room. Knowing it would wake Scott he caught himself and, instead, let it trail quietly to the floor like a dead snake.

The painful rawness of cleared throat pushed him to explore around with his hands. Johnny hoped to find the glass of water to put out the fire left behind by the tube. Scott's breathing made it easy to locate the bedside chair; from there, Johnny figured the table to be next to it. He couldn't quite reach. The restraint across his hips made moving closer to the edge of the bed difficult, and he felt for a way to loosen it without luck. All the adjustments were out of his reach. Still, he managed to move a few inches to one side. The pull on his leg increased as a result, and he bit his lip with the flare of pain.

Johnny was hot and sweaty by the time he located the table and the half-full glass. As hoped, the water soothed his throat and he felt the tension in his shoulders relax a little. He pressed the empty, cool glass against one cheek and caught his breath.

The idea came quickly, and he acted without thinking. Mindful not to disturb his brother, Johnny carefully pulled the pillow from behind his head to his stomach and bent it in half. He made sure the glass was sandwiched inside, and then, using the pillow like a giant mitten, squeezed the glass with his fingers until he heard it break. He froze, waiting to see if Scott heard.

Satisfied with no response, Johnny carefully felt the broken pieces. Finding the two biggest, he put them aside and silently dropped the pillow and remaining glass to the floor on top of the nasal tube. Examining fingers found the longest, sharpest edge between the two pieces and he took it in a firm grip with his right hand. With his left hand acting as a guide, he began to saw on the leather strap holding him down.

It wasn't long before he felt his strength waning. Johnny cursed his weakness mentally but kept working. He could feel the piece of glass becoming sticky with blood, but didn't care. As his body cleared of the hated medicine, pain increased, but he fought to ignore it. He whispered a curse blaming the laudanum for his inability to control the sharpness of the pain.

As he wearied, his attention focused on the width of leather holding him down and the constant throbbing of his wounds. He could feel the ragged cut was nearly half way through, and he dug in harder. He'd convinced himself that when the strap was gone, his mental control would return.

Johnny's world was narrowed to a four-inch-wide area of leather that was sticky with sweat and blood. As the glass became slippery and more difficult to grasp, his movements became more frantic. Both time and energy were running out. He bore down harder, his shoulders hunched in effort.

Then a hand clenched his wrist like a vice.



“Drop it, Johnny!” Scott ordered through clenched teeth.

“Let go of me!” Johnny gasped frantically, his hand a fist around the glass. Struggling uselessly, his arms were easily forced to the mattress on either side of him. Scott's grip was tight on each wrist, and Johnny was too weak to break free. “Scott, let go!”

“Not on your life, brother.” Johnny felt the press of his brother's upper body on his, holding him fast to the bed. “What were you thinking? Look at your hand!” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Scott wished he could call them back.

Exhausted, Johnny stopped struggling and lay quiet, sweat making his skin slick and shiny. The wounds on his hands bled freely from between his fingers. He laughed shortly. “Look at my hand, huh?” He laughed again, and Scott felt sick. “Sorry, can't oblige ya, Boston. Now let me go.” At the last word, the anguish was plain in his voice. He swallowed hard and clamped his mouth shut. Breathing heavily through his nose, his tightly pressed lips twitched as he fought for control.

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Scott managed to push his initial anger aside, but didn't lessen his grip. He knew he had to diffuse this situation right now; his only hope was complete honesty. "I can't let you go, Johnny," he said evenly. "I don't know what you're going to do."

Hesitation showed with Johnny's lack of response. They were both suspended in time waiting for Johnny to make a decision. Scott realized his brother's judgment was greatly impaired by pain and residual medications, but he also knew Johnny's penchant for rash, emotional action. Before he let go, he had to know what was going on in that dark-haired head.

"Johnny, I can't read your mind. You have to talk to me. What were you thinking? What was your plan, here? Talk to me. I don't think you meant to hurt yourself, but . . ."

One short, explosive laugh came from Johnny's mouth and Scott felt his brother's body suddenly relax. Frowning – and cursing the fact that he couldn't read Johnny's normally expressive eyes – Scott did not back down as his brother spoke.

"Hurt myself? You think I'm tryin' to hurt myself?" Johnny's voice was rough with emotion, but became stronger as his anger grew. "I just can't stand this, Scott! Look at me! I can't do anything . . ." his voice hitched and he clamped his mouth shut again to gather himself. His voice dropped to a desperate tone. "It makes me crazy, being tied down. You know that. I can take care of myself."

"You can't be alone right now, Johnny, and you can't take care of yourself. You can't walk and you can't see. Broken legs heal and your blindness is probably temporary. You just have to be patient and wait it out."

"What if it's not?" Johnny said in a tight voice. "What if it's not temporary? What then?"

"Then we'll handle it as a family, like we always do. Now can I look at your hand?" Scott backed off a little and twisted Johnny's right hand until the palm faced up. Johnny relaxed his fist and his fingers slowly uncurled. Scott plucked away the chunk of glass and dropped it on the small table, trading it for the damp washcloth from a small bowl. He began cleaning away the blood, his eyes scanning his brother for other injuries when he saw the spot of blood drying on the edge of the nostril that once held the dreaded tube. "Sam's not going to be very happy about the tube, you know."

"It ain't goin' back."

"Okay with me," Scott said agreeably, continuing to clean Johnny's hand. "I'll be on your side to convince him if you agree to one thing."

There was a slight hesitation before Johnny asked suspiciously, "What?"

"You have to tell me when the pain is too much. We've had this conversation a hundred times in the years past, Johnny, it shouldn't be a surprise. I'm serious." Scott looked at the cleaned palm. It was still bleeding, but it had slowed considerably. "Here, press your hands together on this cloth. I need to get some bandages." He

stood. "Well?" he asked, poised to go. "Deal? Or do you want to continue to have laudanum force fed through a tube? Your choice, Johnny."

"All right."

"All right, what? I want you to tell me exactly what you're agreeing to do. I've seen you slither your way around too many deals, brother."

"I agree to tell you if the pain is too much."

"And take medication to stop it?"

"That wasn't part of the deal!"

"Johnny," Scott warned.

"Scott, I can't think with that stuff. You know that. It makes me feel so . . ." he stopped suddenly and dropped his head as if to study his hands. The washcloth became the object of picking fingers.

"Out of control?" Scott offered softly. After a few seconds, Johnny nodded sharply. Scott pulled out lengths of cloth and laid them on the bed.

"I don't like that feeling," Johnny breathed barely above a whisper. Then his head snapped up and he began feeling around the bed, leaving trails of blood everywhere he touched with the injured hand. "My gun! Where is it?"

Expecting that question, Scott grabbed the holster in question from the bedpost and put it in his brother's lap. "There. It was on the bedpost."

Johnny calmed visibly and fingered the belt. After a long moment, he snorted a short laugh. "Lot a good it's doin' me now, huh? I've already learned that aiming by sound don't work too good." Long, bloody fingers traced the line of bullets adorning the rig then he hefted the holster up again. "Put it back, Scott. Blood rusts the metal." Wordlessly, Scott re-hung the belt and finished wrapping the cut hand.

The sound of greetings from outside caught Scott's ear. "Sam's here," he said softly. "And there's blood all over the bed. Between that and the tube on the floor, I don't know how much I can help you, brother."

Johnny smiled wanly, which make him look very young and defeated. "Time to reap what I've sown, huh? An' Scott?"

"Yeah?"

"My leg's startin' to hurt." Johnny lay back, looking decidedly paler and suddenly very fragile.

Scott lifted a brown bottle from the dresser and brought it over, pressing the item into Johnny's palm. "Here. Take some." Johnny wrinkled his nose at the offering, and jerked his hand away. "Look at it this way - if you take the laudanum now, Sam may be easier on you about the tube." The hardening of Johnny's mouth told Scott that the suggestion was not welcome, so he replaced the bottle on the dresser.

"I'll be the one sayin' what's goin' inside me from now on," Johnny stated flatly. He crossed his arms over his chest and in essence, shut down.

"I'll take that as a no, then," Scott replied shortly. He was already deeply tired, and the road ahead did not look promising. The swing of emotions Johnny was

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showing was disconcerting. Scott figured it was from exhaustion and the remnants of medication and would make a tough situation even more difficult. The older man rubbed his eyes and moved to the window so he'd be out of the doctor's way.

As he leaned against the window sill to wait for the doctor, Scott realized that his conniving brother had done it again - he hadn't agreed to take medicine if the pain got too bad. He sighed, and threw in a mental towel, too weary to argue anymore and almost to the point of being too tired to care. He shut his eyes and let his head droop. Tomorrow, he thought, going back to his plan of priorities. I'll deal with him tomorrow.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam mounted the stairs of the hacienda with Murdoch on his heels, thinking he should simply move his office to Lancer. His buggy horse now made the trip with little direction. He thought about making the joke out loud, but figured it would fall flat.

He'd crossed paths with his old friend on the road from town. Murdoch filled in the family doctor on Johnny's condition up until he'd left, and Sam told him about being called to the hacienda because Johnny was apparently fully awake. The big rancher had nodded silently at that information and hadn't offered anything more. Learning to read his friend over time, Sam could tell that Murdoch was not looking forward to this moment. Things were going to change, and if Johnny stayed true to form, it wouldn't be a quiet change.

The experienced doctor could also read the atmosphere of a room within a few seconds, and when he opened Johnny's door the sense of emotion was instant and hostile. Dr. Jenkins immediately clamped his mouth shut as he visually took in the setting.

Scott stood with his back to the window, his arms crossed stiffly across his chest. Johnny's head had turned slightly at the noise of the opening door, his arms also crossed over his chest. The clearly stubborn set of brothers helped the doctor to hold his tongue, even when he noticed the bloodstained sheets and the curl of tubing on the floor under a discarded pillow.

Murdoch, however, was another matter. "What the Sam hell is going on in here?" the big man bellowed. Much to their credit, neither boy twitched at the loud and sudden statement. "Scott?"

When the blond opened his mouth to reply, his younger brother spoke up instead. "I hear ya, old man!" Johnny snapped, his voice raspy. "I ain't deaf or dumb the last time I checked!"

Sam put a restraining hand on his friend's arm knowing the attitude thrown at him by his younger son would fire Murdoch up in a heartbeat. After a furious glance at the doctor, the patriarch managed to grind his jaws together and keep silent.

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"Well, well. I see you're awake," Sam said with strained patience. He walked to the bed and set his bag down on the table with a resounding thud. "And I see that someone has replaced me as the attending physician and removed the nasal tube." He noted the dried blood in Johnny's nostril as he snatched up his patient's wrist to check his racing pulse. "Sloppy job, I must say."

Scott's posture didn't change. Johnny faced straight ahead, lips pressed tightly together.

Sam shoved the pile at his feet aside with his foot and glass shards tinkled to the floor.

"What the hell?" Murdoch snapped, bending to retrieve a piece.

As he noted Johnny's pulse and the fresh bandages swaddling his hand, Sam twisted the hand until it was palm up. Bright red blood spotted the wrappings.

"What went on here?" Murdoch demanded before Sam could stop him.

"I don't like bein' trussed up!" Johnny yelled right back, jerking his arm from Sam's grip.

That's when the doctor noticed the roughly cut strap and pointed it out to Murdoch. Sam noticed immediately that the big man's eyes were wide and touched with something he rarely saw there: Fear. When Murdoch spoke again several seconds later, his voice was much quieter.

"So you tried to cut yourself out," he said. He sounded relieved.

The way the eldest Lancer said that statement gave Sam pause. What else had the big rancher thought? That Johnny would try suicide? Were things that bad and he hadn't noticed? The doctor quickly gave his patient a visual inspection and didn't pick up anything other than Johnny's normal anger. The boy had been in a drugged sleep for days; had something happened? Sam made a mental note to question Murdoch later.

"Murdoch, would you bring up some warm water?" Sam asked, tilting his head to the door to allow his friend to pull himself together. Murdoch nodded absently and left the room. Yes, he was rather shaken, Sam noted. He turned his attention to his patient, his own anger gone.

"You scared him, you know," Sam said calmly as he began to unwrap the hand. Johnny didn't reply. His head was bowed down and his muscles tense under the doctor's hand. "Hm. You need some stitches."

"The tube ain't goin' back." Johnny stated pointedly.

Sam's eyes glanced to Scott, who shrugged and shook his head. The blond looked tired.

"We'll see about that," Sam said, turning back to Johnny. "I am the only doctor here that I know of."

Murdoch returned with the warm water and they both cleaned the wound with soap and water.

As Sam washed the cuts and stitched he deepest ones closed, he took the time to assess both boys and their father. Scott, he knew, had been bordering on collapse since Alexandra's death. Repeated orders for him to rest had been summarily ignored and he wondered when and where the inevitable breakdown would occur.

Murdoch seemed to be doing fine, physically, compared to the others. He now knew his friend was suffering more than he realized. Sam figured that as long as his family was together, everything would be all right. The man had been too long without his boys here, and since their return, the doctor had seen him become a true family man. Had he misjudged him? Was this situation with Johnny's eyes affecting his friend more than he realized?

Johnny, on the other hand, was acting just as he had when he'd first arrived here years ago, which was, sadly, a giant step backward. The doctor knew this was going to be a difficult case, and he turned some ideas over in his mind on how to make things easier for this family and not jeopardize his stubborn patient's health. As he finished the last of the stitches, he gathered his thoughts.

"How's your leg feeling, Johnny?" A quick wrap of clean bandage, and the hand was done. The doctor moved to the leg as he spoke.

"Hurts a bit," the young man responded tensely. "I can deal with it."

Sam checked the sutures and the drain. "Looks like I can take this drain out. Let me guess: no drugs." Johnny didn't react, but Scott snorted a short laugh. "Here we go." He was as careful as he could possibly be, but the drain had adhered to some skin and was difficult to remove. Johnny hissed at one point, and his fists clenched the sheets in determination. Scott turned away while Murdoch studied the floor. Finally, with only a little blood, the drain was out and joined the nasal tube on the floor.

Sam quickly re-wrapped the leg. "I think we can remove the traction next week, John. It's looking pretty good. That doesn't mean you can walk around like normal, though. In fact, I still want you off of it for another week after the traction is removed." Johnny opened his mouth to protest, but Sam cut him off. "I'm willing keep the tube out in the meanwhile. But if you go against me, Johnny Lancer, if you put any weight at all on that leg in the next two weeks I'm putting that tube right back in and giving you enough morphine to keep you out until Christmas. You understand?"

Scott's smirk was squelched under his hand as he pressed it against his mouth and Murdoch's head jerked up, his mouth hanging open in surprise at the threat.

Johnny, on the other hand, didn't move. His lips, still tightly pressed together, worked furiously as he obviously tried to think of an out. Finally, he lay back with a resigned and weary sigh. "Fine," he snapped. "Didn't know docs bargained with their drugs like that. Somethin' new in one of your medical journals?" The snide edge to the comment wasn't missed by anyone.

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Sam chose to let it pass. "I've learned some new tricks from dealing with you Lancers, yes," Sam conceded. "Let's check that eye treatment now. It's a bit early, but that's all right. Scott, close the drapes, please. You still have a headache?"

"A little."

Sam took that to mean a lot, and didn't ask any more questions. The rest of the examination was carried out in silence, and then he was ready to take his leave. Murdoch escorted him from the room, leaving Scott with his brother.

"Thanks for coming, Sam," the big man said as they descended the stairs. "I'm concerned about this cattle drive. Scott, Jelly and I have to go and only Teresa and Maria will be here in the house. How's Johnny going to handle it if he can't see, Sam? What if he's permanently blind this time?"

The doctor was pleased that he didn't have to start the conversation about his friend's worries. Then again, the fact that Murdoch Lancer was bringing up his feelings was disconcerting. The stress level here at Lancer must be much more than he anticipated. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, the doctor placed a comforting hand on Murdoch's shoulder. He considered his words carefully during a long pause, finally deciding it was time to voice his own concerns. "Murdoch, can I speak frankly?"

The big Scot threw him a surprised glance, and then motioned to step into the great room. Jelly and Teresa were already there and looked up when they entered the room. Jelly remained sitting on the couch, but the girl stood, wringing her hands nervously. Sam hesitated, looking to Murdoch.

"It's all right. They should hear what you have to say, too." Murdoch moved to stand next to his ward and wrapped a protective arm around her shoulder.

Sam took a deep breath of fortification. "Murdoch, I don't think this eye treatment is going to make any difference. There's always hope, but I think you need to make some plans, especially with the drive coming up." Teresa's eyes instantly pooled with tears as Jelly began to study a pattern in the rug. "Johnny is going to need some specialized help. There's a doctor in San Francisco he should see when you get back, but in the meanwhile, he has to learn to function without his sight."

Teresa began to quietly sob into her guardian's chest. Murdoch's jaw worked silently, his eyes fixed on something behind the doctor's left shoulder.

Sam continued. "There are schools back east who have tutors that specialize in teaching the blind how to function. I think it would be a good thing to start looking for one of them to stay here while you, Scott and Jelly are on the drive. Johnny's going to be out of that bed and moving around about that time and he needs to do that safely. I plan on putting a hard plaster cast on his injured leg, but you know your son. You have just enough time to arrange for help before you go." Getting no response, Sam picked up his bag and made his way to the door. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'll get you a list of schools to contact."

He turned and walked from the room with a heavy heart. Sam Jenkins felt like he'd let down everybody in the Lancer household.



Later that night, Murdoch brought his older son into the great room and told him Sam's prognosis and suggestion. Oddly, his older son showed no reaction. He simply stared at the dead coals in the fireplace as he sat on the couch, slowly turning the crystal glass in his hand. He appeared to be in thought. Finally, he threw the last of the Scotch down his throat and turned to his father.

"I agree with him, sir. We need some delegation of duties here." Scott rubbed his eyes and continued as Murdoch checked his surprise. "We can't continue like this. I can't continue like this, and Johnny's only going to get more difficult to handle. I think I should wire my grandfather."

That got Murdoch's attention. "Wait a minute . . ." he started.

Scott held up his hand. "Hear me out first." After a moment, the patriarch nodded tightly. "There are a lot of top doctors in the Boston area that specialize in head injuries and blindness. I heard of them after the war. I think it would be better if we took Johnny there for a second opinion."

"Sam said there was a doctor in San Francisco."

"Only one doctor, sir. We shouldn't ignore that fact. There's also the Perkins Institute for the Blind in South Boston. They train teachers for the blind there. I think the tutor should come out here with the understanding that he will escort Johnny to Boston when we get back. Grandfather can interview at the Institute immediately and send someone out."

Murdoch studied his elder son as he thought. It was apparent that Scott had already thought about this possibility. The pencil the big man held in his right hand tapped a steady rhythm on the desk where he sat. "You don't really think Johnny will go for that," he mused quietly.

Scott ducked his head. "We can't do a whole lot for him when he's finally able to get around. Have you thought about what it will be like around here if he doesn't ever get his sight back?"

Dropping the pencil with a woody clatter, Murdoch rubbed his big hands over his eyes in exhaustion and sighed. "Yes, especially since this afternoon," he admitted. "But, since when has Johnny done what's good for him? He's going to feel like a fish out of water in Boston."

"He's going to feel like a fish out of water where ever he is in this condition. And it would be temporary; just until he is cured or . . ." Scott guiltily looked aside as the sentence trailed to a stop. Murdoch knew he was going to say 'until he learns to live being blind.'

Being completely honest with himself, Murdoch had to admit that he too, was rather overwhelmed with everything at this moment. His own grief for the loss of his

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daughter-in-law and his grandchild had not been fully realized, either. And with the drive coming up, things seemed, at times, unmanageable.

Cipriano had been doing a fine job, but he couldn't be expected to take the place of the three Lancer men indefinitely. Scott certainly could use a break. And as far as Teresa . . . well, he hadn't even had the time to see how she was doing. They all could use a lightening of the duties. For Scott to be suggesting weaning themselves from Johnny's care said a lot about the wan-looking young man's state of mind. His firstborn must be suffering much more than he realized.

"I need to speak to Teresa and Jelly about this before we bring it up to Johnny. We need to be a united front to stand up to him," Murdoch said. "Agreed?"

"Agreed." Scott nodded.

"I'll speak to her when she comes down. Maybe you can tell Jelly when you two go to town for supplies tomorrow. Wire Harlan when you get there."



"Alone?" Teresa said, obviously alarmed. "Johnny can't travel to Boston alone!"

"He won't be, alone, honey, he'll have the tutor."

"A stranger is the same as being alone, Murdoch! Scott or I can go with him."

Murdoch had to smile at the defiant stance his ward assumed with her arms crossed stubbornly across her chest. She looked very much like a certain fiery-tempered son of his. Gently, he placed his big hands on each of her shoulders and spoke carefully.

"I do see your point, Teresa, but think about Johnny. He's going to be uncomfortable dealing with this whole situation anyway, and I think he'll be more uncomfortable - even embarrassed - in front of us. He doesn't need the distraction of worrying about what we're thinking or doing. He needs to learn how to handle himself from an experienced tutor."

"Well, then, can we leave it up to him? Let Johnny decide? He needs family!" Sparking brown eyes refused to yield to the older man's blues. It was obvious she wasn't going to give in on this point.

"Fine. We'll let Johnny decide. It might be a good idea to let him have some measure of control in this whole situation, anyway." He drew the girl into an embrace and he felt her relax.

"Thank you, Murdoch. Johnny has to understand that he's still part of us, even if. . . "The young girl couldn't make herself say the words.

"Yes, you're right. Even if," Murdoch agreed. "I'll discuss it with Johnny when the time is right. Not a word until then, all right? I still need to talk to Jelly, too."

Teresa nodded in her guardian's broad chest, reluctant to let go.



Late the next day, in the main office of Garrett Enterprises, the President and founder Harlan Garrett held a wire in his hand that sparked something inside. The telegram was short and to the point, but the fact that it was sent at all indicated to the Bostonian that they had hit a rough spot at Lancer. And always the businessman, rough spots meant opportunities and, once again, he would not ignore it.

Garrett's mind immediately began calculating how to turn this to his favor. Laying the wire on the desk, the old man swiveled his chair around to look out the window. Boston harbor was thick with fog, the people below him hurrying along the sidewalk with upturned collars and blurred in grayness. Garrett considered for a moment the reduced visibility, and what it would be like if fog was all he could see. Then he considered this plight of the half-breed Madrid and he had to smile.

Since his attempt to split the family to bring Scott back to Boston didn't work, maybe a reversal of thinking was in order. If they were as bonded as Scott insisted, it seemed to the elder Bostonian that maybe getting Madrid here would bring his grandson back. It was a novel approach, but definitely worth a try. Getting his heir to stay was something else to think about.

To make this kind of plan work he needed an accomplice, and Scott's letter told him just where to find it. Whether it would be a knowing or unknowing accomplice was yet to be seen. Garrett knew he'd been lucky last time when Teresa's kidnappers had died; his tie to them was buried along with the bodies and no one was the wiser.

Encouraged by that good fortune, he began to plot and plan.



Murdoch had every intention of telling Johnny their plan of action, but with the dawning of each day came the hope that something would change for the better, be it his younger son's attitude or his sight.

So he waited, fragile hope tantalizing him into silence. At the end of each day, he could see Johnny's old, sunny nature spiraling further away from them, downward into a dark place no one wanted to acknowledge. It had been a week now, and still the big man didn't dare bring it up. Preparations for the drive kept them so busy it was an item that easily fell aside, or was put aside when brought up.

Johnny was never alone, but the subject of his sight was rarely brought up. They anticipated his needs and made everything as easy as possible for him. Johnny accepted the ministrations with growing hostility.

Harlan's wire of success came on the same day Johnny was scheduled to come out of traction, and the final day of Sam's eye treatment. Murdoch slipped the wire into his desk and mentally marked the day on the calendar when Colin Llewellyn would arrive; six days. It would be six days until Johnny was given an opportunity to learn to deal with being blind. Would he take advantage of it, or fight it? Murdoch

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closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose once he realized what he was thinking.

Johnny was blind.

It was pretty obvious to everyone that Sam's treatment for his younger son's sight was not working. The last time, there were subtle changes in Johnny's vision each time the bandages were changed. This time, he only reported the same foggy grayness, and the defeat in his voice grew with each exam. After each visit, he seemed to draw a little further away from his family.

The patriarch sighed as he leaned back in his desk chair and thought about his family. Johnny had no idea the pressure he was inadvertently putting on all of them - especially Scott. If the younger man was able to read faces, he would be able to see how much Scott was suffering trying to deal with his grief, preparations for the drive and Johnny's curt demands to be left alone when that was not possible. How Scott managed to seem so collected in Johnny's presence constantly amazed Murdoch.

The knowledge of Llewellyn's arrival gave Murdoch a small measure of relief. Before he could ponder why he felt that, a shout outside announced the arrival of Sam Jenkins. A new chapter in the Lancer household was about to begin and the big man was not looking forward to it. He only hoped that the promise of a bit more mobility with crutches in a week would be enough to turn Johnny's sour disposition and hold off the growing depression.

There wasn't much more of a future he could offer right now, and the relief he felt a moment ago evaporated.

CHAPTER FOUR

The dog days of summer still had their hackles raised as the official start of fall loomed near. The room held the heat of the day far into the night, the open window giving little relief and no chance of a restful sleep. He was trapped in this bed, in this room and with his increasingly dark thoughts.

Johnny's days and nights were a fuzzy gray blur of sameness laced with constant fear and gut-churning anxiety. It had been a week now since he'd stopped the pain medications entirely. Every morning the first person in the room announced the day and time; Johnny only noted it because it told him another day had passed with no change in his vision. On the other side of the coin, each passing day also brought him closer to the moment that he would be removed from traction.

Johnny had mixed feelings about that; why was he overwhelmed with fear at the thought of leaving this cursed bed? Not used to being conflicted about his freedom combined with the fear and anxiety made Johnny Lancer downright unbearable to be around. He realized how difficult he was being; he heard the things he said and wouldn't want to be around him, either, but for some reason the horrible things still spilled from his mouth. Even Scott had become distant, but none of that really mattered to Johnny right now.

All he could think of was the fear that was constantly trying to overwhelm him at the thought of being finally free from the bed. What good was it if he never saw again?

For a while the pain of his leg and the constant, throbbing headache were distractions from the depressing thoughts, but as these distractions faded, so did his focal points. Johnny found he missed the pain desperately.

What was he going to do? His stomach turned with the thought.

Now, on this day, things were going to shift a tiny bit. Once out of traction, he could move around. Part of him thought that it didn't really matter because everything would be the same no matter where he went, but another part of him couldn't wait to escape this room. He hoped that a different location would help him to accept his final fear - that Johnny Madrid wasn't long for this world.

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And that's what scared him the most. Madrid had kept him alive all these years. Now he was starting over, and, as Johnny Lancer, he had to figure out how he was going to survive. At that unbidden thought, the zing of fear caught his breath.

Then he heard the shout outside and the sound of Sam's buggy and he knew the time had come to find his way. In reality and in essence, he was unarmed and Johnny wasn't sure he was up to the challenge. With the now familiar squeak, Johnny's door was opened and the rustle of skirts told him it was Teresa.

"Johnny, Dr. Jenkins is here," she said. "Let me help you sit up."

"I can do it," he growled automatically, working his way up with his arms. Ignoring him, Teresa stuffed pillows behind his back. He could see her in his mind's eye, standing back and looking for a way to help with hurt in her eyes. Johnny consciously fought down the growing anger, knowing she only wanted to help. If he drove her away, it was going to be an even more difficult recovery, and that wasn't a thought he formed lightly. "I'm sorry, Teresa," he said quietly after he was settled. "I know it's been hard."

He heard her sniff and felt like a heel. The anger disappeared, but the stirrings of fear and panic simmered just under his thoughts. He briefly thought of Mattie, and how depending on her had been so easy. And Teresa wouldn't leave.

Even with his eyes still bandaged, she managed to read him. "You're scared, aren't you? Like last time?"

He felt his resolve crack, and he finally reached out with his voice as if she were a life preserver, "Yeah."

He felt her soft hand in his, and he gave it a squeeze. Footsteps and murmured words made their way up the stairs and down the hall. Teresa gave his hand another squeeze just before Sam and Murdoch entered the room. They were easily identified by their voices.

"Well, Johnny, looks like it's time to keep my promise, isn't it?"

Johnny sighed shakily and noticed his mouth was suddenly dry. "Let 'er buck, doc."

He heard Sam's bag thud on the table. The awkward silence told him they were waiting for the usual snide remarks and surly attitude, but at this moment the fear had stolen his voice. All he could think was that with the removal of the dreaded traction, he had no reason not to leave this room. That thought grew like a nor'easter and chilled him even in the heat of the day; if he couldn't see, did he want to leave? He shook off Teresa's hand before she noticed the nervous sweat of his palms.

"I've told you all along, John, that I'm putting a hard cast on this leg. You won't be able to bend your knee or ankle. And you are to stay in this bed another week. You hear me?"

Johnny nodded shortly, not trusting his voice. The doctor continued to talk as Johnny heard people moving around to the foot of his bed, then he felt a hand on his leg. He inadvertently jumped at the touch.

"Where's Scott?" Sam asked conversationally.

Johnny knew the doctor noticed his tenseness, and the astute man also knew that Scott was the one that could usually get Johnny to settle down. He felt his face grow hot at being so easily read, and clamped his mouth shut against the retort he nearly shot back in response.

"Getting supplies in town for the drive. I thought he'd be back by now." Murdoch's voice came from near Johnny's feet.

"Murdoch, release the weight and take off the straps and rope. Teresa, help me remove these pillows."

Johnny felt the ever present pillows under his legs pulled away. Sam's hands supported his leg and splint as he was freed from the weight. Someone - he assumed Teresa - began to unbuckle the waist strap, and in a moment he was free of the device.

"How's the leg, Johnny? Any pain in the thigh?"

"No," Johnny croaked. There was a dull ache, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. In fact, the distraction was welcomed and he turned his attention to mastering it. Finally, something familiar he could do for himself.

Heavy footsteps in the hall announced the arrival of Jelly. "How much a this stuff you gonna use, doc? It's heavy!" That statement was followed by a heavy thump. "The water's on the way up."

"Thanks, Jelly. Yes, plaster is heavy stuff." Johnny could feel the doctor and Murdoch working the laces that kept his leg in the wooden splint. In a few minutes, he felt the cool sheets under his calf. Sam began to remove the wrappings on his thigh. "Well, the drain opening is nicely healed, just like the surgery site. Now, let's get this leg wrapped and get that cast on. Teresa, you may want towels on the bed and floor. This is going to get messy."

The light peck to Johnny's cheek just under the bandages was a surprise and he jumped again, his concentration on the ache momentarily broken. Quickly, he gathered his scattered thoughts together again, slightly alarmed that this seemed so hard to do. He missed the sound of Teresa's retreating feet amidst the arrival of whoever was dragging up the buckets of water. The busyness in the room made regaining his concentration nearly impossible.

Murdoch held Johnny's leg aloft by the foot as the doctor wrapped the leg from hip to heel. Even though he'd been told the extent of the cast, the feel of the wrappings brought it to life and Johnny could feel his panic growing. How can I move with this thing on? he thought, horrified at the visual picture in his mind. Johnny tried to squelch the anxiety by concentrating on the ache in his leg.

His inner battle for emotional control was becoming problematic. Bit by bit, his concentration dwindled away. There was too much noise and too much distraction

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in the room. Jelly was clanking buckets and apparently mixing the plaster, Sam was wrapping his leg and he could hear someone else moving around the room doing something he couldn't identify. For once he was grateful for the wrappings around his head making his face unreadable, save the painful twitch he felt in his jaw from his clenched teeth.

The desire to flee was becoming overwhelming but he was physically trapped.



"I'll get to your eyes as soon as I'm done here," Sam said lightly, more to warn the others than inform his patient. "Jelly, you can start cleaning up."

"The cast is already hard down here," Murdoch commented, tapping by Johnny's ankle.

"It dries quickly, but it won't be completely dry for a few days. You need to lie still until then." There was no response. "And you're to stay in bed for one more week. I think the bone can handle some movement after that. Understand, Johnny?" Finished, Sam held his arms aloft to avoid touching anything with his plaster-laden hands.

"Johnny, answer Sam," Murdoch ordered, albeit with a soft tone.

"I heard 'em!" Johnny yelled, making everyone flinch. The narrow strip of skin between bandages and hairline was shiny with sweat, and his breathing rapidly increased. He struggled to sit up, and when upright, he put both hands flat on the thigh area of the damp cast. "You might as well tie me to the bed again! I can't move in this thing!" He began to tear at the damp plaster, but was pushed back into the pillows by Murdoch's big hand on his chest.

Pinning Johnny to the bed, Murdoch barked, "Stop it, Johnny. Calm down."

"Calm down? You're joking!" Johnny was now taking in gasps of air, attempting to control himself. In apparent desperation, he grabbed his father's forearms with both hands to move it aside, but Murdoch's arm was like a tree trunk. "Calm down? Why don't you just shoot me instead, Murdoch? That would solve all our problems!"

A tiny gasp from Teresa brought a glance from the senior Lancer. He threw a look at Jelly, and after a moment, said lowly. "Take Teresa out of here. Now."

Jelly, standing in shock next to the bed snapped into alertness and nodded quickly. Teresa tried to protest, but tears made it hard to catch her voice. Jelly hauled her from the room with the feeling that things were going to get nothing but ugly.

"How dare you!" Murdoch practically yelled, leaning into his son with determination. "We've been tip-toeing around you all week because of your nasty mood, but I've had it! Are you proud that you've hurt Teresa? Or any of us? Do you think we have no idea what you're going through?"

"You have no idea, old man! None!" Johnny yelled right back. He again tried in vain to push Murdoch's hand from his chest. Neither Sam nor Murdoch could believe

it when Johnny's flailing arms redirected and he began a search for the holster hanging by his head. His hands got on it at the same time Sam's did, and the old doctor showed a flash of youthful dexterity when he snatched the whole rig away. "Give it to me!" Johnny tried to sound demanding, but there was a trembling edge to his words that suggested desperation.

"To do what? Shoot me?" Murdoch snapped.

"Give it to me, old man!" Johnny turned his attention to pushing off the mattress, using his good leg for traction.

"Murdoch," Sam warned, earning a glance from his old friend. The doctor shook his head, trying to convey the seriousness of the situation. The change in Murdoch's expression indicated he got the message, and the eldest Lancer changed his tune.

"Johnny, stop." The big man was calmness personified even though the implications of the demand terrified him. "Let Sam check your eyes, son. Come on, let's go one step at a time here."

For the first time since he was a two-year-old toddler, his father's voice actually calmed Johnny. Murdoch's heart felt like it was going to break from despair - his normally self-reliant, independent, vibrant son, now deep in a pit of depression, needed another person to take care of him and tell him what to do. This was a corner the older man had difficulty turning; how many times had he cursed his son's independent streak? Be careful what you wish for, ran bitterly through Murdoch's mind as he felt Johnny's struggles pause. Johnny was panting roughly, but he was still, clutching Murdoch's arm in obvious terror.

Sam hung the rig on the door knob and stepped up. "Let's take off the wraps. I know you're scared, but you have your family here. I want you to remember that." Breathing heavily, Johnny didn't give any indication of hearing him. Sam took scissors from his bag and began to clip the bandages. "Almost done." The doctor tried to sound upbeat, but he knew it was useless; they all knew it.

The bandages fell away and Johnny blinked. From his posture and blank expression, it was evident that nothing had changed. Sam waved his hand in front of Johnny's eyes without a reaction. The doctor glanced at Murdoch and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, John," Sam said quietly.

Johnny swallowed hard and pushed Murdoch's hand away. "'s okay," he said softly after a moment, barely audible. "Ain't no surprise." He put his hands over his eyes and lay back with a shuddering sigh, completely spent.

"I've already spoken to Murdoch about the next step. It's still early, John. You can't give up hope. Not yet."

Johnny didn't reply.

Grim faced, Murdoch looked as lost as his son. "Thanks, Sam. Stay for dinner?"

Sam wasn't even sure Murdoch realized he'd asked the question. "No, thank you. I have some things to do in town. I'll check with you tomorrow. Good bye now, Johnny."

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Neither man moved as Sam left the room, the pair of them a study in misery.



It was nearly an hour before Murdoch came down, carrying the gun belt. He'd seen Scott's returning with the loaded wagon, and stiffly made his way down the stairs where he was met by a very worried Teresa and equally agitated Jelly.

"How's the boy? 'Twarnt any yellin' after that first bit and that kinda worries me, to tell ya the truth. Doc tole us 'bout his eyes," Jelly hooked his fingers in the waistband of his pants nervously.

"How is he?" Teresa asked, her eyes wide.

A shout outside and a returned greeting along with the rumbling of wagon wheels marked the arrival of his elder son. "Honestly? I don't know how he is. Depressed. Upset. I don't know. Hopefully, he'll talk to Scott," he said. Murdoch took the gun belt and hung it by the front door. Then, he entered the great room and began to set up his first drink of the day with trembling hands.

When Scott entered the great room he could feel the emotional heaviness in the air. He paused, hat in hand, and fingered the rim as his eyes went from Jelly to Teresa, settling on Murdoch. He didn't miss the glass in his father's hands.

"I passed Sam on the way in," he started, hanging his hat on the back of a chair. "He told me."

Teresa looked up at the lean blond, her eyes worried and wide, and then she glanced at her guardian, a picture of sorrow. Scott spoke again. "I think none of us are surprised that the treatment didn't work."

Jelly snorted. "Kin say that agin. What about that teacher? He still comin'?"

"He'll be here in six days," Murdoch said, studying his glass.

"We leave in seven," Scott stated, still waiting to meet his father's eyes. "He needs to know, sir. We have no reason to put it off any longer."

The other three dropped their eyes knowing Scott was right but not wanting to be the one to face Johnny. After an awkward silence Scott turned to the stairs, overcome with the feeling of dire inevitability. It was time to place the burden aside to be dealt with later. Priorities.

"I'm telling him now."

No one stopped him.

Scott was taken aback for a second when he saw the mass of plaster on Johnny's leg and hesitated when he stepped in the room. His brother was lying uncharacteristically still, staring at the ceiling, his face blankly neutral with his hands resting on his abdomen. Scott took a fortifying breath and closed the door behind him.

"I talked to Sam," he started, moving to the bed as he spoke. "I'm sorry, Johnny." Scott pulled a chair next to his brother and sank into it.

"What do you want?" Johnny said flatly, his eyes cast toward the ceiling.

The older brother studied his toes. "We've contacted someone to come and help you while we're on the drive."

Johnny frowned, and his finger began to tap his stomach. "I don't need no help."

"Yes, you do. We all do. This is new to us, too."

The injured man's lips pressed tightly together. His finger kept tapping, tapping, tapping, drawing Scott's attention until he found himself staring at the action as he spoke; it was better than looking at Johnny's unfocused eyes.

"He's a teacher for the blind." Tapping broke cadence for a pair of beats. Scott continued. "There are things you need to learn that we can't teach you. Things we just don't know."

"Then how come you're so damn knowledgeable about it?" Johnny snapped, his fingers breaking their song to focus on picking at the bandage on his hand instead.

"Because I know there's a special school in Boston. I've seen it. They train teachers there."

"Well good for them! Tell 'em to keep 'em there!" Johnny abandoned bandage demolition and struggled to sit up. Scott automatically reached over to help, but his hand was slapped away as soon as it touched Johnny's shoulder. "I can do it myself!"

Scott sat back in the chair and scrubbed his cheeks with his hands. This was going exactly as he expected, he was sorry to note. "Well, it's too late. He's on his way already. Maria and Teresa need the help. And when we get back from the drive, I'll be going with the two of you back to Boston to see some doctors that are specialists."

"Don't I get any say in this?" Johnny snapped, his anger growing stronger with each word. "It's my life! It may be a pretty pathetic one at this point, but it's mine and I say I don't need it!" Unkempt hair fell over his forehead as he shouted, his bright, blue eyes staring sightlessly in the direction of his brother and glistening with emotion.

Johnny looked frayed. Even blind, the depth of sadness there was startling and Scott had to hold his breath for moment as the shock of seeing it passed. He kept his own voice even. "It's a done deal, brother. I'm sorry you don't think it will help, but I know it will. You just have to trust me on this."

Scott braced for a bitter comeback, but instead watched as his little brother's forehead furrowed and his eyes take on a dark hue of despair. Johnny dropped his chin, staring sightlessly at his hands, clenched as fists in his lap. His jaw muscles worked furiously, lips clamped tightly shut. He looked like a completely lost and angry boy; Scott's heart broke at the sight.

Feeling his resolve crack, Scott shot to his feet before he promised not to leave his little brother's side. "It's for the best, Johnny," he said firmly. "In Boston, they can help you a lot more than we can here." He paused a moment and then practically ran to the door. Scott Lancer had seen despair like that in the mirror too recently, and he couldn't bear to see it again on the face of his only brother.



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When Scott went upstairs Teresa found she couldn't simply sit. The butterflies in her stomach wouldn't allow it. Instead, she collected what glasses she could and excused herself to the kitchen to help Maria.

The small woman was just scrubbing furiously at the pantry floor when Teresa came in. The real reason Maria's vigorous physical work wasn't lost on the younger woman; the events surrounding Johnny were affecting her as much as anyone. Maria's maternal-like relationship with Johnny was obvious to all, and she had respectfully stood back during this most recent rehabilitation to allow Johnny's family to rightfully deal with it the way they saw fit. Teresa wondered what the woman was really thinking at the moment.

Carefully setting the crystal glasses next to a large bowl of soapy water, Teresa toyed momentarily with bringing up the subject of Johnny. She heard herself speaking without thought.

"He's so different," she said. Surprised at what came from her mouth. Maria paused in her motions and glanced up curiously. Teresa continued. "Johnny was so sure of himself when I was in trouble and before. Now he's so . . . I don't know . . . different. I can't imagine what he's thinking."

Maria sat back on her heels and after a moment, and then rinsed her rag in the container of water beside her. "Si," she nodded slowly. "I think there will still be trouble. Juanito has not found his place."

She then rattled off a Spanish phrase that Teresa didn't entirely catch, but did recognize the word 'powder keg' and understood the gist of the phrase. It was only a matter of time before sparks flew. Maria struggled to her feet as Teresa dropped her head and said sadly, "I miss him." The burn of pooling tears made her turn to wash the glasses.

Teresa felt a comforting squeeze on her elbow, and Maria said lowly. "We will be just fine soon enough. I have faith."

Grateful, but unable to speak, Teresa nodded, intent on her chore. Maria retrieved her dirty water bucket from the floor and shuffled to the door.

"*Buenas noches*," Maria said lowly. "I will see you in the morning."

"Good night, Maria." Teresa heard the door shut, and then the muffled sound of water being dumped in the courtyard. She finished the glasses, dried them then wandered the kitchen aimlessly for a few minutes before settling on rearranging the pantry while she tried to pull herself together emotionally.

So intent on her work, Teresa didn't hear Scott when he came up behind her. "Teresa?"

She startled, but managed to keep her grip on the jar of peppers in her hand as she turned. "Scott, you surprised me."

The lean young man gave her a weak smile. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to let you know that I told Johnny I would go with him and the teacher to Boston."

Teresa frowned. "Wasn't the idea to give him a choice?"

"He didn't seem inclined to make a decision. There's still time; he can change things if he wants." Scott sounded as depressed as Johnny.

Nodding in resignation, Teresa turned back to arranging jars. "I just hope he becomes receptive to anything in the next couple of weeks."

Scott turned to go. "I can't say I'm envious that you're staying. I'm sorry."

Teresa recalled Maria's comforting words as she replied. "It's all right. We'll be just fine." In her heart, however, she wondered if that would ever be true again.



Preparing for the drive was excuse enough for the two Lancer men to avoid Johnny's room for the next several days. Teresa suspected they were avoiding him; Murdoch would look in on Johnny when he was asleep and Scott would take his normal post in the armchair late at night and instantly fall asleep for a few hours before rising and getting back to work.

Maria and Teresa prepared the guest room on the first floor for the teacher, Mr. Llewellyn, but otherwise kept busy by preparing foods for the drive. The women managed to keep the house in formidable shape even with the hectic comings and goings of the two older Lancer men.

Both women knew that none of this hustle and bustle was lost on the youngest Lancer. They couldn't tell by looking at him, however. With forced cheerfulness, they kept Johnny informed of the goings on and looked for any kind of response. As night after night fell, his continued listlessness began to put them on edge. Knowing their Johnny, the quietness was not a good thing.

A couple of days before the drive would start, Murdoch and Scott tramped in the kitchen and informed Teresa that they had to go to the south pasture to check the herd just as lunch was ready. They grabbed quick plates of food and were out the door as Teresa fixed Johnny's tray. Maria clucked as she worked in the kitchen, murmuring words about proper mealtimes.

Teresa smiled a small, tired smile as she picked up the tray. "You know how it gets around here this time of year. We're lucky if they eat at all!"

Carefully carrying the tray to avoid spilling the cool glass of milk Teresa knew her brother-by-heart should enjoy, she made her way up the stairs. When she reached his door, she hitched the tray on her hip and rapped sharply just before pushing the door open. "Johnny, I have your lu . . ." Shocked, she jerked to a stop, sloshing the milk onto the tray. "What are you doing?" she choked in surprise.

Johnny was standing next to the bed, pale and shaking, the cast leg protruding awkwardly forward. One hand on the mattress propped him up while the other waved slightly at his side and maintained his balance.

Teresa dropped the tray on the wardrobe top and strode to his side, but didn't dare touch him. "You're going to fall!" she chastised sharply.

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"Well if I do, it's my business," Johnny growled between clenched teeth. "I've gotta get out of this room." Putting both hands on the edge of the mattress, he moved them hand over hand as he worked his way to the foot of the bed. He used a hopping gait and put very little weight on the broken leg, but Teresa knew that any weight wasn't a good thing.

"Johnny, Sam's going to knock you out for a month if he finds out about this!" She put her hands on his forearm, but he shook her off.

"Fine! Then I won't have to deal with that teacher!" Another hop revealed his draining strength as his exposed leg began to tremble. Johnny gripped the mattress with both hands and teetered precariously.

Teresa again grabbed his arm, and this time his motion to brush her off caused him to sink to the floor. Only part of the Spanish terms that left his lips were understood by the girl, and she knew any lady shouldn't know any of them. Growing up on a working ranch, however, had exposed her to many things; stubborn men being one of them.

"Let me help you up," she grunted, pushing her fear aside for the moment and pulling on his arm.

"Let go of me!"

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Johnny, it's either me or one of the men. Which do you prefer?" She was momentarily taken aback by the firmness of her demand. It was at that point she realized she was mad, and it was both refreshing and empowering.

Johnny must have been surprised, too, because it took him a moment to respond. He was actually thinking about the choice. "The chair. I've had it with that bed."

"Fine." The compromise worked for her. Teresa moved the armchair from the head of the bed to behind Johnny. He hooked an elbow on the seat, and with Teresa pulling on the other arm, he was able to maneuver into the chair. She fought the urge to brush his hair back into place with her fingers, and instead, turned away to allow him time to control his trembling and catch his breath. It was unnerving that his eyes were unfocused; she missed the former depth of his gaze. With a shaky voice that belied the sternness of her words, she said, "I have dinner here. Are you going to eat it or throw it on the floor?"

Johnny had the decency to duck his head. After a moment he sighed, and when he spoke, his voice was soft and calm. "Just leave it on the table over here. I'll get to it sometime. Sorry to be so much trouble." The sharp tone of the past several days was gone and replaced with tired resignation. Teresa wondered what that meant, but decided to take Johnny's lead and run with it.

"It's all right, Johnny. That's what families are for, you know." She arranged the tray on a small table within his reach. "There's a glass of milk there . . . oh darn it, it spilled!"

Johnny chuckled. It was the first time she'd heard that in weeks, and the milk was forgotten. "What's so funny?" She tried to sound upset, but knew she'd failed miserably.

"Nothin'. It's just that . . ." His voice softened, and he cleared his throat. "Everyone seems to be so careful when they talk around me. So serious. Guess I haven't made it any easier, though."

"That's a fact," Teresa said lightly, the small smile evident in her tone. Was he coming to terms with his situation?

"Teresa," Johnny started. The young girl could tell he was deciding what to say by the slight furrow between his eyebrows. "Teresa, are you all right? I . . . I haven't talked to you since . . ."

She knelt by his side and took his hands in hers. "I'm fine, Johnny, thanks to you and Scott. It was horrible," she took a breath to steady herself, "but I'm fine, really. And you will be, too."

There was an extended pause. "Remember when you asked me earlier if I was scared? When the bandages were comin' off?"

"Yes," she said softly. "You were scared that last time. When Mattie left."

"Yeah. Well, I'm still scared, honey, and I don't know what to do about it."

The confession was a huge revelation, and Teresa knew it. Was it a step toward acceptance? She bit her lower lip to keep from crying and gripped his hand a bit tighter. "I'm scared, too, Johnny, but if we stand together we can work through it. Let's help each other, all right?"

A ghost of a smile shadowed his wan face. "I'll try. Really."

"But that doesn't mean I approve of you being out of bed. Murdoch and Scott will have your hide if . . ."

"Let's keep it our little secret, okay? They have too much on their minds lately, anyway. We still have those crutches in the barn, right?"

"Johnny," Teresa said warily, wondering if he'd intentionally maneuvered her into a position of willing partner in crime.

"I promise I won't overdo it. I'll just move around the room until doc says otherwise. Come on, Teresa, I need to move a bit more. My backside's gettin' sore!" A hint of the Johnny she remembered showed in his smile.

"I'll think about it." Not about to be maneuvered so easily, she avoided answering. "Since you're out of the bed, I'll change the linens. Meanwhile, you stay there and eat."

Teresa knew Johnny and his subtle ways. She wasn't about to be sucked into his game, whatever it was, but for now, the closeness was something she craved and she latched onto it. For now, she would hold his secret, and prayed that he was on his way to acceptance.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was the evening before Llewellyn's arrival. Scott, Murdoch and Jelly were splayed around the great room after dinner in various positions of repose, tired from the preparations of the day and together in a rare-of-late gathering. They would be leaving in less than two days.

Scott eyed Teresa when she swayed into the room with a tray of coffee and noticed a certain sort of bounce to her step and movements. "You seem in a good mood, Teresa," Scott noted out loud. He was sitting on the sofa, leg across knee, rubbing his foot. "Are you happy to see us go or something?"

She threw him a scowl that didn't stick long. "Of course not, Scott. It's just that today was a good day for me, that's all. Johnny was pleasant all afternoon.

Murdoch raised his head at that remark. "He was?"

Teresa couldn't tell if it was surprise or suspicion that edged her guardian's tone. "Yes, he was. I'm not saying he's happy about the tutor arriving tomorrow - in fact, he's not - but he was nice to me. Has been for the past couple of days, actually. He even apologized for being sharp."

Scott continued to rub his foot, but looked skeptical. Knowing his brother, there had to be a reason for this turn around; he just wasn't up to figuring it out right at the moment. He also knew there probably wouldn't be time to figure it out before they left, either. This made him all the more edgy about Llewellyn's arrival. What was his little brother cooking up? He looked to his father and saw the same skeptical air to his expression.

"Why does that make me nervous?" Jelly finally said, verbalizing the men's concerns.

"Jelly!" Teresa scolded. "That's not fair!"

Jelly began to sputter an explanation to defend himself but Scott pulled on his boot and slowly stood. "Teresa, I have to agree with Jelly. This makes me nervous, too." He pulled the indignant young girl into a one armed hug, and kissed her on top of the head. "I'm going to miss your cooking on the trail, by the way. And now I'm going up to see if I can figure out what's up my conniving brother's sleeve. Then I'm going to bed."

He excused himself and headed up the stairs. Before knocking on Johnny's door he took a breath in an attempt to chase away some of the tiredness that had dogged him constantly for weeks now. Since Johnny's awakening, Scott had toyed with the idea of sleeping - or trying to sleep - in his own room but it still smelled of Alexandra, and pieces of her were still everywhere. As a result, sleeping there resulted in vivid dreams and not a lot of rest.

Scott lightly knocked on the door then opened it a bit. "Johnny?" he called before entering. Not getting an answer, he cracked the door and stuck his head in the room. What he saw shocked him speechless.

Johnny was standing next to the bed with crutches tucked snugly under his arms. His hair was a wild swirl as he swayed for balance, the heavy, thick cast sticking out in front of him at an awkward angle.

Not wanting to break Johnny's concentration, but at the same time angry enough to strangle his little brother, Scott managed to keep his voice low and level. "Just what the hell do you think you're trying to prove?"

The dark head tipped in his direction, the unfocused eyes cast toward the floor. The smile that shaped his lips was almost - sickening. "I'm gettin' outta this room. Now move outta my way." He swung the crutches forward a little and managed a hop on his good leg.

Scott fought the urge to grab Johnny's arm and drag him back to the bed. Instead, he planted himself in front of the door and crossed his arms. "You are, are you? And just where were you planning on going?"

"Downstairs." Johnny took another crutch step, followed by another hop with a wobbly landing. The furrows etching his forehead told of the concentration this was taking.

"Downstairs." Scott's voice was still amazingly flat. "The rest of us are going to bed soon."

"So?" Another step/hop, this time with a longer stride. "I can take care of myself. Been doin' it for years."

"I don't think this is a good idea. You aren't ready . . ."

"I ain't ever gonna be ready, brother. It's just gotta get done." The next step brought him up to Scott's body. "You gonna move?"

"Why?"

Johnny was already breathing a little hard. "Why what?" he demanded as he started to push his way around Scott's body.

"Why are you doing this, Johnny? Just tell me that, and maybe I'll help you."

"I don't need your help!" Johnny barked instantly. "Don't you see? You're gonna be gone, everybody's gonna be gone, and I'm gonna be here with some stranger. I can't be layin' in bed like some invalid when a total stranger's around the house! Now get outta my way!"

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Scott thought for a second, and then stepped quietly aside. Johnny was right; they were going to be gone. It was better he pulled this stupid stunt now while they were around to pick him up. "Here, let me get the door."

Johnny waited for the door to open all the way and then slowly worked his way into the hall. Unable to just let him go, Scott began to follow.

"I know you're hoverin' like a mother hen, Scott. I can hear ya breathin'." Johnny's words had a gasping edge as he continued to exert himself.

"Sam's going to have your head, you know," Scott warned.

Johnny snorted and continued down the hall, knocking a small table with the crutches. Scott saved the vase perched on top, and by the time he'd reset the doily and the vase, he turned to see his brother approaching the stairs.

"Whoa! Wait a minute, Johnny; the stairs are right in front of you!"

"I know that!" Johnny puffed. "They'd have to be if I'm goin' down 'em!"

It was clear to Scott that Johnny was tiring and because of that, becoming a bit unraveled. "Then let me help you," he said in a calmer tone.

"I don't need your help!"

"Yes, you do. You're just too stubborn to realize it." By the time Scott placed himself by his brother, a small crowd had gathered at the bottom of the stairs. Their mouths were agape at the sight of the younger Lancer at the head of the stairs, wobbling on crutches in his nightshirt.

"What in God's name are you doing?" Murdoch bellowed. Scott, holding Johnny's arm in a firm grip, felt his little brother startle at the noise.

"What's it look like I'm doing?" Johnny yelled back.

"Where did you get those crutches?"

Scott motioned with his other hand for his father, Jelly and Teresa to be quiet and turned his attention back to his brother. Johnny's muscles were quivering with fatigue, and he was perched dangerously on the top step. Any other distractions could end up in a disaster.

"Calm down, Johnny. Let's get this done. I'm tired, too."



With a sharp nod that made him sway enough for Scott to audibly catch his breath, Johnny started down the stairs. After the first step, Johnny realized how difficult it was to keep his balance without his sight and was glad Scott had a grip on him. About half way down, his good leg began to quiver. Scott held his arm firmly, reassuring him that he was doing fine, and again was glad for his brother's help. Johnny could feel the sweat beginning to trickle down the side of his face and he felt his body's tremor of overexertion. Too late now, gotta finish it, he thought. He began to feel a little nauseated.

"Almost there," his brother said calmly. "Two more steps."

If goin' down is so hard, how am I ever gonna get up again? Johnny thought miserably as his foot finally hit the floor. The admission was a very hard one to make and he began to wonder if he'd done the right thing after all. Too late now!

Johnny heard his family part in front of him while Scott gently guided him to the great room. Too tired now to resist the help, all Johnny could think about was getting to the couch. When he finally did, he gratefully sank onto it, letting the crutches drop to the floor next to him.

Scott finally released him. Johnny wanted to thank him, but was too tired to talk. A moment later, he both felt and heard Teresa's skirts as she threw a quilt over him. He sighed, exhausted, already giving in to sleep. As he dropped off, he felt hands readjusting the massive cast and heard murmured words he was sure weren't complimentary.



Murdoch stood next to the couch and gazed down at his sleeping son with a mixture of fury, sorrow and pride. How could one person be so stubborn? When Teresa took his arm, the guardian glanced at her with a weak smile.

"I think he'll stay put for the night. That took more out of him than he'll ever admit," Murdoch said softly. When he got no reply, he turned back to his ward and saw that she was on the verge of tears. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Teresa wiped away a tear threatening to fall. "I gave him the crutches."

He looked at her, slack jawed. "What? Why?"

"He asked for them. Like I said, he'd been so sweet lately. I wondered if he was up to something, but I didn't really care." She sniffed, and got control of her emotions. "He needs someone, Murdoch, and so do I."

With an amazing show of sympathy, the big man gently stroked her hand and nodded. "And I'm glad you've been there for him, Teresa. The rest of us certainly haven't. The next couple of weeks are going to be very hard for him and you're going to have your hands full. I wish I could stay . . ."

She smiled up at him. "I know, but we'll be all right. He can't go too far, too fast right now. I can catch him."

After a few moments of watching the sleeping man, Murdoch asked, "Has he said anything about the tutor? Any indication of how that's going to go?"

Teresa's face turned serious. "He's not happy with the idea, but he knows there's nothing he can do about it. I think that's what he hates the most - the feeling that everything is beyond his control. I think that's what this venture was all about. He had to prove something." She watched her brother-by-heart for a moment longer. "This Llewellyn better be able to stand up to Johnny or he isn't going to get far."

Murdoch chuckled lightly, and led her toward her room. "Ain't that the truth," he sighed.

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Johnny jerked abruptly awake and was instantaneously disoriented. In an effort to sit up, his cast leg slipped from the couch and he was, in essence, dragged to the floor with an undignified thump. Swearing softly and untangling himself from a quilt, he realized that he was not in his room but in the great room. Aching muscles helped to remind him how he got there.

Painfully maneuvering to a sitting position on the hard floor, he felt the texture of the floor's throw rug on his bare thigh, reminding him that he was still in his nightshirt. Softly cursing again, he wondered what time was as and paused to listen. The clock chimed half past the hour, not helping him in the least. There were no outside noises, or kitchen noises, and he was far enough from the window that he couldn't use heat to determine if the sun was up.

Suddenly, he missed the familiarity of his room. There, he could at least tell, generally, what time of day it was - morning from night, at least - due to the close-by window. Adjusting his nightshirt so he was sure he was covered, Johnny began to feel around for the crutches.

"You won't find them over there."

Scott's voice made him jump, his right hand automatically going to an empty thigh. "Damn it, Scott! Don't surprise me like that!" Johnny snapped, stopping his search with disgust. "Where are they, then? And what are you doing down here anyway?" Both furious and totally taken aback at being surprised, Johnny was beginning to feel like a sideshow act.

"I couldn't sleep. I knew you'd do something stupid as soon as you woke up. Guess I wanted to watch."

The comment didn't help Johnny's mood. "Very funny!" he snarled. "Guess everyone needs some entertainment, huh? Let's watch the blind man fall around like a fool; you gonna charge admission?" Johnny managed to pull himself onto the couch during the tirade, and, spent, fought to both catch his breath and control his emotions. After a moment, he demanded, "Hand 'em over. Or do I have to perform some more?" The bitterness cut the air cleanly, his point crystal clear.

There was a long pause of silence before Johnny heard a clank of wood. Then a chair squeaked. Four steps brought his brother to him. "I'm sorry, Johnny. That was incredibly cruel, and I apologize. Here."

Johnny turned his head slightly in Scott's direction, the hurt still raw. He reached out, and when his hand bumped the familiar wood, he snared them with contempt and struggled to a stand. His brother's helping hand was shrugged away. "What time is it?"

"A bit after five." Scott took a breath. "Look, Johnny, I'm really sorry. I don't want to leave on the drive with that between us."

Johnny, his back to his brother, hesitated. The swing of emotions he felt at that moment were so alien to him, he didn't know what to think. He did know that at the

base of things, he didn't want a schism between him and his brother, either. "Me neither," he whispered with a raw voice.

"How about I help you to your room to get cleaned up? Or are you going to eat with us dressed like that?" The forced lightness helped the air between them.

Before he could answer, a couple of other things occurred to the Johnny, the foremost being that he didn't want to eat in front of any of them - the idea embarrassed him. Eating was an ordeal he hadn't been able to master yet with any dignity, and he felt his face flush with the idea of sitting at the table with anyone.

The other thing he realized was that he wasn't about to change clothes here in the open. His room - which he was in such a hurry to leave yesterday - began to feel like the safest spot in the house; a place where he knew every intimate detail. A refuge. And he wanted to go back there immediately.

Things will be different once I can walk again, he hastily reasoned. Meanwhile, he acquiesced to his brother's request with a quick nod. "Fine. But I don't need no help."

"Of course you don't," Scott agreed quickly.

Johnny clumsily turned, and with the second step, caught the tip of one crutch in the edge of the rug and nearly fell. Scott's quick grab saved him. After setting his balance again, Johnny shook off the hand. "I can do it," he said as if he were trying to convince himself.

"I'm sure you will," Scott said with a short, resigned laugh.

It took longer than he thought it would, and when he reached his room he was a lot more tired than he expected to be or wanted to show. Knowing his brother was less than a step behind him the whole way both comforted and angered him. Johnny hated the polarization of his emotions - it made concentration impossible.

Finally, he sat on the edge of his bed panting, soaked with sweat, muscles trembling. He allowed Scott to take the crutches as he fell back on fresh linens. Unwilling to fight off the tiredness he knew would take him away from his conflicted thoughts, Johnny let his eyes slide shut to escape. He barely felt Scott lift his leg and cast to the mattress before he was asleep again.



Scott adjusted the curtains to stave off the morning light when it showed itself, and paused to watch his brother sleep for several minutes. "This will be for the best, brother," he said quietly. "We both have to believe that." Then he slipped from the room to clean up for breakfast and the arrival of the tutor.

Something inside told him to view this quiet time as a lull before the storm.

Scott joined Murdoch and Teresa at the breakfast table. He filled them in on the pre-dawn events, skimming over his embarrassing rudeness, and ending with an offer to take Johnny's breakfast up to him. Llewellyn was due to arrive early in the

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afternoon, and Scott wanted to be sure he and Johnny were all right before 'turning over' his brother to a stranger. A stranger that will help him, Scott reminded himself.

"We have some things to finish before our guest arrives," Murdoch said. "See me at my desk after you've taken Johnny's tray up."

Scott nodded. When he got to Johnny's room, his brother was still asleep. He left the tray, informed Teresa, and lost himself in chores for the drive.



It was nearly three in the afternoon before Jelly pulled up to the hacienda and hauled the team to a dusty stop. "Well, here we are," he said as he jumped down. "Let me help . . ."

"I've got it," Colin Llewellyn stated, carefully climbing from the buckboard seat. He paused when his feet hit the ground then straightened his coat sleeves. Once adjusted, he reached in and retrieved his valise and an intricately carved cane. "It feels good to stretch my legs," he said, settling the items in his hand. Then he cocked his head toward Jelly, who had circled around to the back and was in the process of removing a larger suitcase. "I'm not exactly in the proper dress for this part of the country, am I Mr. Hoskins?"

Jelly snorted. "Well, one does tend to get a tad dirtier here than in Boston," he stated.

"Welcome, Mr. Llewellyn," Murdoch greeted as he crossed under the arch from the courtyard with Teresa on his arm. "I hope your trip was uneventful."

The young man turned to the elder Lancer. "Yes, but I must admit, it is a long one. Colin Llewellyn, Mr. Lancer." He stuck his hand out and Murdoch shook it firmly.

"My ward Teresa O'Brien," Murdoch said after a moment, and the visitor shook her hand as well. "And my older son Scott should be here in a minute. You must forgive us if we seem rather hurried. We have a cattle drive coming up and . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Hoskins has told me all about it. Actually, that works out well for me. I've discovered the distraction of family sometimes is a hindrance to learning, especially in a home environment."

"I'll still be here," Teresa said, sounding somewhat put off. "As well as Maria, our housekeeper, who is like a mother to Johnny."

Llewellyn bowed shortly, "I apologize if I sounded trite," he said softly. "Of course family is always important, but in this matter I really should have the last word for now. I didn't mean to offend you."

Teresa's face reddened. "It's all right," she said. "We're just a little upset about all this."

"I understand."

Teresa studied the man in front of her, surprised by his youth. He wasn't a big man by any means, and when he shook her hand she noticed the softness of his hands.

It was obvious that he didn't work outdoors, but as he spoke she marveled at the way he carried himself and the confidence of his speech. She wondered how this man would hold up against Johnny Madrid.

"Mr. Llewellyn!" Scott brushed the dust from his hands as he hurried over from the barn. "I'm Scott Lancer." He puffed, a little bit out of breath, and stopped short next to the visitor, a surprised smile frozen on his face. After a second, as the newcomer turned to him, Scott offered his hand.

"Colin Llewellyn." Scott's eyes fell to the beautifully carved cane and noted the detailed metal dragon's head handle as Llewellyn switched it to his other hand to shake.

"That's a beautifully carved cane," Scott commented.

"Thank you. It was a gift from my wife," Llewellyn replied, stroking the smoky grey creature with obvious affection.

"You're married?" Teresa asked brightly.

"Yes. Sarah had to hold things down at the Institute, so I came out alone. I've always wanted to come west."

"Shall we step into the house?" Murdoch offered.

Llewellyn accepted Scott's offer to carry the valise. As the teacher trailed Murdoch and Teresa toward the house relying heavily on his cane, Scott hesitated, his mind racing. The blond skeptically evaluated the slight teacher and wondered if he was physically capable to deal with his volatile brother. Chewing his lower lip as he mulled that over, he took several long strides to catch up and they entered the house.

The newcomer paused inside the door, cocking his head. "What a grand home you have, sir." Scott stopped behind him and watched as Llewellyn drank in the room.

"Jelly, could you take those bags to Mr. Llewellyn's room? Would you care for something cool to drink, Mr. Llewellyn? Maria has made some lemonade."

Jelly, last in the door, took the valise from Scott, furtively glanced at the newcomer, and started down the hall.

"I would like to go to my room first, if you don't mind, Mr. Lancer. Then I would be pleased to join you." He began to follow Jelly, who was thumping his way down the hall. "I'll only be a moment. A cool drink sounds wonderful."

The three of them watched the young man move off, and then they all regarded each other wordlessly. After a moment, Murdoch moved to the great room and Scott followed.

"I'll help Maria with the drinks," Teresa said, a little flustered as she left.

A little while later, Llewellyn, moving easily even with the heavy cane, entered the great room behind Jelly. "I apologize for keeping Mr. Hoskins, but I was getting some information." He accepted a tall glass of lemonade from Maria with a nod of thanks and an easy smile. "I understand that my student has other injuries?"

Murdoch summarized Johnny's injuries and described the cast. Teresa let it slip about Johnny's ill humor and Llewellyn nodded knowingly. "That's not

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uncommon, Miss O'Brien. He's afraid, but probably won't ever say that. It is a scary prospect to deal with. I'm sure we'll have a fairly good working relationship by the time you get back from the drive. Then, I understand, one of you will be accompanying us to Boston?"

"That's the plan," Scott confirmed. "I'll be going back with you. Won't you have a seat so we can tell you some more?"

Llewellyn finished the lemonade and shook his head. "I was hoping to meet my charge, Mr. Lancer . . ."

"Just call me Scott. There are too many Mr. Lancers around here."

"Scott. Thank you; that will make it easier. You're Mr. Garrett's grandson?"

"Yes."

"Maybe we'll get a chance to talk a little more before you leave. I know you are very busy, so I don't want to keep you. Miss O'Brien? Perhaps you can show me Johnny's room?"

"Certainly," Teresa said, taking the offered elbow and walking him to the stairs.

As the two departed, Scott turned to Murdoch, two sets of question-filled eyes regarding each other. "Well. He's not what I expected at all," the younger said. Then he cleared his throat. "It's not too early for a Scotch, is it?"

Murdoch wordlessly retrieved the decanter.



"Here's his room," Teresa said, releasing Llewellyn's arm. "Um, he may not be too receptive when I introduce you."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather introduce myself. Thank you, Miss O'Brien." Llewellyn took a step to the door. "I'll be fine."

Teresa was taken aback. "Oh. Certainly. I guess I'll just go back downstairs, then."

"I'll be down shortly." He smiled, then turned his back on the stunned girl and opened the door to the lion's den.



Well aware that a wagon had arrived, Johnny, now dressed and ready to face the newcomer, sat in the armchair facing the door. Faint sounds of footsteps on the stairs and in the hall announced the arrival of someone – two people, actually. Johnny heard the door open and the sound of one person entering. The door closed again. Then he heard a voice he didn't recognize.

"My name is Colin Llewellyn, Mr. Lancer."

Johnny tilted his head in the newcomer's direction. "Where's Teresa? I heard her voice."

"She went back downstairs. Your hearing is good. That's a heavy door."

Johnny snorted.

"Have you noticed that your hearing has gotten better since your accident?"

"All I noticed is a whole lotta hurt, Mr. Llewellyn." The snideness of the remark was thick. "I suppose you have a lot more words of wisdom for me along those lines, don't ya?"

"You can live without your eyes. You just have to be man enough to try."

"You have no idea what I'm man enough to do," Johnny snapped. "Unless ol' Harlan filled you in on my sordid past."

"Mr. Garrett has told me nothing about you other than you may be difficult to work with. I understand you're an independent sort."

Johnny laughed sharply. "Nice way of sayin' stubborn. Ol' Harlan does have manners."

"You can still be independent when you know how, Mr. Lancer. I'm not going to lie and say things are going to be the same as before."

"What do you know about it, anyway?" Johnny spat bitterly.

"I know a lot about it. I wouldn't have graduated from the Institute if I didn't. The first thing we're going to cover is personal care - shaving and dressing to be exact. Your injured leg will make things difficult, but not impossible."

"I can shave myself just fine!"

"According to Mr. Hoskins, he has been shaving you, and not on a regular basis. When was the last time you washed your hair? A man should think about his family and what they see, Mr. Lancer."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Johnny yelled, rising anger making him struggle to his feet. "Get outta my room! I don't need you taking care of me!"

Llewellyn's level tone didn't change. "If I wanted to be a nurse, I would have gone to nursing school. Your family hired me to teach you to take care of yourself."

Johnny felt for his crutches leaning against the chair once he was upright. Zeroing in on the intruder's location as he spoke, Johnny managed to hobble his way in that direction and stopped when a crutch tip bumped what he figured was Llewellyn's foot. He set his face in his best Madrid expression and centered his eyes on where he estimated the Bostonian's face would be. Johnny leaned in and spoke in a menacingly low tone. "You've wasted your time comin' here. Get your money and get out."

Tension thickened the air. It was instantly dissipated when, to his total surprise, Johnny felt something metallic and hard push on his chest. In a fleeting second, he was falling backward, crutches flailing, and landed hard on the floor with a grunt. Quickly, he scrambled to a sitting position, swearing angrily.

The intruder's voice was nonplussed. "I'm staying. Get used to it."

Johnny heard footsteps turn and retreat to the door. Before he could regain any kind of composure, the door firmly closed, leaving him alone, furious and deeply frightened.

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Jelly and the rest of the Lancers were in the great room when Llewellyn carefully descended the stairs with his cane. All eyes were on the slight man as he joined them. He appeared to be in one piece and unruffled.

"What was that noise?" Murdoch queried. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Lancer. And I must say that Mr. Garrett rather underestimated your son's . . . spirit."

Scott snorted through a quick smile. Murdoch found he couldn't think of a response while Jelly and Teresa looked warily at each other.

"If you don't mind, I think I'll rest in my room for a while before dinner," their guest said. "The stage ride was rather tiring."

"Dinner is at six, Mr. Llewellyn," Teresa offered, finding her voice.

"I'll be eating upstairs with my charge, if you don't mind. Now if you'll excuse me." The young man turned and made his way easily toward his room, greeting a surprised Maria as she passed him in the hall.

Jelly glanced at the ceiling in the general area of Johnny's room. "Wonder what went on in there," he mused, brows knit together. "That was a loud thump after all that yellin'."

Scott tossed back the rest of his drink in one swallow, set the glass down and waved a hand in the direction of Llewellyn's retreat. "He sure does get around well for a blind man."

"He's amazing," Teresa said in awe. "I only hope Johnny lets him help."

"Well, I feel better about leaving tomorrow. It's obvious Mr. Llewellyn can handle himself, sighted or not," Murdoch said with satisfaction. "I guess I'll have to thank your grandfather after all."

Scott felt a bit of trepidation at that statement, remembering the disasters surrounding Harlan Garrett and other trips to Lancer. Although he couldn't pin anything on his grandfather for his last trip here - the one where Teresa was kidnapped and Johnny injured - something inside Scott couldn't shake the notion of some kind of complicity. He stared momentarily down the hall where Llewellyn disappeared. "You may want to wait on that, sir. Who knows what'll happen while we're gone."

CHAPTER SIX

Dinner that night gave the household a brief insight of what the following weeks would be like. Llewellyn insisted the family stop doing everything for Johnny. In fact, the blind teacher reiterated that everyone should stay away to give the Bostonian time to prove himself to his surly student. The meal in Johnny's room was unnervingly quiet, his tray of food barely touched hours later.

Everyone else had plenty to do in preparation for a dawn departure. After dinner, both Scott and Murdoch made a point of visiting Johnny to say their good byes knowing how hectic the predawn hours would be. Slumped in the arm chair, the dark-haired Lancer's responses were short and his expression unreadable. Neither father nor brother could pinpoint his mood but his whole demeanor was disturbing. The depression in the room was undeniable.

It was late when Murdoch and Scott finally stopped for a brief moment of quiet in the great room prior to going to bed where they knew they wouldn't sleep. Maria and Teresa were already in bed, knowing they would be up well before dawn to get the men off on the trail with full stomachs.

Scott plopped into one of the chairs with a sigh. "Still seems odd that Johnny's not going," he mused.

The big man rolled amber liquid in his glass, gazing at it like a crystal ball. "Yes," he said softly. "It does."

Quiet within each of their own thoughts for a few minutes, Scott finally broached the silence. "I wonder how mealtime went in his room," he said. "I understand why Colin went to bed so soon after. It must have been tiring for both of them."

Murdoch looked thoughtful. "You know, Llewellyn's rule about no one in the room except him didn't set well with me, but now I'm beginning to see his point. Do you think your brother can be forced into a working relationship?"

Scott laughed shortly. "He can't be forced into anything. I see him digging in like a mule and refusing to move."

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The elder shook his head as he swallowed a sip of Scotch. “No, your brother is way too active to use that tactic for very long. I do want to send a wire from Stockton when we do the turn around to see how things are going, but I’m sure he’ll survive.”

“It’s not Johnny I’m worried about,” Scott said with a yawn. “Well, I’m going to try and get some sleep. Good night.”

“Night, son. See you in a few hours.”

With a little wave, Scott went upstairs in search of elusive sleep.



Scott dragged himself from his bed figuring he’d gotten about two hours of sleep. When the grandfather clock struck for the fourth time, his feet were on the cool floor and moving to the washstand. In automatic motions he shaved, dressed and put the last of his things in his saddle bags. With a tired sigh, he threw the bags over his shoulder and turned to go, but the spark of a memory made him pause.

From out of nowhere he imagined the warm, velvety brush of lips along his jaw line. Scott, instantly paralyzed, shut his eyes while his fingers lightly traced the path. When the sensation dissipated, he slowly opened his eyes and surveyed the room with sadness. As he did so, the heavy drapes rippled with the hot night wind, and he was sure he heard Alexandra’s whispers.

Reining in his emotions, Scott turned his back and walked from the room.

Once in the hall he paused at Johnny’s door feeling like a raw, open wound. His hand was opening the door before he even thought about it. A motion in the darkness caught his attention – Johnny was sitting up in bed.

“You’re awake,” Scott said, relieved for the distraction from his ghostly encounter.

“Yeah,” Johnny said lowly. He managed to twist around and slide his feet to the floor. “Chair,” he said abruptly, indicating the straight back chair against the wall by his dresser.

Scott took a moment to light the lamp, realizing, oddly, he was the only one that would benefit from the weak, yellow light before sliding the chair back under Johnny’s hand. He noticed clothes stacked on the seat as his brother reached for them.

“You’re getting dressed?” Scott felt silly stating the obvious, but he didn’t want to say the first thing that had come to mind, which was ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’ He wanted to leave on a good note.

“Yup,” Johnny said, balancing precariously on his good leg while he started to remove the night shirt.

“Let me help you,” Scott said, putting his saddle bags down as he reached out.

“I can do it,” Johnny snapped, shrugging off the helping hand.

“Okay,” Scott said, biting back a sharp comeback. Instead, he stood back and watched Johnny struggle out of the sleeping garment and into the shirt. “We’ll wire

you from Stockton on the turn around,” he said. Johnny, fumbling with the small number of buttons, didn’t reply. “We don’t want to go, you know,” he ended softly.

“I’d be out of here in a heartbeat.” Bitterness filled Johnny’s words. Finished with the shirt, he started untangling the pants.

Scott watched from a short distance, glad for the meager lamp light so he couldn’t see his brother’s eyes. He knew there would be sorrow, anger and desperation all rolled up in one, unfocused gaze, and Scott didn’t want to carry the memory of that look on this trip. “I finally see a use for those buttons down the side,” he said conversationally.

With a pair of tiny hops, Johnny maneuvered to the chair and sat, where he began working his good leg into the pants.

Scott raised his eyebrows. “Skipping long johns today?” he asked lightly.

“Yup.” Johnny writhed around to pull the pants up over his hip, the left side unbuttoned from top to bottom.

“Good thing they’re lined, I suppose.” The idea of wearing that particular pair of pants like that in Boston crossed his mind and resulted in an amused smile. Johnny buttoned the top button on the left side, then after shoving to his feet, buttoned down a couple more, ensuring some modicum of decency. “Won’t the rest flap around?” Scott could see that his brother was puffing from the exertion.

“Gonna lace the rest with rawhide strips.”

“Good idea,” Scott nodded. “I’ll help you downstairs and get it for you.”

“Teresa can get it,” Johnny said shortly. “You need to go.”

“Then let me help you downstairs . . .”

“Just go,” Johnny cut in, sounding more tired than angry.

“Johnny,” Scott started, exasperated. “I need to know you’re all right before we leave.”

“Ain’t that what that teacher’s for?” his brother snapped. “Just go, Scott. I’ll survive.”

The comment stung, but Scott took a mental step back and regrouped. This is what he’d asked for – a lightening of the duties. Later, he thought. We’ll work this out later. Without another word, he picked up his saddle bags and left his brother behind.



Murdoch entered the hall just in time to see the blond head of his son disappear down the stairs. He started to follow but noticed that his younger son’s door was ajar, so instead, he stuck his head in. The lamp light surprised him, but not as much as the sight of Johnny, dressed, sitting in a chair and struggling to get his crutches from the floor.

Without a word, Murdoch entered and picked up the items, holding them out to Johnny’s searching hands. The word ‘thanks’ was barely heard. Ignoring the

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attempt to shrug off his helping hand, the big man assisted his son to his feet and let the boy adjust the crutches.

"I'm glad to see you up, Johnny," Murdoch said softly. In reality, he wanted to tell the hard-headed young man that there was no reason to go through so much effort, but his heart guessed that Johnny needed to do this. "Let's get downstairs, then."

Johnny's head was bowed down from the moment Murdoch had entered the room, and he held the pose for the entire trip to the stairs.

"I'll go first and be right in front of you," Murdoch told his son.

Johnny hesitated at the top step and then Llewellyn's voice carried from the bottom of the staircase. "There are 12 steps. Feel for the edge of the step with the left crutch and put your weight on the right."

"I can do it!" Johnny snapped. Murdoch couldn't help but notice a line of sweat beginning to gather on his son's temple.

"I didn't say you couldn't," Llewellyn said calmly.

"Come on son, I'm right here," Murdoch urged in an effort to defuse the hostility. Johnny started down the stairs – using Llewellyn's method – and made it to the bottom on pure determination, Murdoch surmised. The big man paused at Llewellyn's side, but Johnny brushed by and headed to the front door. Managing to stop a direct order to come back, Murdoch, instead, asked, "Where are you going?"

"It's hot. I'm sittin' outside." Johnny started to grapple with the door knob, but the door opened on its own. Johnny staggered back a few steps, and Murdoch felt his heart jump into his throat.

"Oh!" Jelly said as he stepped in, "Johnny! I'm sorry, I didn't know you were. . ."

"Watch it, will ya? Get outta my way." Johnny, panting heavily, managed to recover his balance and skirt around the sputtering handyman.

Jelly watched the young man's back disappear with an astonished expression. "Well, I never!" he sputtered. "Just excuse me for livin'!" he stormed into the kitchen and Murdoch sighed.

"He'll be fine with me, sir. I can tell you not to worry, but I don't think that will help." Llewellyn leaned on the heavy cane with both hands atop the metallic dragon's head.

Murdoch gripped the man's shoulder with one hand for a second. "I don't know which of us has the most work ahead. All I can say is good luck and keep the guns locked up." He dropped his hand and gave the front door a final glance. "I need to eat. Are you coming?"

"I'll be along."

Murdoch strode to the kitchen, but hesitated in the doorway. Turning, he saw the enigmatic tutor make his way to the open front door, stand in the frame for a moment as if listening to something outside, and then back into the house and shut the door.

Wondering what this house would be like for the next weeks, Murdoch sadly shook his head and continued to the breakfast table.



Pots clanged and pans banged as the whirlwind that was Maria and Teresa worked in a well-rehearsed dance to get their men off on the trail. Knowing about the quiet weeks that would follow, the women relished the activity for the time being and made sure the sendoff was both substantial and fondly remembered. There would be plenty of time to clean up after the men departed.

When the last hand mumbled his thanks and disappeared into the receding darkness, the two women finally paused. They had served from tables in the courtyard just outside the kitchen door. Teresa stood with her hands on her hips and surveyed the area around her with a sigh. Then, she glanced over the wall and noticed that in the growing dawn she could see the assembly of man and beast preparing to leave. She also noticed a dark form within the still shadowed arch of the wall. With a small smile, she wiped her hands and walked to Llewellyn. He turned an ear at her approach.

“This is quite an undertaking,” he commented lightly.

“Yes,” Teresa agreed. “It is pretty hectic. After a few days I miss it, though.” She stopped at his side and watched groups of hands move off under the Lancer arch. Then she glanced around the inner courtyard. “I guess I’d better find Johnny,” she said quietly. “He hasn’t eaten.”

“He’s on a bench by the front door,” Llewellyn said.

“I’m surprised he’s not in the barn trying to sneak out on his horse.” After saying that, Teresa ducked her head and her voice dropped. “Actually, I wish he’d try it. Then I’d know he was still Johnny.” A sympathetic hand on her forearm surprised her, and she looked up to see a hint of a smile on the slight man.

“He’ll get there,” Llewellyn assured her. “I don’t think he can be anything else.”

“I hope you’re right. I miss him.” Teresa reached behind to untie her apron. “I’ll stay with him until they leave.” She threw the material over her arm and left to find Johnny.

He was right where Llewellyn said he’d be, the unwieldy cast projecting forward from the bench and bright in the breaking dawn. The crutches were across his lap, blocking anyone from sitting next to him. Dark hair fell forward over a forehead creased with concentration, his head bowed as he listened with obvious intent to the preparations on the other side of the wall. Teresa thought he looked incredibly lonely.

Johnny’s head tilted slightly with her approach. “I, um, I’ll fix you a plate, if you want,” she hesitatingly asked, arms crossed in front of her. What she wanted to do was sit next to him to show support, but his body language screamed ‘stay away’.

“Not hungry,” he snapped.

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Anger flared momentarily at the rudeness, but Teresa clamped her mouth shut against it. Instead, she turned her back on him and watched the hands depart. They were down to the last group, which included Scott and Murdoch. Both men were walking under the arch toward them. Scott altered his stride to allow Llewellyn to follow.

“Well, that’s it,” Murdoch announced as he gave his ward a hug. “We’re off.” Teresa hugged him back. “Be careful, Murdoch.”

Scott took his hug and kissed her on top of the head. “We’ll see you in about two weeks.” He kept an arm around Teresa’s shoulders as he faced his brother. “Good bye, Johnny.”

Johnny seemed to be staring at the ground under his feet the entire time, his body rocking slightly with some kind of unspent energy. Something akin to anger emanated from him in waves, keeping his brother away. When he didn’t get a response, Scott turned away.

“Colin, good luck,” he said, shaking the teacher’s hand. Colin nodded in response, and Scott strode off.

Then it was Murdoch’s turn. Turning to the girl, he took both of her hands and kissed her cheek, smiling wanly. “See you soon, honey.” Then he released her hands and turned to his son. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. A look of sadness crossed the big man’s face as he closed his mouth and dropped his head for a moment. Teresa pressed her lips together and felt her eyes sting. Then, quietly, her guardian said, “Good bye, son,” and turned on his heel, leaving without a backward glance.

Teresa quickly wiped her eyes then turned to Johnny to say something, but instead, jumped back in surprise when he hefted a crutch and wound back to throw it after his departing father. The girl had just enough time to drag Llewellyn out of the way before the crutch arced through the air and clattered to the dusty ground. Neither Murdoch nor Scott acknowledged the action.

She started to go to his side when Colin’s surprisingly strong grip held her back. “Let’s go inside,” he said quietly as he pulled her toward the hacienda.

She dragged back a little, but when she looked at the forlorn figure of Johnny on the bench, she began to see that Llewellyn’s suggestion may be the right thing to do. The dark haired young man was in no mood to be coddled.

Maria, who had said her goodbyes outside the kitchen door, met Teresa just inside the front door where the girl directed the small woman to the den. From there, through the enormous picture window, they watched their men depart and eventually disappear over the most distant ridge.



Johnny sat on the bench long after the men left struggling with his thoughts. It wasn’t easy listening to the departure. For the first time in a very long time,

resentment had sneaked into his mind. A lot of bad things had happened in his lifetime and he'd learned early on that harboring resentment was a waste of time - it couldn't be fixed and fueled emotion-filled action that wasn't very wise most times. 'Why me?' was a useless term he'd banned from his dialogue long ago. Things in the past needed to stay there. Sounds familiar, he thought snidely to himself. Then he wondered if anyone in his family carried guilt for his blindness.

Did he regret his actions that got him here? That question was answered with a quick, unchallenged 'No'. Regret was another sentiment that wasn't in the Madrid repertoire. Tired of this mental anguish, he turned his senses outward.

The ranch was too quiet. It had been nearly an hour since everyone had left on the drive and Johnny felt an odd sort of restlessness born from feelings of abandonment and uselessness.

"*Estupido!*" he growled to himself, stopping the tingle of fear that touched his gut. A flash of his mother's desertion and similar emotions he thought were long forgotten crossed his mind, pushing him into action.

Johnny grabbed his crutch and wobbled to his feet. He knew Colin, Maria and Teresa had eaten in the kitchen and were now in the process of cleaning up. He carefully moved in the direction of where he thought his crutch hit the earth and with barely controlled anger, began to feel for the errant device. He felt the sunrise on his cheek and was shortly thereafter greeted with a rush of warm air - a Santa Ana wind, which always gave him a feeling of foreboding. Combined with the restlessness, Johnny's search almost became frantic before he finally reunited with the crutch. It took quite a bit of concentration, but the piece of wood was finally retrieved and again in place. Sweating and puffing slightly, he took a moment to catch his breath. The unfastened pant leg flapped against the cast with the irregular breeze, which dried his damp skin with prickly efficiency.

Heavy with the scents of dry grass and dusty earth, the air was dry and irritating and made Johnny feel edgy and trapped. Using the map in his head and the tips of his crutches as feelers, Johnny was able to escape from the courtyard to the openness of the barn yard.

Just outside the courtyard wall he paused, using sounds to tell him who - or what - was watching. Chickens, a screeching hawk somewhere above and the nearly silent skitter of lizard feet gave him a good picture, but it was the welcome rumble of a horse's greeting that finally made his anger crumble and break a grin.

"Ah, Barranca, *mi compadre*," he murmured. Johnny made his way to the corral gate, pant leg flapping, and fumbled it open. It was awkward, but he managed to maneuver through and close it again. As he arranged his crutches and caught his wind, he heard approaching hooves. He stood still, and soon, warm breath and a soft nose found his cheek.

Angry at the tears he felt suddenly fill his eyes, Johnny raised a hand and laid it gently on Barranca's flat cheek. "Hey, there," he said lowly. Forehead to forehead,

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Johnny ran his hand from the horse's wide cheek down the silky neck under the flowing mane, and back up to scratch behind a twitching ear. Barranca's muzzle drifted down his master's neck before the horse settled his forehead against Johnny's chest, happy to drink in the voice and attention.

Johnny sniffed the horse's scent. "Smells like breakfast. Timothy hay? And it sounds like you got some company out here," Johnny noted, hearing milling of feet at the other end of the corral. Then he recalled that there were several horses here he was supposed to have broken for the drive's remuda; a flash of shame washed over him. "I ain't much use out here, am I?" he whispered. He gently pushed the palomino back and adjusted the crutches. Suddenly, the heavy cast seemed like an intruder between them. "All I can do is check your water like some little kid," he said bitterly.

Circumventing a curious muzzle, Johnny got around Barranca and headed to the trough on the other side of the barn. He heard the plod of following hooves. The morning's heat and the dry wind caused a hot flush to his skin. He was disturbed by how unsettled he felt.

Bumping into the trough with his cast, Johnny sidled up to it and managed to keep his balance as he leaned over to feel the water level. "Could be higher," he mumbled, moving awkwardly to the pump. Setting the crutches aside, he grabbed the pump handle and began moving water.

The physical labor was an outlet for his frustration and he pumped heartily, even when he felt his arms tremble with fatigue and his body dripping with sweat. The whole time his faithful horse stood close; Johnny could feel the palomino's breath on his lower back.

Finally worn out, he stopped. Johnny could hear the water overflowing the edges of the trough and didn't care. It wasn't until he'd controlled his labored breathing that he realized how silly this must look. With a disgusted snort, he hopped to the side of the trough and balanced on his good foot while he splashed the cool water on his face. It felt good.

Then an urge from out of nowhere struck him that that he simply couldn't ignore.



"Where'd Johnny go?" Teresa asked, poised in the doorway to the outside. Colin stopped beside her.

"I didn't hear him go upstairs," he said.

"Johnny?" the girl called. Getting no answer, she pulled back into the house and shut the front door. "I'll check his room."

Colin nodded and stood for a moment in the hall. There were no noises to suggest that Johnny had come inside. He opened the heavy door again and edged just outside where he stopped, listening. Other than the natural voice of the ranch, he heard nothing.

Employing the cane, Colin tapped his way across the courtyard, tilting his head one way and another for any clues. He heard Teresa's voice in various parts of the house, and then heard her rush outside to join him.

"He's not inside," she said worriedly.

"He can't have gone far," Colin assured her. "He's still pretty weak. Look around."

After a moment, he felt her hand on his forearm. "I think he's visiting his horse and he shouldn't be out there. All the other horses are at the other end of the corral eating hay except for Barranca. I can see his rump from behind the barn. I'll go check."

Colin heard her feet retreating, then, eventually, a gate unlatch. Both Scott and Jelly had mentioned his fondness for the horse and had warned him about how Johnny would probably get outside, somehow, to see him. That warning had amused him. There was a soft spot in Johnny Lancer after all.

"Johnny?" he heard her call from a distance. "Are you out here?" Then, abruptly, her tone changed to one of alarm. "What are you doing?"

Moving quickly, Colin found his way to the gate, hearing a hot exchange of words the whole way.

"Go away, Teresa!"

"Johnny Lancer, get out of there! What were you thinking?"

"Leave me alone!"

After fumbling with the gate latch, it was easy to follow the voices, but running feet came to meet him.

"He's taken off the cast," Teresa almost sobbed. "He soaked it in the trough with all his clothes on!"

Colin found one of her hands and gripped it to calm her. "I'll take care of him. Can you get the doctor?"

"I'll send Manuel. He's in the hay field."

"Do that. And make sure the gate is latched. I'm not very good at rounding up horses."

The light humor helped and Teresa choked out a small laugh, followed by a sniff. "Okay. I'll be right back." With a swish of skirt and a click of latch, Colin was on his own to deal with the disturbed and angry young man.

He took a bracing breath, knowing exactly what Johnny was feeling. He even understood the drastic action, but would Johnny believe him or even care? Using the sound of splashing water to guide him, Colin rounded the corner of the barn and stopped to listen.

"I know you're there, Llewellyn," Johnny growled.

"Teresa was a little upset. She went to get the doctor," Colin calmly replied. "Isn't that water on the cold side?"

"Did the job," Johnny said flatly.

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By the sound of grinding dirt and dripping water, Colin deduced Johnny was outside the trough. Then he also heard Johnny hop once and curse lowly.

"Problem?" Colin started forward, finding his way around the far side of the trough. He felt squishy clumps of what must have been the remains of the cast, surrounded by mud, at the tip of his cane.

"Crutches," Johnny grumbled. Colin could hear the shakiness of the young man's breath and knew that Johnny was either chilled, which he doubted in this heat, or about to collapse from exhaustion.

"I'll get them," Colin offered. "You hang on to the trough." The image of an angry, tired, dripping man came to his mind. He carefully circumvented the plaster mounds and used his cane to locate the crutches.

As he did so, Colin could hear Johnny speaking lowly in Spanish. A fluttery horse sneeze told him who the young man was speaking to. "Well, at least you had company." Colin located the items piled together and picked them up. Johnny went silent and didn't answer. The teacher found his way to Johnny's side and managed to avoid bumping into the horse. Colin could feel the warm breath from twin nostrils on his hand as he offered the crutches. Johnny took them wordlessly. The teacher offered an open palm and Barranca's nose lightly brushed his palm. A soft, warm tongue licked away the saltiness of dried sweat. "He seems like a nice horse."

"He is," Johnny said quietly, sounding exhausted. Colin could hear him setting the crutches and fumbling awkwardly.

"What kind of horse is he? I mean, what color?"

"He's a palomino," Johnny said with growing irritation. "Ain't you ever seen a palomino before?"

"Yes, I've seen many. I just can't see this one." Colin's fingers traced Barranca's cheek and ears. The horse rubbed his forehead against the man's shoulder in response. Johnny had fallen quiet again, both physically and verbally. Colin continued his examination of Johnny's friend with his fingers. "I bet he's beautiful. His coat feels healthy and smooth. What's his name?"

There was a long pause before Johnny answered. When he did, his voice was void of any anger. "Barranca," he said softly. "Are you . . . you can't see?"

Colin's hand paused in its inspection. "No, I can't," he said slowly. "I've been blind for almost fifteen years. You didn't know that?"

"No . . . I . . ." Johnny stuttered to a stop, the enormity of the information hitting him like a lightning strike. A chill raced through him. He knew that instantly things had just shifted and changed, and he wasn't alone in this dark, foreign existence after all. He also felt like a fool. "No one told me," he whispered.

"And you didn't ask."

"No." Barranca turned from Colin and sidled up to Johnny, who absently began stroking the long, muscled neck. Then possibilities began to come to him. "You came out here by yourself?"

"Yes. Like I said before, you can live with being blind. It takes some time, but it can be done."

Johnny continued to pet the horse, his tired mind racing. The hot southeast wind had mostly dried his clothes to stiffness already and he shifted his weight from his trembling right leg to his left. His left knee, however, instantly buckled and his thigh burned with an inner fire. A sudden jerk to steady his balance caused the horse to back off quickly. Johnny hissed in pain and grappled with the crutches.

Colin's steadying hands were on him in a heartbeat and Johnny didn't pull away. He panted, wearily appreciative of the help as he sank to the edge of the trough. "I just need a minute," he mumbled. "I think I kinda over did things a might."

The teacher chuckled. "I'd say so. Let me know when you're ready." He waited a few beats. "I imagine you've left quite a mess out here."

"Yeah, I bet I did." After a quiet collection of minutes where Johnny both caught his breath and organized his jumbled thoughts, he said, "I can make it now." He pushed off the trough and balanced on his crutches.

The trip back to the hacienda seemed longer than the trip out. Johnny's mind – numb with this new information – tried to figure out what the presence of this newcomer meant. It's for the best, Scott had said, and, reluctantly, Johnny considered the words.

Not one to give his trust easily, he felt an inner struggle beginning between the ever defensive Madrid and the now dependent Lancer; or was that assessment wrong? Could he be independent again? Living proof was right there in front of him and couldn't be denied.

Johnny had never been afraid of change- skeptical, perhaps- but never afraid. He simply had to be convinced the change was a good thing. This time, it seemed he didn't really have a choice in accepting the change, and Johnny grudgingly admitted that may be the reason for his anger – he had to admit to himself that he wasn't much for being forced into things. Perhaps he'd give Llewellyn a chance after all. The man had earned at least that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It took a few days for Teresa to stop walking like the hacienda floor was lined with eggs. At Colin's request, she steered clear of the pair, allowing Johnny the freedom to move around the house and not feel like he was under constant scrutiny. Murdoch's words about Johnny being embarrassed rang true now that she had a clearer idea of how much her brother-by-heart's world had changed. She was thrilled to see that Johnny was actually giving Colin a chance.

Maria had been a little more work to convince. Her attachment to Johnny was difficult to deny, but she managed to keep herself in the kitchen and out of the way. It took a while for the protective woman to accept Llewellyn's 'hands off' approach and trust the Bostonian's efforts for her son-figure. With the small work load in the hacienda, she eventually turned her attention to the hay crew's welfare and her visits to the hacienda reduced in number with her focus being company for Teresa and putting together some of the spicy foods she knew Johnny preferred.

As Teresa began to prepare lunch, she thought back on Dr. Jenkins' visit after the 'trough incident' as she thought of it. The old physician had been angry on his arrival, but Teresa saw how his attitude changed when she described the hours that followed Johnny's removal of the cast. Strangely subdued and oddly silent, Johnny not only allowed Colin's company, he actually seemed both curious and interested in listening to the man. A relieved smile had softened the doctor's face and he had patted Teresa's arm in obvious approval. "I won't be staying long, then," he said. "I'm not about to put a damper on this little bit of progress."

And he didn't. There was a token scolding and a few grunts of disapproval, but the doctor had kept his word and left quickly. Johnny promised to use the crutches and stay off the leg, and so far, had kept his word. Teresa thought again how, months ago, a cooperative Johnny usually meant he had something up his sleeve. Now, however, he seemed focused on learning and had no time for his usual rebellions. True, he was still a bit sullen and grumpy, but the deep anger that had been with him for so long, coupled with the depression, seemed to be gone.

As she spiced the evening's stew, her thoughts turned to Colin. He was amazing to the young girl. Poised and confident, he made it easy to see what Johnny

could be. The dire future she had foreseen, the same one she was sure Murdoch and Scott still saw, seemed like a foolish prediction now. The two men would be completely surprised on their return. They all had some adjustments to make, but everything was going to be fine; she just knew it. Her family would finally be intact.

Setting the table for the two men, Teresa looked forward to the day she would be invited to join them.



Eight days from their departure a rider brought Teresa a telegram. Murdoch wrote that the drive was over and everyone would be home within the week. When she told Johnny, he felt a certain amount of reluctance about their return. Old fears about wondering if he would ever really fit in here again hung in the back of his mind. Right now, it was as good as he could ever hope, but the house was practically empty and no real demands on earning his share of the ranch had been laid on him. Not that it ever would, but the ex-gunfighter couldn't yet picture what the future would bring. Johnny still wasn't comfortable with the idea of a full house; this semi-solitary existence was easier and strangely comforting.

What added to his reluctance to deal with people was the fact that Johnny still felt constantly off kilter and he hated it. Skills he had acquired to survive as a young man depended entirely on his ability to read people in one glance. Now, the major tool he used for survival all his life was missing. Getting used to working around that loss was frustratingly difficult, and what made it worse was how easy Llewellyn made it seem. Could he ever get there? Would the solitary Madrid nature ever be vanquished so he could ask for help when he needed it?

After the revelation of Llewellyn's blindness Johnny felt a growing curiosity about what made the teacher tick. How did he learn to get along so well - was the knowledge offered on a silver platter, or did he learn by trial and error? Did that really matter? Was Llewellyn simply the adventurous kind who didn't allow blindness to stop him, or was the lure of money what got him to come? Try as he might, Johnny couldn't quite peg him in either category. Johnny, always unwilling to talk about his past, was reluctant to dig and feel obligated to reciprocate.

Some inner instinct compelled Johnny to trust Llewellyn, but he was fighting it. Was it pride? And then it occurred to him that maybe he felt unbalanced because he couldn't confirm this instinctual feeling toward this man because he couldn't read the man's eyes. With that once vital tool that built Madrid now gone, it was time for Lancer to find another way to hone his survival skills - and he admitted to himself that it would take time.

Sitting in the great room, Llewellyn's voice wore at the edge of Johnny's awareness as he mulled over his own thoughts. Johnny had spent the week learning practical things like how to eat, shave and arrange his clothes and room, as well as how to move around. He was amazed that there were techniques for all of these

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things. He was learning a new way to live, just like he'd done so many years ago under the tutelage of Reveles to become a gunfighter.

His leg was free of swelling and redness but still complained with weight. With Dr. Jenkins blessing today, Johnny put aside the crutches for one of Murdoch's heavy canes Teresa had rounded up. Recalling with a chuckle how Llewellyn had used his own cane the first time they met again reminded him of his time with Reveles.

This past week had also been full of information on how such an object could be used as a weapon. Johnny had to admit, Llewellyn was a realist. The man knew full well that being blind meant being a target and the small measure of protection a cane could provide put Johnny a little more at ease. The ever present feelings of helplessness could now be fought.

Currently, the Bostonian was telling the history of something called Braille symbols. Johnny's musings were abruptly cut off when Llewellyn put a heavy book in his lap. Extolling the attributes of reading little bumps, a noise beyond the teacher's chatter caught Johnny's wandering attention - there was a rider coming in.

Within seconds, rapid footfall and the crisp rustle of Teresa's skirt entering the room made every nerve in Johnny's body suddenly scream into alertness. He rose to his feet, and the Braille book fell to the floor with a thump. Llewellyn fell silent at the sound. Leaning on his cane to steady his aching leg, Johnny's right hand automatically fell to the empty spot on his right thigh. Instead, he gripped the cane more tightly with his left.

"Johnny!" Teresa spoke in a breathy voice and Johnny canted his head in her direction. "There are some riders on the ridge. One came into the yard." Fear clearly edged her voice.

The fact that Maria and Ramon, the hand left behind to work the barn, had departed for town no less than two hours ago was not lost on the ex-gunfighter; they were being watched. "Teresa, get my gun belt," he said. The girl hustled off immediately.

"MADRID!" The voice that called from outside was gruff and sharp. "Come out and face me, Madrid!"

"What's going on?" Llewellyn asked, puzzled. "What does that man want?"

After a pair of heartbeats, the Madrid in Johnny was in full force. "Me," he stated.

Before Llewellyn could respond, Teresa rushed to the room and Johnny's well-worn rig was pressed into his hands. Leaning against the armchair, he put the cane aside. With a soft thank you, he took it from her and began to buckle it on. The familiar, but long unused, motions came easily.

Llewellyn cocked his head at the noise. "Gun belt? What are you doing?" he asked, astounded. "You can't . . ."

"Johnny," Teresa interrupted, her voice shaky. "I count five on the ridge."

"What's the one in the yard look like?" Johnny lashed down the holster, ignoring the protests in his thigh, and felt for his cane.

The young girl's skirts rustled to another part of the room. Johnny could hear the curtains crinkle as she drew them back with a hand. "He . . . he's a little older than you, red hair. He's wearing his gun like you do." They both knew the implications of that fact.

"Can you see his fingers?" Johnny asked. "Is he missing a couple on his left hand?"

After a moment she replied, her voice edged in panic. "Yes. He's wearing a black glove on that hand but the fingers are cut out like he's showing it off or something. Johnny . . ."

"Teresa, honey, come over here and listen to me. Quick, now."

"What is going on?" Llewellyn demanded, keeping his voice low and moving closer himself.

"Quiet, Llewellyn, and listen." Johnny felt Teresa's warmth as she came to him. He reached out, found her shoulder with one hand and positioned himself to face her. Under his touch, her frame trembled. Johnny rested the cane on his hip, and then raised both of his hands to gently cradle her chin. He could feel her racing pulse with the tips of his fingers just under her soft skin. "Teresa," he said as calmly as possible, "this is what I want you to do. . ."

Johnny spoke quietly and quickly. Teresa raised an objection with a voice on the edge of tears, but Johnny's tone stayed low, calm and in control. When he was done, she went scrambling with a surprised Llewellyn in tow. Johnny checked the gun once more, the click of the cylinder seating loud to his ears. When the sound of footsteps going up the stairs faded away, Johnny found his cane and turned to the front doors.



Dexter Elsom was about to dismount and check the hacienda himself when he heard the great wooden door creak open. Elsom had kicked his right foot free of his stirrup to swing it over his mount's rump, but when he saw the familiar form step from the shadows onto the sunny porch, he hesitated. Slowly, he settled back into the saddle and sized up what he saw.

"Johnny Madrid!" he said, sweeping the smaller man with a critical eye. "Heard you were laid up."

"Dex," Johnny said in a lazy drawl. He leaned a little on the cane and pulled the brim of his hat down to cast a shadow over his eyes. "Heard wrong. Don't think I appreciate you an' yours droppin' in uninvited."

Elsom frowned. He'd been under the impression that Johnny Madrid was practically an invalid, blind and lame. The inspection he was getting from the hooded

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eyes told another story. Elsom, however, also knew the ability of Madrid to mask his weaknesses. He'd seen it himself years ago.

"Well, that ain't too friendly of ya." The redhead's tone lost its lightness and he sought Madrid's eyes in the shadow of the hat.

"Don't mean to be friendly with the likes of you. Get off my land, Elsom." Johnny stepped out from the doorway, casually crossing the courtyard with his right hand conspicuously on his gun. He walked easily, even with the assistance of the cane.

Elsom eyes flicked constantly between the cane, the weapon and the shadowed eyes. Johnny crossed under the arch of the courtyard wall and into the open yard.

"You tellin' me ta go?" Elsom snarled, finally deciding to fix his stare on the darkness below the hat brim.

"Only if you wanna live." The chill in Johnny's tone gave Elsom a shiver and he mentally cursed himself a fool. "Or do you have other plans, Dex?" The easy smile that finished the sentence was far from cordial. Madrid's thumb casually flicked off the leather thong that secured the gun in the holster.

"L. . . livins' always my plan, Madrid." Elsom could not look like a fool to his observing gang - he was in this to the end now. Carefully, he swung down from his horse and kept watch on his nemesis. By the tilt of Madrid's head, Elsom knew those mestizo blue eyes followed him from deep within the shadow of his hat.

"You brought the fight to my home, Elsom. I don't appreciate that one bit." Still speaking with that same infuriatingly calm drawl, Johnny moved easily to the front of Elsom's horse and placed himself at gun fighting distance. "You wanna dance? That the idea?" The dark haired pistolero side stepped twice to get Elsom's horse out of his bullet's path.

Elsom tightly worked his jaw as he stepped away from his horse to stand across from his foe. His mind worked furiously; was this all a bluff? The loosely grouped men on the ridge were watching from afar for the story of Madrid's infirmed state to be confirmed, and for their leader to kill the infamous gunman as he bragged he would. Elsom knew they were mostly cowards, and wondered why he put himself in this position to begin with.

Then again, with a quick glance at the hacienda, he knew why. This place was gold.

Somewhat fortified with the thought of wealth, Elsom set himself up facing Madrid. It had to be a bluff. Then something he'd seen clicked in his mind, causing his eyes to return to the great house. He damned his eyes as he felt them involuntarily widen at what he saw - Madrid's cane was casually leaning against the hacienda outer wall. The redhead hadn't seen any trace of a limp when the half-breed had moved into position.

Did I just commit myself to suicide? Slowly, he again faced the dark gunfighter.

"Well?" Madrid still appeared cool and collected as he waited for Dexter to make his choice, his left thumb hooked on his belt while his right palm rested casually against his gun butt. Madrid's index finger lightly tapped the leather holster in expectation.

Elsom wiggled his fingers and tried to focus as doubts crossed his mind. Many hot seconds ticked by. Then he made his decision.

The gunshots were tightly grouped, and the last thing Elsom saw was the clear blue California sky growing forever black.



Burnt gunpowder stung his nose. Johnny was sure Elsom was down - the sound of him dropping was unmistakable - but being dead was another matter. He tiredly dropped his arm, listening hard for and signs of life. Sweat had coursed down Johnny's back and gathered at his waist, soaking his shirt. He fought the urge to pick at the wet material. Instead he averted his eyes for a moment to where he figured Elsom lay. Then, he raised his eyes as if questioning the intent of the men he knew were out there. Johnny cursed the grey fog that veiled his sight, but stood fast until he was sure Elsom wasn't moving again.

Taking a chance that the men had gone, Johnny dropped his head and listened hard around the pounding of his heart in his ears. He desperately wanted to return to the hacienda. With the distraction of an aching thigh, his resolve proved difficult to hold as he slowly tried to retrace his steps back. When he felt reflected heat, he was able to tell when he was close to the outer wall. When the time lapse of his footsteps' echo dropped to nothing, he slowed to a near shuffle. Eventually, he brushed the adobe and stumbled slightly; pain spiked in his thigh. Fighting to appear nonchalant, he straightened and continued on, sensitive to the slight wind that would come through the arch in the wall. He was drenched in nervous sweat and exhausted when he found it. Johnny passed under the arch with blind caution.

Not knowing what eyes were upon him, Johnny still tried to appear confident of his direction. Finally, he made it to the hacienda wall and leaned against it to gather his wits. Johnny dared not feel for his cane in case the gang was still out there. Instead, he raised his hand and fingered the cylinder of his Colt as if inspecting it for dirt.

When he heard footsteps clatter from the front door, he was able to push aside his pain and focus on his anger.

"Johnny!" Teresa cried, taking his elbow. "They're gone. Are you all right?"

He shook off her hand and turned awkwardly in her direction, tilting sideways against a stab of pain and physical exhaustion. "What were you thinking, Teresa?" he yelled, the tension of the past minutes exploding in his words. "You could have been killed, or worse!"

"Johnny, I . . ." the young girl began.

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"I told you to hide in the attic! You would have been safe there! They would have ransacked the place and then taken off! What if that bunch thought three shots wasn't right? What if we hadn't switched to that smokeless gunpowder? They would have seen you! What was in your head?"

"You!" She yelled, her voice telling of tears. "You were in my head, Johnny! I know how to use a rifle and I knew what it was loaded with! I had a perfect shot from your bedroom window! I couldn't let you . . ."

"Let me what?" he broke in. "Get killed? Did you ever stop to think that that may have been better?"

The dead silence that followed was heavy with implication. Pressing a palm to his now throbbing temple, Johnny dropped his head and tried to find remorse for his words. He couldn't. He'd lost every shred of emotional control with that statement, and finding again seemed pointless.

The next thing he felt was Teresa throwing her arms around his neck with a sob. Warm tears soaked through his shirt, dampening his shoulders as he leaned his cheek against the crown of her sweet smelling hair. Johnny's left arm held her close as his right hung limply at his side. The hot barrel of his handgun burned his thigh through the rough material of his pants.

He could feel her trembling with fright and felt nothing but incredible sadness for what she had done to protect him. She may not have killed Elsom - maybe Johnny's bullet had, indeed, found its target - but her innocence had been forever compromised. All for him. That's when Johnny knew he couldn't stay in the west any longer.

Johnny Madrid was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When the Lancer arch finally appeared on the horizon both Scott and Murdoch let out relieved sighs. As hard as it had been to leave the ranch, they both realized the time away had been a good thing. The physical and mental demands of the drive not only occupied their minds and hands, it gave them a refreshing sense of long-lost normalcy and the knowledge that the world did, indeed, go on outside the hacienda walls.

Scott, physically exhausted, finally felt a sense of peace and focus. He was ready to move forward with the next challenge and go on to the next phase of his life. Some pressures had lifted from his shoulders.

Murdoch was just happy to be home. The stresses of day to day ranching always built up prior to the annual drive to market, and the weeks that followed were usually more easy-going. He, too, was ready to take on another challenge; after a hot bath, of course.

The horses' steps perked up, and they even broke into a little jog when their home pastures came into view. The two Lancers didn't hold them back. A loud whinny drew their attention to the nearest pasture where they saw a lively palomino shaking his mane and bucking playfully. Barranca ran to the fence and slid to a stop, poking his head over the top rail in greeting.

"Home never looked - or sounded - so good," Scott said with a smile.

"You can say that again." Murdoch watched the romping palomino take off toward the barn. "I wonder. . ."

"How Johnny's doing?" Scott finished for his father. Murdoch gave him a knowing nod, eyes still on Barranca. "Guess we'll find out soon enough."

When they crossed under the arch, Maria ran from the courtyard, yammering nonstop in Spanish. Her demeanor was not one of happy greeting. The small woman ran right up to Murdoch's leg and chattered up to the tall man, her face frantic.

"Wait a minute, Maria, slow down! What's that about Johnny?"

Maria stopped and took a big breath, "He is gone, Patron. He and Teresa and the teacher!"

"What?" Scott said loudly from the other side of his father.

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Maria tugged on Murdoch's leg, urging him off his horse and he complied, moving stiffly. She chatted all the while, a bit more slowly. The big man's face turned dark as he listened. He translated in a flat voice for Scott.

"They left in the middle of the night. Two nights ago. She thinks they went to . . . where?" Translation wasn't needed on the last part.

"BOSTON?" Scott sputtered

Speechless for a moment, the two men regarded each other in shock.

Scott turned back to Maria. "Johnny? He left willingly?"

Maria wrung her hands and nodded her head. Scott dismounted, tired and sore, and the two men handed off their horses to the stable hand. Murdoch gently took Maria's arm and steered her to the privacy of the courtyard. With Scott by his side the eldest Lancer urged the Mexican woman to explain everything.

Somewhat calmer, Maria told what she knew from the time Murdoch had left up to the day before the shooting. Then she relayed what she had been told about the gunfight. The fact that Johnny had survived was nothing less than a miracle - and a somber realization that his finely honed senses, covering for his loss of sight, had probably saved all of them and Lancer as well.

The redhead gunfighter's body was still in town, scheduled to be buried this very day. There was no mention of Teresa's rifle shot because Maria had no knowledge of it. When she finished her tale, the small woman pulled a letter from her apron pocket and handed it to Murdoch. "She told me to give this to you, Patron."



Johnny knew that Teresa was worried about him; he could feel her concern in her touch and in her voice, no matter what the topic. Since demanding to go with him to Boston, his sister-by-heart had been amazingly subdued. Johnny's heart hoped that she wasn't chastising herself for taking a man's life - he knew how hard that was to handle.

Maybe they should have waited for Doc Jenkins to examine the body and say which bullet did the job. Maybe if they weren't in such a rush to leave, that could have given her peace of mind. Johnny finally had admitted to himself that he was, in reality, afraid to know. In his mind, his bullet had killed the man and that's the way it had to be.

He felt responsible - entirely responsible - for the whole incident. It was up to him to take the steps to insure it never happened again. Johnny Madrid had to be left behind in the land where he was born because Madrid could no longer take care of anyone. He was nothing but a liability.

Johnny Lancer had to find a new life. The acceptance of this idea came instantly when he realized who had fired the rifle from his bedroom window. That single shot had killed Madrid forever.

Johnny hung his head. Swallowing his pride and turning to Llewellyn had been one of the most difficult things he had ever done, but Johnny Lancer was going to be a man that did the right thing, especially when it came to the safety of his family. Solely focused on the need to get away from Lancer, Teresa's demands to come along hadn't been rebuffed to the extent expected from Madrid. The Lancer in him craved the connection and partially realized her need for a connection, too. After pushing Madrid aside, it had been amazingly easy to bring her along.

The three of them were three days into their journey. After a slight delay to clear the tracks somewhere in Colorado, the eastbound train was now finally on the go once again. Johnny laid his head against the cold window, allowing Teresa full use of his right shoulder as a pillow. He assumed it was night; his inner clock was in turmoil. The storm clouds overhead blocked the sun that was his usual timepiece, and they had been in and out of various buildings along the way. He missed the openness of Lancer then chastised himself for thinking about a past life, one that was simply not possible anymore.

He could feel Teresa's gentle breathing on his neck, warm and real. Johnny contemplated if it was a weakness that allowed her to come. At this point he didn't care. It felt right and good to have her there. He only hoped that his father and brother could understand his leaving so abruptly. That was a problem he instantly put aside to deal with later. Right now, learning to take care of himself in a wholly different way was his primary goal.

Teresa's hand clutched the sleeve of his right arm even as she slept. Johnny found her hand with his left, and held it firmly. The soft skin beneath his was reassuring. She was an anchor. It allowed him to think of the life he'd walked away from without regret.

Murdoch and Scott should almost be back from the drive now, if not home already, he thought. He swallowed hard at the note left behind - the one Teresa had to write for him. She hadn't said a word as she took the dictation exactly as he said it. Johnny had thought out the note thoroughly before he'd asked her to write it. When he was finished, he heard her sniff quietly, then whisper that it was perfect.

They left the very next morning after the shooting. First, they delivered Elsom's body to the sheriff with a brief explanation. Johnny insisted the two holes in the body were from his gun, and the sheriff accepted the story with a minimal of questions. The three of them then got on the first stage to the train station shortly thereafter, avoiding any follow-up inquiries.

Traveling blind was a scary thing. Johnny hoped he didn't look as tense as he felt. Again, he was glad that Teresa was there to physically guide him and he grew to appreciate the skills Llewellyn had acquired. Now he had a goal to strive toward, and that helped his frame of mind immeasurably.

During one of the frequent lulls common in travel, Llewellyn was able to pull from both of them an all too brief explanation of who Madrid was. It was shortly

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thereafter that he cornered Johnny and gently suggested that the ex-gunfighter should obtain some dark glasses similar to the ones that Llewellyn apparently wore; he'd figured out the security Johnny would feel knowing no one could read his eyes since he couldn't reciprocate. The idea appealed to Johnny, and he was pleasantly surprised by how much that little thing, along with his hat pulled low, helped him feel more confident.

With Llewellyn's quiet coaching, each day was easier than the one before. By the time they reached Boson, only a half-day behind schedule, Johnny was feeling better about the whole ordeal and the idea of starting a new life seemed less daunting. Teresa stayed close to Johnny's side in the bustle of the big city station. It was cold, and Llewellyn insisted that the first thing they do was buy heavier coats. The blind teacher deftly hailed a cab, and they were away from the noisy station in fairly good time to hunt for better fall wear.

Coat buying was an interesting event. Johnny was amazed at the different textures from which to choose. Finally, he settled on a long, wool coat that seemed to please Teresa. She tried to explain what she got, but Johnny gave her a lopsided grin in mid description. She stopped immediately.

"What's so funny, Johnny Lancer?" she demanded in a huff.

"Honey, you could be wearin' Scott's plaid ridin' pants and I wouldn't know the difference."

She whacked him playfully on the shoulder. "I have better taste than that!" she giggled - he realized he hadn't heard that sound in a long time. "Hey, do you think we'll see those pants again since . . ." she stopped instantly, realizing what she'd said, and the levity of the moment was gone. "I'm sorry, Johnny."

He continued to smile in her direction. "*Querida*, it's okay. Really. I'm fine."

He felt her take his hand and give it a squeeze. "I know. Let's just get these coats and go, all right? I really would like to sit on something comfortable for a change."

Johnny took the lead and paid for the coats, easily separating the money because Llewellyn had showed him how to fold the denominations in different ways. He let out a sigh when they stepped from the store; that wasn't too painful, he thought to himself.

The small troupe climbed back into their waiting cab and the travelers wearily sagged onto their seats. The sounds of the hooves on cobblestone grew clearer as they left the business district behind. When the cab pulled up in front of the Institute, Teresa let out a small gasp.

"It's a beautiful building! And so big!"

Johnny climbed down, and then helped Teresa down as Llewellyn exited from the other side.

"Our trunks should be here later," Colin said. "Let's unload what we have here and I'll have someone from the Institute take Teresa and me home." It had been

planned to have Teresa stay with the Llewellyns in their small home while Johnny stayed at the school. Neither Johnny nor Teresa had any inclination to stay with Garrett or even tell him that they were coming, and the subject of Scott's opinion on that move was deftly avoided by the pair.

As Johnny paid the cab driver he said, "I'd check the left hind on your horse, mister. Sounds a bit off."

There was an odd, extended silence before the driver murmured, "Uh, sure."

Before the driver could leave, Johnny worked his way to the animal's side, speaking calmly to the creature as he ran his hand down the questionable leg. Frowning in concentration, his long fingers stopped in an area just above the hock. "Here. It's warm and thick right here."

Johnny heard the coach squeak as the driver climbed down and moved in next to him. Johnny felt a large hand briefly brush his as the driver felt the place indicated. After a moment, the driver said. "I think you're right. Ol' Brownie got cast in his stall last night, but I thought he came out of it all right. Guess he got a bruise." The driver pulled back. "Thanks, mister. A full day on this stone would have put him out of commission for several days. You know your horses."

Patting the horse's rump with affection, Johnny nodded. "He should be okay with a little rest. Your harness here is about to go, too. There's a pretty deep crack." He was fingering the leather that draped over the animal's back.

Now a believer, the driver immediately checked it out. "Yeah, you're right. Guess our stable manager's getting a little lax. I'd better report this to the boss when I take Brownie back. Thanks again, mister . . .?"

"Lancer. Johnny Lancer." He stuck out his hand and the driver shook it with appreciation.

"Harry Bellows."

When they separated, Johnny made his way back to Teresa's side where she took his elbow. Bellows called goodbye, and with a cluck, set the horse off at a slower pace.

Picking up the lighter pieces of luggage, Colin led the way to the front doors of the Institute. The doors opened as soon as their feet hit the stoop.

"Colin!" a feminine voice called from the doorway.

Llewellyn mounted the last step and collected the woman in his arms. Listening to the reunion, Teresa moved in closer to Johnny's side, and he wondered if she felt a twinge of remorse for leaving her home so far behind. He knew he felt it, but pushed it aside as an unrealistic dream.

"Sarah, this is Teresa O'Brien and Johnny Lancer."

There was a quick round of greetings and then Sarah insisted they come in out of the cold air. "I'll send the boys out to get your things," she added. "You and Mr. Lancer relax in the parlor for a little bit, Miss O'Brien, while we get his things situated in his room. Then you and Colin and I will go home for a little lunch and

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some rest. You must be tired. Forgive the noise in the hallway, but the students are changing classrooms. I'll be right back." Light footsteps receded on a wood floor.

Colin moved at a slower pace and stayed close to Johnny as he spoke. "The Administrator, Mr. Searles, would like a word with you before you settle in. I'll go get him, and then arrange for a driver for the three of us." Johnny had no problem following Llewellyn across the large foyer. They stopped in a doorway. "You'll be comfortable here. Small couch at three o'clock, chairs and a small table between at nine, low table in the middle. Table against the wall at twelve o'clock. I'll only be a few minutes."

With that, he led them a few steps into a quiet room that smelled of well-oiled wood and left them alone. The number of people had suddenly swelled in the foyer. Johnny could hear the canes tapping and friendly greetings behind him as he stood just inside the quieter area. He knew it was a small room by the way the sound echoed shortly, and he tried to picture the furniture as Colin described it in his own mind.

"It's a beautiful room, Johnny," Teresa said lowly. "Come in and sit."

Suddenly, Johnny was filled with an anxious dread. Could he really do this? The commotion of people and the smallness of the room made him feel trapped and his doubts resurfaced unexpectedly. Unable to move, he fingered his cane and dropped his eyes. This was going to be hard; very hard, he realized.

Something must have tipped off Teresa because she was at his side in an instant, taking his elbow and nestling it firmly to her body. "I'm scared, too, Johnny," she whispered. "We're so far from home."

Johnny felt a pang at the word 'home'. But coming from one so dear to him, it gave him instant strength. It was for her sake and his family's sake that he make it here. Johnny held his arm firmly aloft for Teresa and allowed her to lead him into this strange, new existence.



Murdoch,

I've decided that I have a lot I need to learn to make something of myself so I have taken Colin up on his offer to go to Boston. Teresa and I figured that it would be easier on all of us if we left before you got home. I tried to make Teresa stay at Lancer, but she insisted that you said it was all right if she came with us. Doc Jenkins agreed with her. I will be staying at the Institute and the Llewellyns have invited Teresa to stay with them. Colin says Sarah will enjoy the company.

By the time you read this you probably already heard about Dexter Elsom. I did the best I could, Murdoch, and luckily, it worked out this time. I don't want there to be a next time. Be careful and watch Lancer closely - there's more Taylors, Elsoms and Pardees out there.

Tell Jelly, goodbye for me, and tell Scott I'm truly sorry about all that has happened in the past month. Let him know that there's nothing between us that can stop us from being close again someday.

I know one or both of you will get this way soon enough. Just know that we are fine and miss you all.

Johnny

Murdoch folded the well-worn letter yet again and tucked it away in his pocket next to the accompanying letter left by Teresa. Her letter made it clear that she wasn't going to allow Johnny to be without family; he'd had enough of that in his life already. Those words warmed the big man's heart, but he couldn't help but feel a bit uneasy about the whole departure. The abruptness was a bit infuriating, as well as the fact that he didn't get to say good bye. He was sure they were fine, and immediately sent a wire to the Institute to let Johnny know they had returned to Lancer and received his letter. The reply they had received today let them know all was well in Boston.

Still, something just didn't seem right. Maybe it was because the hacienda was so empty.

Scott, on the other hand, was furious. Since their return he'd existed in a stormy silence that was beginning to wear on both him and Maria. All Murdoch could figure was that Johnny had inadvertently interfered with some plans that his elder son had made. Was he relying on the plan to take Johnny east to get away from the bad memories here? Was Scott relying on the time away to rid him of his grief? Whatever the reason, his normally stoic and pleasant son had definitely gone another direction.

They had been back from the drive for almost two weeks. The fall haying and preparations for winter were well under way. There wasn't anything here that Cipriano couldn't handle, and Murdoch toyed with the thought of going east. His back, however, made him think twice. The drive had inflamed the old wounds and general aches to an uncomfortable level; he had to finally admit to himself that this may have been his final cattle drive. He'd grudgingly reverted to using one of his canes again, and was just getting to the point where he didn't need it every waking hour. A train ride would only exacerbate the condition according to Sam. If they were to have a Thanksgiving at Lancer as a family, now was the time to make it happen. It was also a perfect chance to force his surly son to take it easy for a while. Forced rest on a cross country train may be just what Scott needed.

The patriarch's musings were interrupted by the sound of something dragging upstairs. With a twinge in his lower back as he rose, Murdoch walked stiffly to the stairs and was surprised to see Scott tugging on a trunk.

"Where are you going with that?" he asked curiously, careful to not provoke his prickly-of-late son.

"The stage station. I'm shipping Alexandra's things to her parents."

Murdoch's brows rose. "Oh," he said neutrally. "I thought Teresa was going to help you with that."

"Well, she's not here now, is she?" Scott snapped instantly. He wrestled the trunk down the stairs while his father watched.

Murdoch saw that he couldn't fit on the stairs, and he wasn't sure he wanted to get tangled in his son's physical fury anyway. Instead, he stepped back out of the

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way and watched Scott vent on the bulky trunk. The trunk was dragged out the front door and into the courtyard before Scott stopped for a rest. Puffing and wiping his brow, the disturbed blond sat on the object of his anger to catch his breath.

Treading slowly, Murdoch made his way to his son's side and debated in his mind what to say. Scott was obviously hurting and Murdoch wanted to help ease the pain - he just didn't know where to start. Amazingly, Scott gave him the opportunity.

"Does it ever go away?" the younger Lancer said out of the blue.

"What, son? The pain of loss?" Scott nodded and dropped his head. Murdoch thought a moment before replying, not wanting to give a glib reply. With surprising gentleness, he laid the flat of his hand at the base of his son's neck. "I'd like to say yes, son, but I'd be lying. The pain is always there. You just learn to live with it."

Scott studied his hands as he spoke. "Does it get easier?" The anguish in his voice tore at Murdoch's heart. He saw himself in Scott's place so many years before, with Paul O'Brien standing where he was now. His friend's words at the time seemed so banal, but time had proven the man right. Murdoch repeated the words, hoping it would help. "I'm not sure I'd say easier, but yes. Things get better. It becomes part of you, but I think the secret is to not let it make you who you are."

Sorrowful blue eyes regarded him in a thoughtful sideways look as if he wanted to believe, but just couldn't open his heart to the possibility right now. Then a thought struck Murdoch.

"You know, son, it's taken me a while, but I've learned that family is what makes it all more bearable. Teresa's always been here, and that's been a blessing, but since you boys have returned that lesson has become well learned. And since Johnny's been gone this time, it's a lesson I've learned - hard. Teresa is right. Family is everything and will help your heart to heal." Scott quickly wiped at his downcast eyes with the back of his hand at the words. Murdoch was fairly certain his son couldn't speak right at the moment, but asked anyway. "Do you want to go get your brother and sister?"

"Yes." The answer came without a moment's hesitation, and Scott finally raised his head. A small smile etched one corner of his mouth and a long missing spark of life brightened his tear-shiny eyes.

Murdoch slapped his shoulder and chuckled. "Then get to packing some more bags, son."

CHAPTER NINE

Boston in October got under your skin, Johnny realized, and not in a good way. He was constantly cold, and even with activity his fingers, toes and nose always felt icy. The bulky jacket was like a second skin as well as a physical shield; the idea that it hid the fact that he wasn't wearing a gun belt in public was oddly comforting, though.

Johnny also noticed his growing dependence on the heavy cane. It certainly wasn't a Colt, but it was becoming just as familiar to him as the weeks passed. Not able to leave his gun behind in California, it was currently stored away in the bottom of his traveling trunk. The trunk and his valise were the only personal items sitting out in his small room.

His room at the Institute was simply functional. A small bed, a dresser and a chair was all he had, and that was fine with him. He'd put his clothes in the dresser and reluctantly bought some plainer things that would do better in this colder weather. Cold brought out the ache in his thigh and increased his limp, but he didn't let it slow him down. He couldn't; to slow down meant he had to think, and he didn't want to do that right now. It was difficult keeping Madrid under wraps to allow his new persona to grow.

Classes here picked up where Llewellyn left off at Lancer with Braille being the focus. He was expected to take care of his own needs and appear presentable at all times, be punctual at mealtimes and clean up after himself. He mindlessly attended to these tasks, hoping they would become rote on his way to a new life. It wasn't as easy as he kept telling himself it would be. Johnny had a hard time sometimes quelling the rebellious part of him that shirked rules. Turning his back on Madrid was just as challenging, if not more so, than learning to get around without his eyes.

He and Teresa walked around the city at least once a day. They both were now very familiar with the area surrounding the Institute and the Llewellyns' home. The blind couple had a very small house provided to them by the Institute that was between the school and a business district. Any needs were within walking distance. As they walked, she described the area and the slowly changing trees in such a way that Johnny could see them clearly in his mind's eye.

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Within the first week of his being there the cab driver they had encountered on the first day came to the Institute and looked Johnny up. Apparently, the owner of the livery was upset by the lax job done by the stable manager, and wanted to know if Johnny would be interested in hiring on. At first, Johnny was reluctant; his desire to work with the horses was strong, but he knew it wouldn't be in the same way as before. He questioned his ability to be satisfied in any other relationship concerning the animals, but Johnny also knew he couldn't pass up an opportunity for work. It was the first step to an independent existence.

So his daily routine shifted again to a new routine - work, school, and mapping the city in his mind. Sunday was dinner at the Llewellyns', which was getting to be the only time he ever got to really sit with Colin anymore. The man had always seemed a bit standoffish to Johnny, which was fine with him, but after several weeks in Boston, that began to change. Colin's formal edge slowly dissolved and their relationship became warmer. Johnny knew this was a great relief to Teresa; she had grown very fond of Sarah and helped her at the Institute where the blind woman taught beside her husband.

Teresa was a welcome addition to the Institute. Volunteer workers were hard to find, and she relished the chance to help out where she could. She was also learning valuable techniques for making Johnny more comfortable when they got back to Lancer. Johnny knew this was important to her, which made it more difficult as the weeks went by to for him to listen to her talk about her plans for the hacienda.

Johnny had no intention to returning to Lancer and Teresa would have to be told sometime soon.

Then the wire came informing them that Scott was on his way to Boston. Teresa was thrilled, and cried a little at the idea of being reunited with her other brother figure. Johnny was at first apprehensive, but then glad that his brother would be able to escort Teresa home. He knew she wanted to be home for Christmas. So did he; Johnny just had to accept the fact that he was already home, and that was proving to be extremely difficult. There was room for only one home in a heart.

During their regular Sunday dinner, the day after receiving Scott's wire, Teresa brought up a subject they had both been avoiding.

"Johnny, we have to get a doctor to look at you. Both Murdoch and Dr. Jenkins wanted an opinion from a specialist before you came back and we haven't done that yet."

"Dr. Boyer would be perfect," Sarah suggested. "Don't you think, Colin?"

"Yes," Colin agreed. "He would. He comes to the Institute several times a month to follow up on some cases. Would you like me to arrange that for you, Johnny? I think he'll be in on Wednesday."

Johnny started to pick at his meal when Teresa brought up the subject, his stomach doing a jittery flip at the suggestion. Why bother? he thought. Nothin's gonna change. Out loud, he uttered a quiet, "Sure." Scott wasn't going to go back west

without it, so the exam might as well be taken care of before he even got here. Then there wouldn't be any reason for the two of them to stay any longer than they had to. In Johnny's mind, the plan was complete. Now all he had to do was inform the others involved.



“So when are you moving in, Johnny?”

The question echoed in Johnny's mind as he sat in his small room waiting for Dr. Boyer. It had been asked just that morning by Andrew Diamante, the businessman that owned The Easton Street Livery and Stables. Drumming his fingers lightly on the head of his cane in an unconscious action, Johnny felt strangely unsettled as he thought of his reply to Diamante. He pushed the uneasiness aside, blaming it on the expected feelings of a dead man. Johnny wasn't going to allow Madrid to make decisions regarding his new life.

Footsteps approached his open door, and the low murmuring of two voices, one male, one female, floated through his room's open doorway. The man was issuing orders and the female was listening. When her dainty strides carried her away, Johnny knew Dr. Boyer had arrived.

“Mr. Lancer? Dr. Phillip Boyer.”

Johnny stood and pushed his hand forward where it was taken in a firm, warm handshake.

“Hello, doc. Can we get on with this?” Johnny sat again and waited for the questions.

The doctor chuckled lowly. “I was warned you'd be rather direct. Let's get going, then.”

Johnny could hear the pen skritch away as he gave the doctor dates and described symptoms. The questions were pointed and no nonsense, the doctor's tone giving nothing away. After he'd asked more things than Johnny thought possible, the physical exam began. It was difficult to sit still as a complete stranger firmly prodded his skull, sometimes to the edge of pain, but Johnny set his jaw and accepted the handling. He could feel Dr. Boyer's expert fingers find and trace every scar Johnny could recall that was hidden under his thick hair. One particular query made Johnny's mouth twitch with a suppressed laugh.

“I take it you remember this one?” Boyer asked curiously as his finger tip circled a particular scar on the crown of Johnny's head.

“I'd forgotten about that one. Kid hit me with a stick. I was about 10.”

“Playing a little rough, huh?” the doctor commented rhetorically.

After a moment, Johnny mumbled, “Playing. Sure.” A flash of a childhood scene went through Johnny's head, edged with the corresponding emotion of the time. Actually, starving, Johnny'd been caught stealing a plate of fresh made tamales put aside to cool in a border town shanty kitchen. The kid of the house caught him in the

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act and had whacked him hard, but the kid's mom had seen the whole incident and stopped her son short of his second swing. She'd given Johnny the pie and scolded her son, but later in the day the kid found Johnny and threatened to beat him senseless if he came back. Johnny moved on to the next border town that same night, but not before leaving the kid with his own memoir; it was the first fistfight Johnny'd ever won.

Dr. Boyer's pen scratched paper again, and Johnny heard him clear his throat. "Well, Mr. Lancer, I can see that your skull has taken some interesting injuries. I think we both know which ones are the serious ones. From what I can see, I think you may have an overabundance of scar tissue built up and that's what's affecting your sight. I can't be sure without surgery."

Johnny sat up straighter. "You mean cuttin' in my head?"

"I'm not suggesting that, Mr. Lancer. I can't even guarantee that surgery would even correct it. What I'm saying is that the amount of repeated damage to that one area strongly suggests that is the problem, but without actually looking inside, I can only guess."

"So what's that mean?"

Johnny could hear the shrug. "Not much, I'm afraid. It's possible there's still inflamed tissue complicating things, but with the headaches now gone for the most part, I'm assuming the swelling is gone. That would leave scar tissue, which, as you know, doesn't go away. It could shift, though."

"Shift?"

"Well, if the optic nerve isn't scarred but the nearby tissue is, it's possible that somehow the nerve could be separated from the damaged tissue and start working again."

Johnny thought about that for a second. "So what you're saying is that there could be scars blocking the nerve like a boulder blocks a creek."

"Exactly."

"But you don't know if that's the case."

"No, I can't tell that from this exam, nor can I say I'd see it in with surgery, either. It is an option, though. I can't say there's absolutely no hope."

Johnny pressed his lips together at the sound of that cursed word. Hope. He'd left that behind when he walked away from Madrid and Lancer and he wasn't about to allow anyone to cut into his head on the meager promise of it. Johnny stood and slipped the dark glasses back across his eyes. "Thanks, doc, but no thanks. I'll take the no hope. And don't tell my family any of this. I'll do it."

"But Mr. Lancer," Dr. Boyer started.

"Listen, doc. I've caused enough heartache in my family and they don't need anymore. I won't accept surgery, especially if it's based on something as flimsy as hope. I've moved on, and they will, too."

The doctor sighed and briefly patted Johnny's shoulder. "As you wish, Mr. Lancer. I do understand your point of view. From what I hear, you are adjusting well to your situation. Is it true you've taken a job at Diamante's stable?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I'll be movin' in there the end of the week." He smiled wanly. "Word does get around mighty fast."

Boyer laughed and gathered his papers. "Not only word, Mr. Lancer, but action, too. I keep my horse there. I was thinking of moving him, but now that it sounds like Edwins is going, I think I'll keep old Dusty where he is for a while. You've made some excellent improvements."

"Third stall from the north end, west side."

"That's right. I understand you and my old nag have forged a relationship."

Johnny grinned crookedly. "Yeah, he reminds me of another horse I know. Not a trusting type, is he?"

"Depends on who he's asked to trust. He's a good judge of character, old Dusty is." The doctor found Johnny's hand and shook it. "He's never let me down. Any friend of his is a friend of mine."

"Well, then, doc, I guess since we're friends, you'd best call me Johnny."

"Then I'll be seeing you around, Johnny. When's Edwins getting the boot? You know, I caught him more than once passed out in one of the stalls. And Dusty can't stand the bastard."

Johnny laughed at the comment. "Well, I guess he's gettin' the news right about now. Time I got back to work, ain't it?"

A light rap on the door caught their attention. Dr. Boyer opened the door and Johnny heard a little gasp. "Oh! You must be Dr. Boyer," a familiar voice chirped.

"Yes, and you are . . . let me guess . . . Teresa O'Brien? Sarah speaks highly of you."

"Thank you." Johnny could tell by her voice that Teresa was probably blushing. "I didn't mean to interrupt; I didn't know you were here yet."

"In fact, I'm done. It was nice meeting you, Miss O'Brien. See you later, Johnny."

"Later, doc." Johnny started to slip on his coat.

"Well? What did he say, Johnny?"

"There's nothin' he can do. He thinks it's old scars blockin' things."

"Thinks'? He can't say for sure?" Teresa's disappointment tugged at Johnny's heart.

"No, not without cuttin' open my head and lookin'. And even then, he can't fix it." Johnny saw no reason to fan hope to life. This was over here and now, and a little white lie wasn't going to make any difference. It would, however, save some heartache from dashed hopes.

"We can see another doctor . . ."

Johnny spun around to face her and took a deep breath to temper his words. "No. No more doctors. We both know Boyer is the best around. It's time to put this

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aside, Teresa. I've got some things to do right now, so we'll talk about this later if you want, but I don't see the point." He found her shoulders and pulled her in for a quick kiss to her forehead, then turned and made his way from the room. As he left, it was hard to ignore Teresa's sad sniff that would precede new tears.



Johnny left the Institute with thoughts swirling in his mind. Things were working out for once; when Scott got here there would be no reason left for Johnny to go west. He had a job, the school and a place to live. He could be moved into the livery office before Scott arrived, but there was still Teresa to consider. Moving before telling her he wasn't going west would tip his hand too early.

There was only one thing he had to do to feel secure in his plan. He needed a partner. Fifteen to twenty horses were in the stable that Johnny would be responsible for. He would oversee the leasing out of six of them to cab drivers and make sure the rest - private boarders like Dr. Boyer's Dusty - were taken care of. When he'd first arrived, Harry, the driver he'd met on his first day in Boston, gave him the tour. Harry was one of the cabbies that rented a horse from the establishment and made a living as a cab driver, splitting his daily take with the owner, Diamante. Harry told Johnny that he suspected Edwins kept a bit aside for himself from time to time when he collected for Mr. Diamante.

Johnny had made an immediate impression that first day, but it was on the negative side. As soon as he'd stepped in the barn, Johnny's nose told him that cleanliness was a problem. Harry's mention of various hoof and skin ailments of the lease horses confirmed it, and Johnny's direct manner made him speak his mind not only to Edwins, but Mr. Diamante as well. Given a chance to prove himself - which surprised him, considering his blindness - Johnny had turned most of their problems around after a week, resulting in more reliable horses and a steadier income. It wasn't without difficulty; the stable hands griped at the extra cleaning work, but realized it balanced out when the horses didn't need as much doctoring. And the place did smell better.

Diamante became a believer. He told Johnny that Edwins was going to be fired one way or another, and that he wanted Johnny to take his place. Johnny hesitated - he could see the pitfalls of being blind in this position, and realized the need for a reliable right hand man to do the job well. When approached, Harry had agreed. Until they could add a horse or two to the livery line up, Johnny would pay Harry with his own wages.

Johnny felt they would work well together and wanted to feel secure in the arrangement, but being unable to confirm his positive gut feelings with a visual appraisal still made him uneasy. Johnny still felt like an outsider and figured he always would. It was time to move on, regardless, and he'd accepted the job just this morning.

Although he was deep in his thoughts, Johnny's exquisitely sensitive senses suddenly began to tingle. He'd just passed through a section of the business district that hosted a collection of pubs that always seemed to be busy, no matter the time of day. As he rounded a corner, to a quieter street, he realized he was being followed.

His shadow had an uneven gait. Johnny slowed a bit and shifted away from the brick wall to his right, keeping his pursuer unbalanced. Then he abruptly stopped when he knew the area was otherwise clear. A slurred curse from behind was carried on liquor soured breath and Johnny knew the man would be making his move. He waited until he felt the physical warmth of the body before he reacted.

With a duck and a spin, it was just a fraction of a second until the attacker was pressed against the building with the head of Johnny's cane pressing on his windpipe. A gasped expletive of surprise identified the man as Edwins. Johnny smiled crookedly, his face inches from the angry drunk. He was glad for the dark glasses, visualizing the effect he must have, and wondered if Edwins could see himself in the round lenses. The idea made Johnny's grin a little bigger. He pressed the cane's head a little deeper. Edwins gagged.

"Lost?" Johnny asked with a coolly calm voice.

"Gahhh..hhh!" Edwins gurgled, his breath putrid and hot.

Johnny leaned in even closer, his face a picture of deadly amusement.

"Anytime you wanna dance, Edwins, I got the time. Wanna dance now?" He accented the last word with a jab of pressure, and Edwins stopped squirming. Instead he pawed at Johnny's steely arms and fought to breathe. He shook his head as much as he could. Johnny imagined his rheumy red eyes starting to roll skyward. "No?" Johnny said, sounding disappointed. Then without warning, he jerked the cane away and Edwins dropped like a discarded old boot at his feet, making a whistling noise as he sucked air.

Johnny stepped back and readjusted his cane. As he moved on down the street, he mentally thanked Colin for tips on how useful this old cane could be.

Still ain't a Colt, though, he mused.



Trains normally had a way of lulling Scott into a lethargic state, especially when he knew it was a long trip. This time, the trip had been uncomfortable and cold and with the worst possible company he could have: himself. As a result, lethargy was replaced by exhaustion as his mind vainly searched for some kind of peace.

Murdoch had decided to stay at the hacienda as his back and leg pains were stubbornly hanging on. The idea of sitting on a train for any length of time made his father pull a face that could not be disguised. Scott insisted he stay home and recover fully, and now that the train was slowing to enter the Boston station, Scott wondered if he'd done the right thing. Admittedly sullen himself, Scott wondered if his brother's

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attitude had changed as much as Sam had hinted; he hoped so. Two miserable people stuck on a train together would make for a worse trip back.

Then again, there would be Teresa to talk to. Scott sighed. Used to be that he and Johnny could talk about anything, but that hadn't been true of late. Both of them were saddled with incredible circumstance that had crippled them both emotionally. Scott wondered if it had been long enough yet to call them survivors. All he knew was that after this long, lonely trip east he finally felt a need to move on. He was tired of the grief, tired of the endless 'what if' scenarios that played out in his head, and tired of dealing with all this conflict alone. Scott wanted to be surrounded by family again. He wanted his brother and sister.

Jerking to a stop the train let out a sigh of steam and the passengers rose as one, milled about, and slowly trickled to the exit doors. Cold bit his cheeks as he crossed the threshold, and Scott paused to glance around the snow-frosted platform, and, not seeing anyone right away, stepped down. Automatically, he flipped up his jacket collar, tucked his traveling valise under his arm and reached for the gloves in his coat pocket as he walked slowly toward the luggage car.

"Scott!"

Teresa's voice sounded like spring. A grin touched his cheeks before he even looked up to see her huge smile and waving hand. His eyes locked on her and Scott weaved his way through the crowd with pointed determination, scooping her up in a bear hug as soon as he reached her. He would have swung her around, but the press of people didn't allow for that. She laughed and hugged him tightly back.

"Keep that up and you're gonna knock over some innocent bystanders."

At the sound of his brother's voice, Scott set Teresa down and turned to find him. For a moment, Scott was taken aback by what he saw. If it weren't for the familiar cowboy hat, albeit dusted with powdery snow, Johnny would have blended into the crowd. The long, wool coat with turned up collar, gloves and cane were all unfamiliar, but the strangest thing to absorb was the dark glasses. Scott had never seen Johnny wearing any kind of glasses before and it was eerie. Johnny's eyes were so striking and full of expression that covering them made his face look . . . ordinary. And 'ordinary' wasn't a word Scott would ever have associated with Johnny Lancer.

"Hey, brother," Scott said warmly, pulling himself out of his reverie and giving Johnny a quick hug. Holding onto Johnny's elbow, Scott stepped back and tried to find something of the sibling he remembered. "Uh, Murdoch wanted to come," he said, finding words difficult and unable to pry his eyes from Johnny's face.

Teresa must have felt Scott's unease because she moved in and took his arm. "Let's get your bags. We have a coach from the Institute waiting for us." She coaxed him to move and after a few steps he lagged and glanced back.

"What about Johnny? Shouldn't one of us . . ."

"Johnny's fine, Scott. Just don't walk too fast," Teresa said in a low voice. Scott did see that Johnny was following behind, his head thoughtfully bowed and using his

cane with obvious concentration. “He’s getting around very well on his own. You’ll be amazed.”

“He’s limping.”

“It’s the cold. Some days are better than others, but the doctor says the pain will go away eventually.”

“I’ll meet you at the coach,” Johnny said just loud enough to be heard. Scott and Teresa stopped and turned to him. “That way you can talk about me and I won’t hear.” Recalling his brother’s attitude, the last time he saw him Scott waited for his brother to explode angrily. Instead, the small smile that appeared on Johnny’s face after the comment took Scott by complete surprise. “I’ll take your valise if you want.” Johnny held out his hand, the smile turning a bit lopsided.

“Uh, sure.” Not sure what else to do, Scott handed over the traveling case. Johnny took it and turned away from them.

“We’ll be right there, Johnny.” Teresa tugged on Scott’s arm, breaking his astounded stare. As she pulled him toward the luggage car he couldn’t keep himself from glancing back.

“He’s okay in this crowd?”

“Yes, he’s fine! Like I said, you’ll be amazed. He has a job, too.” The slack jawed surprise on his face made Teresa giggle shortly. “You should know better than to underestimate Johnny,” she scolded lightly.

“I guess I should,” Scott admitted as he turned his attention to finding his bags. “I didn’t know what to expect. When we left, I was sure we’d be coming back to Llewellyn’s funeral.”

Teresa let out a short laugh. “Since the trough incident, Johnny’s been a different person, Scott. Something happened. I don’t know what, exactly, but it doesn’t matter. He’s doing amazing things. The Institute has been wonderful. And Sarah and Colin . . .”

“I understand you’re staying with them. Didn’t Grandfather offer a place to stay?”

Instantly, she flushed under the cold-induced pink of her cheeks and ducked her head. Flakes of dry snow fluttered from her hair. “We, um, didn’t contact him until after we’d been here for a little while. He also invited us to dinner but Johnny . . .” Teresa shrugged her shoulder. “You know how he feels about Harlan, Scott. And in his condition he just wouldn’t feel comfortable there. He’d feel, you know, vulnerable, so I we didn’t go. I never told Johnny about the invitations. I did stop by and thank him, though.”

Scott adjusted his grip on his bags and started making his way through the crowd. “I suppose I can understand that. It seems rather silly to have the three of us in three different places, but it won’t be for long.”

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Tears instantly shined in the young girl's eyes and she touched his hand briefly. "Oh, Scott, I miss home so much. It's been a wonderful visit, and I'd love to see more of the city with you, but I'd really like to have Thanksgiving at Lancer."

Scott smiled and felt warmth in his heart he hadn't experienced in what seemed like a very long while. "Me too," he said. "Did Johnny get a doctor to look at him yet?"

Teresa nodded. "Dr. Boyer from the Institute. I don't think there's anyone better in the city, Scott."

"And?"

Teresa was unable to hold his gaze. "It wasn't good news," she said softly.

"Oh." Scott felt a stab of disappointment, and dropped the subject.

Breaking from the crowd at the cab stand, Scott saw the figure of his brother standing next to a jittery bay hitched to a boxy coach. The driver and Johnny were talking as Johnny ran his hands down the horse's neck with affection. Scott could tell his brother was calming the animal, but he turned toward them as they approached. Still, nothing gets by you, does it? Scott thought with tempered amusement, happy to see a bit of his sibling that hadn't changed.

Johnny turned his attention from the driver to the approaching pair. "Roca here is new to the traces so I'll stay with him until you load up," Johnny said in a calm tone.

"Sure thing," Scott quipped, walking past his brother and opening the coach door. After he threw in his bags he helped Teresa inside, and then Scott paused at the open door, wondering what he should do now.

He didn't have long to wait. With a final, reassuring pat Johnny turned from the horse and came back to the coach after a few, low words to the driver. Johnny stepped in behind Scott and they settled into their seats as the coach lurched forward. Scott noticed Johnny massaging his thigh.

"The leg bothering you?" Scott asked.

"A little. I can manage. I take it the drive went well?"

Safe subjects didn't help to dispel the awkwardness between them by the time the coach arrived at Garrett's. Scott wanted nothing more than to have a long and deep conversation with his brother, alone; he'd managed to push Alexandra and his grief aside during the drive to market, but had dwelled too much on them in the trip east. Now was Johnny's time, and Scott was ready to deal with him. The older brother could clearly see that there was a lot of catching up to do, but he decided that he should settle in first. A bath was definitely the first thing on his list.

Once at Harlan's Beacon Street address, Johnny climbed down and went immediately to the jittery horse where his voice and hands calmed the animal almost instantly. Scott helped Teresa down and as he unloaded the coach, the grand pair of doors on the mansion swung open and an older man in a suit crossed the porch and descended the stairs.

“He wasn’t too friendly when I came by that one time,” Teresa whispered to Scott.

“He isn’t paid to be friendly, just efficient,” Scott replied with a wink.

“Scotty!” Harlan’s voice carried from the open doors and his grandson unconsciously straightened up. Scott offered his elbow to Teresa and led her forward to greet the old man.

“Sir,” Scott said formally, offering his hand. “You remember Teresa and Johnny.”

Garrett shook Scott’s hand and then turned to Teresa. “Miss O’Brien. It’s a pleasure to see you again. Our last visit was too short.”

“Mr. Garrett,” Teresa said politely.

The butler disappeared into the house with the luggage and Harlan indicated the entry with a sweep of his arm. “I have some hot beverages and a light lunch waiting. Please, come inside. Johnny?”

To Scott’s surprise, Johnny stepped from the horse and started coming toward them without hesitation. After a few steps, however, he stopped and cocked his head back. Shortly thereafter, a large, rattling wagon pulled by two fast moving draught horses noisily rounded the corner, barreling their direction. The skittish bay jumped in surprise and tried to bolt, but the driver managed to barely keep the horse in place.

Johnny’s movements were fast and quiet, and he was at the bay’s side in a fraction of a second. Scott realized that his brother had been in motion before the noisy wagon had even rounded the corner. With Johnny at Roca’s side, the dancing horse managed to contain its fright and slowly get itself under control again. After a few moments with all its feet on the ground at once, Johnny stepped back and signaled for the driver to go.

“Thanks, Johnny!” the driver called as he moved off at a controlled clip. “I’ll be back at 2:00.”

Johnny waved, and turned back to the small group. Adjusting his cane in his hand, he hesitated a moment and cocked his head slightly before coming toward them.

“Well, that was quite impressive,” Garrett beamed. “I’d heard you had a way with horses.”

Scott turned to his grandfather with a befuddled look. Since when did Harlan Garrett care about his brother’s well-being? From the corner of his eye he could see the same surprise on Teresa’s face. When Johnny was closer, Harlan reached out and touched the sleeve of Johnny’s coat. “Shall we go inside out of the cold?” With a light hand, the old man set Johnny in the correct direction and walked beside him to the front doors.

Scott was jerked from his astonishment by Teresa, who had taken his elbow. “Follow them, I guess?” she said lowly.

“Sure.” Scott noticed that she looked as puzzled as he felt.

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Scott watched as Johnny pulled off his hat and coat for the butler to put away, but he kept on the shaded glasses. If it was disconcerting to accept that part of Johnny, the plain cut of the clothes under the coat seemed even more out of character. It was like he was looking at a stranger. Feeling a bit off kilter, Scott barely noticed his own coat taken away. He couldn't take his eyes off this new person that was his brother.

Harlan Garrett was a polite host, but there did seem to be a slight lack of warmth as he led them to the parlor. After coffee was disbursed and everyone was seated, Garrett initiated conversation, mostly from Johnny and Teresa.

Scott learned a lot about his brother's abilities by listening to the short replies Johnny supplied to Garrett's questions, but knew there was more. There was always more to what his evasive brother said, and he grew more and more curious about the past weeks. Getting Johnny alone for a real talk would go a long way to reestablishing their relationship, but it wasn't going to happen today, it seemed.

Scott got the impression that his grandfather was making a point to make it clear exactly what Johnny had done in his time here. The vision of showing off a prize horse in an auction arena came instantly to his mind. With a dismissive shake of his head, Scott told himself that was silly; Harlan was merely showing polite interest. He made himself focus on something else.

Listening to Teresa, Scott could see the obvious pride in her brother-by-heart's accomplishments. Reflecting over the events of the recent months, he was glad to see that she seemed to be recovering from all that had happened. At Lancer, Teresa had been hard pressed to leave the house. Here, she seemed to have regained her confidence. He hoped that he gave off the same feeling. Scott was satisfied that the trip seemed to be a good idea after all.

"Scott?"

Harlan's voice made Scott realize his mind had wandered and his grandfather had called to him at least twice. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat and felt a slight heat rise on his cheeks. "Um, yes?" he stammered.

Johnny's lopsided grin caught his attention which was something the older brother hadn't seen in a while. He automatically readied himself for a teasing remark. His own smile at the reaction felt good.

"Your mind wandering farther than your train ticket says? An' you pick on me for not payin' attention," Johnny smirked.

"Yeah, well, apparently you've learned how to sit still in the past few weeks," Scott shot back. "Guess I'll have to find something else to pick on you for. Shouldn't be hard."

"Scott Lancer!" Teresa said in mock disapproval.

Johnny chuckled and relaxed back into the overstuffed chair fingering his cane where it leaned against the chair's padded arm. "It's good to have you back, brother. No one else around here talks to me quite like you."

“I hope not. It’s my job as the older, smarter brother.”

Garrett watched the bantering at first with perplexed surprise, but then his expression changed into something that was unsettling to Scott. He frowned for a moment, trying to pinpoint the feeling, but they were interrupted by the less-than-friendly butler.

“Lunch is served.” The severe man topped the comment with a short bow. Again, automatically, Scott looked to his brother for the regular amused grin that accompanied such a display of formality but Johnny’s expression remained the same. Scott mentally kicked himself for the expectation and reminded himself that things had changed in his absence. Get used to it.

CHAPTER TEN

Scott woke the next morning feeling immediately displaced. It took him several moments to recall where he was, and several more to realize that he’d slept an entire, dreamless night without waking up. Eventually deciding it was because there were no memories of Alexandra here, Scott accepted the gift of sleep and rose to ready himself for the day.

As he shaved and dressed, he thought back on the prevalent discomfort from the previous day. The midday meal downstairs was uncomfortable with Johnny pushing his food around without really eating. The soup dish was finished without incident, albeit very slowly for his normally impatient sibling, but the other foods remained merely rearranged.

After that, the three of them had taken a quick carriage tour of the area around the Institute, the livery where Johnny worked and Scott’s old hang outs. Teresa chatted gaily and sat as close to Scott as she could, seeming to relish their togetherness. They ended the tour by dropping Teresa off at the Llewellyn’s for the night.

For some reason, Scott hadn’t expected Sarah to be blind. He marveled at her grace and coordination. Scott took careful note of the house and how plain the decorations were. Figuring some of the items – like the pictures and quilts hanging on the walls – were meant to put sighted visitors at ease, Teresa had corrected that

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notion by informing him that wall hangings softened reflected noise. That's when Scott realized he had a lot to learn about what it meant to be living blind.

With a hug and a promise to come by first thing in the morning, Scott and Johnny departed to take Scott back to his grandfather's house. Finally alone with his brother, Scott found he didn't know what to say. He decided to start with the obvious and see where it went.

"So, did you bring any of your own clothes?" he asked lightly.

Johnny sat in the coach across from Scott, resting both hands on top of the upright cane in front of him. The shaded glasses looked even darker inside the coach. "They're in the trunk in my room." Johnny answered slowly.

Scott was not entirely satisfied with that answer; he really wanted to know why they were put away and unworn. "I'm surprised you aren't wearing your gun belt." He knew he'd hit a sore spot when his brother started to fidget and dropped his chin.

"Yeah. Me too." So soft was the statement, it was nearly lost in the ambient noise of the coach. Scott took a breath to make yet another pointed statement when Johnny spoke up again, still studying his lap. "Look, Scott. I know you have questions, but I'm asking you to trust me. Wait until tomorrow, after I've shown you what I can do and how much I've learned. I'm different, I know – Dios, I know that all too well . . ." he rubbed his healing thigh with the palm of one hand and Scott recalled feeling a little guilty. "Everything's different. You'll see that tomorrow. Just wait until then and I'll answer your questions. Okay?" Johnny lifted his chin, and even with the dark glasses Scott could see the determined set of his brother's features.

Leaning over and giving Johnny's hand a reassuring squeeze, Scott had replied. "Okay. No more questions today. Can I ask if your leg bothers you a lot?"

Obvious relief relaxed Johnny's expression. "Yeah, it does. I think it's the cold, but it's getting better."

"Good." Scott had stated. "Then the sooner we get back to Lancer, the better!"

That's when they'd arrived at Garrett's. Thinking back to that moment, Scott realized that Johnny had never mentioned the ranch, or asked any questions about it or Barranca all during their tour. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't pinpoint what it was. It would be difficult to keep his promise about not asking questions, but he would do it just the same.

He resolved to keep his promise as he finished dressing for the new day. Scott jogged down the stairs and strode into the dining room, lured in by the smell of coffee. He was pleased at how much better he felt after a good night's sleep.

"Ah, Scotty! Finally up, I see! You must have needed the rest." Harlan came into the room from the direction of the den and stopped next to his grandson. He put his hand on Scott's shoulder and directed him to a chair. "Sit! Phillips has a good breakfast all ready for us. I decided to wait for you."

“Good morning, grandfather.” Scott sat in the offered chair, and within seconds, a steaming cup of dark brew was placed in front of him. “I did sleep well, thank you.” He took a careful sip as the older man sat. Phillips returned instantly with the first part of their meal and the day began with Harlan filling in his only heir on the status of Garrett Enterprises.



Johnny awoke according to some internal clock that had grown to be very accurate in the past month, and swung his legs over the side of his bed. Quiet permeated the Institute this time of day, and Johnny took a few seconds to appreciate it. Living among so many people and city living in general had made the rare quiet moments something to relish.

The constant dull ache in his thigh was hardly noticeable this morning as Johnny quickly dressed. That done, he just as quickly made his bed. That simple act set his thoughts in the direction of how he'd changed; more exact, how Madrid was gone and replaced by someone new. It hadn't been easy. In fact, it was still a struggle. But after today, after he'd convinced his brother that this new person he'd become was better off here, he hoped that would be the end of it. That Teresa and Scott would leave, taking the last reminders of his old life with them.

Passing through the kitchen Johnny tried to get away with snagging a fresh biscuit and slipping out the back door, but he was summarily redirected to a seat at the counter by Josephine. Josie, as she liked to be called, was shorter than Johnny but at least twice his width and he didn't have a chance at slipping from her grip. She had a low, infectious laugh and a no-nonsense way of running her kitchen. Josie reminded Johnny a whole lot of Maria.

“You need more than a biscuit, young man. I was expecting you.” A clink of china on the counter in front of him brought the smell of bacon and was soon followed by the rich aroma of coffee. Josie had figured out quickly that this particular young man wasn't accustomed to the normal, light fare of an east coast breakfast. Within minutes, eggs, thick toast laden with butter and a slice of ham lined up in front of him.

Johnny thought he was too nervous to eat, but found he had an appetite after all.

“Mr. Searles will probably have my head for feeding you in here instead of the dining room,” Josie clucked as she returned to her work.

“Ah, Josie, you can handle him just fine. Keep feedin' me like this, though, and none of my new clothes are gonna fit.” Johnny dug into the eggs using the bread to guide them onto his fork. Eating by feel had proved to be a lot more difficult than learning to shoot had ever been.

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“I certainly hope so! I don’t know how you’re going to survive the winter here as skinny as you are. You do have your gloves, don’t you?” she clucked. Scraping sounds drew a mental picture of the woman stirring a big pot.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Really.” Johnny finished up his meal first to the sound of Josie chuckling, then to her melodious humming as she worked. It made her easy to find in the growing bustle of the room, and Johnny gave her shoulder a quick squeeze of thanks as he left.

Icy air bit his exposed face when he stepped outside, and he paused to pull on his gloves. At the same time, he listened carefully. The quiet told him it was still dark. Noise increased with daylight as the city woke up. The occasional clatter of hooves on cobblestone as deliverymen made their stops was all that could be heard at the moment, and Johnny headed to the livery where his brother would meet him after the cabs were assigned and released.

His morning walk, now very familiar to him, was a time where he could have time by himself. In his mind, he tried to imagine he was in Teresa’s garden, or on the boardwalk of Morro Coyo in front of the saloon he and Scott liked to frequent, but he couldn’t trick himself that way. His feet and cane echoed on the hard city surfaces and any comparison to Lancer was lost. By the time he arrived at the livery, his mind was fully on work. It had to be, or the Madrid in him would make itself known.

Harry arrived shortly after him, already falling into somewhat of a routine after three days together. The pair of them inspected the horses, tack and coaches, one visually one and by touch. It was a daily ritual that both men had come to enjoy and the rest of the workers had come to respect in the short period of time. They weren’t used to someone actually being there before a problem occurred. Edwins had always arrived late in the morning, grumpily logged who had taken what, and more often than not either drank in the office or disappeared for hours, arriving just in time to collect the business’ share of the fares before calling it a day. Johnny’s more careful attention had allowed earlier release of the cabs and more fares, resulting in more income and the promise of another horse or two to rent if it kept up.

The private boarders also commented on the improved quality of their horse’s coats and feet. Diamante had even come by in person to voice his approval.

The only person Johnny wanted to impress was his brother. He had to make Scott see that he was fine. The whole idea of having to prove himself to anyone made him grind his teeth in annoyance, but he knew it was necessary. Johnny wondered if Murdoch would have been the easier one to convince. At the thought of his father, Johnny’s heart skipped. To keep his thoughts from his former home, he turned back to his work.



Deciding to walk to the livery stable ended up being a good idea, Scott surmised. He’d listened to his grandfather’s chatter politely and with vague interest,

but his thoughts were on his brother. Finally, after Scott decided he'd played his dutiful grandson card to the hilt, he prepared to leave.

"Meet me for dinner at Antonio's, 5:00, and we'll walk from my office."

"I don't know what Johnny's plans are . . ."

"All I'm asking is for you to spend some time with me. I'm also interested to see what you think of Johnny's progress."

That comment made Scott remember the thoughts that crossed his mind yesterday about Harlan's apparent interest in Johnny's well-being, but he decided to hold his tongue and curiosity until later. He agreed to meet for dinner.

Walking had cleared his mind and gave him some time to again appreciate the brilliant display of changing leaves that Boston offered and California lacked. A tight smile followed when he realized what followed - a bitter winter that he wouldn't miss for a second.

By the time he got to the stable he was relaxed and ready to see what Johnny was so anxious to show him. Something about the earnest request by his brother to see what he'd learned struck Scott wrong from the beginning. He knew Johnny pretty well, and was sure there was something he wasn't saying. Was the blindness permanent after all and he wanted to waylay any pity? Was he trying to usurp any guilt he thought his family may be harboring about his condition? Whatever it was, Scott was going to make it clear that everything was all right. He wanted a relaxed, enjoyable ride back to California, not one filled with the tension of unspoken fears. Lord knows, he was ready for some relaxation.

The Easton Street Livery and Stables wasn't hard to find. Scott remembered the place from his childhood when his Grandfather used to board a carriage horse there. Chuckling, he walked through the yard area and realized that the place was smaller than he recalled; then again, he had been much smaller, then, too!

He stopped in the center of the yard and caught the scent of fresh straw beckoning him to the dry coziness of the barn. As he walked toward it, he saw the side corral hosted the jumpy Roca from yesterday. A young boy was in the process of haltering the mare, speaking softly to her as he did so. Just inside the barn he immediately spotted the familiar form of his brother as he slipped into a stall. Scott ambled in that direction and noted that the first several stalls were empty.

Soft Spanish made his heart surge and realize just how much he'd missed his brother. In his mind's eye he saw Johnny speaking just like that as he brushed his cantankerous palomino. Scott felt a tiny stab of guilt for not paying any attention to the horse in his brother's absence, but he knew the two would be reunited soon.

Scott recognized Murdoch's worn cane propped against the wall as he leaned on the top of the stall door. Johnny was running his hand over a fuzzy bay. The horse's ears flickered, and the long head turned in Scott's direction. Johnny's voice faltered and Scott realized he'd better announce himself.

"Hey, brother. Who's your friend?"

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Johnny's shoulders visibly relaxed a little as he turned his attention back to the horse. "It's one of my boss's horses. Seems to have a bit of a tendon problem." He began speaking low Spanish again and the horse turned away from Scott and resumed a relaxed position, ears angled toward the soft cadence. Johnny ran his long fingers down a front leg for a moment, then stood and affectionately patted the bay's shoulder. "Feels good. Another day or two and he can be back in cab rotation."

"Is that why the stalls are empty? Those are the cab horses?"

"Yeah. The rest of 'em are boarders. So, brother, how's old Harlan?"

Johnny checked the horse's water and made his way to the stall door. Scott opened it for him and gave a brief overview of how his morning went. Johnny laughed lowly and gathered his cane from beside the door.

"You know grandfather. Boston is the center of the world. So tell me, what are you in charge of here? Doctoring?" Scott watched Johnny closely as he spoke. It was very clear that his brother knew this barn very well. Before answering, one of the workers conferred briefly with Johnny before scurrying off to complete a chore.

"Well, Boston," Johnny's grin at the blatant use of the nickname made Scott chuckle in return as his little brother continued. "I'm a little more involved than that. Actually, I'm the manager."

Surprised, Scott stopped, speechless. Johnny took a couple of steps before realizing he wasn't being followed, and also stopped. He twisted around.

"The manager?" Scott said in what he hoped was a light tone. "You handle everything?"

"Yeah, I do." The sound of a horse coming in the back door caught Johnny's attention. The nervous Roca had entered the stable with an equally nervous stable boy - the jittery tone of the boy's voice made his fear of the horse obvious. Johnny stepped back out of the aisle and addressed the pair. "Simon, relax. She's feelin' your nervousness." The mare's feet made an uneven pace that was loud in the hard dirt of the barn aisle.

"Yessir," Simon replied. He took a breath and Scott saw the boy's frame relax a little. Roca mirrored the relaxation after a few seconds, her pace becoming more even.

"That's right," Johnny crooned as they passed by. "She's just a little sensitive, that's all. There ain't a mean bone in that mare's body."

"Yessir," Simon repeated. "I know. I'll get over it." By the time the mare was secured to a tie ring at the front of the barn, she was in a much better frame of mind.

"Get over it'?" Scott whispered as he caught up to his brother.

Johnny grinned. "Yeah. She bolted last week and dragged the kid halfway down the street."

"He didn't just let go of the rope?" Scott asked quietly.

"Nope. Didn't want her to get away and get hurt. He's a good kid." Johnny turned and started moving down the aisle again. "They're doin' fine now."

Scott wondered how hard it was for his brother not to simply step in and take over handling the nervous mare. Johnny wasn't much for telling as doing; was this something else that had changed in addition to his clothes? Falling in behind his brother, Scott again noted how plain his brother looked. And those glasses. . . he wasn't sure he could ever get used to those.

"So, you seemed to have made some kind of impression on the owner. How did you manage that?"

Johnny told the story of meeting Harry, and how that led to the introduction to Diamante, and how Johnny had listed the problems with the stable after being there less than an hour. "You know, I was my normal and convincing self," he finished with a grin.

"Worked the old Lancer charm, huh? So, who's going to take over when you come home?"

Scott noted the split second of hesitation and the slight slip of the smile before Johnny answered.

"I have a partner," Johnny said slowly. "Come on, I have some things to do in the office, then we'll go to the Institute and see Teresa."

The quick change of subject only added to Scott's feeling that something wasn't right. Swallowing any more questions, Scott made himself recall his promise to Johnny and keep quiet. It wasn't going to be easy.

The rest of the day moved quickly and drove home to Scott how independent Johnny really was. He knew Murdoch would be just as pleased as he was; the few times the subject of the future came up on the cattle drive, neither of them imagined such improvement.

The stable office was orderly and neat, reminding Scott strongly of Murdoch's desk at Lancer. Something relating to paperwork and neatness must have sunk in after all, he thought humorously. Scott met Harry and liked him immediately. Johnny left the stable in his partner's hands when they left for lunch at the Institute.

Teresa greeted them and seemed to have a problem letting go of them. Everywhere they went during the tour of the building, her hand was either on Scott or Johnny's arm, or both. She was obviously thrilled at having the brothers together again. She happily pointed out all the inspirations for change at Lancer. Scott couldn't help but wonder how Murdoch would take the changes, but knew he'd let his ward do what she wanted.

Scott not only sat in on some of the Braille classes, he helped instruct, following Teresa's lead. Johnny had learned enough to help out in some of the classes, too, but Scott didn't think he looked as comfortable as Teresa. What Johnny did best was work with some of the younger children. Scott couldn't tell what, exactly, his brother was teaching them, but the small group giggled a lot while Johnny seemed content and involved.

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What Scott found most amazing was how Johnny greeted everyone. He knew who they were before they spoke half the time, and that wasn't only in the Institute. When they took a small group out for a walk, Johnny greeted most of the shopkeepers near the Institute. That smile still worked every time, Scott realized as he shook his head at the audacity of some of his brother's comments that accompanied the smile.

Scott met Dr. Boyer briefly when he stopped by to drop off some medicine. As he shook Scott's hand, Scott noticed the kindness of the man's face. Wanting to speak to the doctor about Johnny's eyes, Scott asked for a meeting. The doctor glanced toward Johnny, then back and Scott knew what he was going to hear. "You'll have to speak to your brother, Mr. Lancer. I can't speak about him without his permission. But if you manage to get him to agree, I'll be here tomorrow most of the day."

Scott nodded and said he understood.

By late afternoon, Scott had to admit that Johnny had done well during his short time in Boston and fit in better than he'd ever imagined he would. If he's fine here, then Lancer will be a snap, he thought with satisfaction. He wondered if that was the point of this show-and-tell. Knowing Dr. Boyer's diagnosis, had Johnny wanted to make it crystal clear what his limits were before he came home? Did he want to make sure there would be no pity? Whatever the reason, Scott knew Johnny's point had been made. Clearly. His brother was fine.

With the last of the classes finished, Johnny said he had to get back to the livery and finish out the day. Teresa walked with them, chatting gaily. At the entry gate to the stable, Johnny flagged down Harry's returning cab to take Scott to Garrett's office.

"I'll see you in the morning, Johnny," Scott promised. "Our train leaves in two days so we can hopefully beat the snow."

"And be at Lancer for Thanksgiving!" Teresa said excitedly. "I have a lot to do, and I can't wait. I wonder if Jelly's fattened up a turkey for us?"

"There's always Dewdrop," Scott teased, cowering at Teresa's swat.

Johnny just stood and smiled. Scott playfully patted Johnny's cheek. "And you need to start packing, little brother. I'll see you two tomorrow."

Teresa walked him to the cab. "Have a nice dinner with Harlan," she said, trying to sound serious but failing to hide her smirk.

"I'm sure I will, thank you very much," he said with pretend indignation, and then pecked her on the forehead before stepping in the cab and being whisked away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Johnny knew it was time to tell Teresa and Scott that he wouldn't be returning to Lancer. He heard Teresa saying her farewell to his brother as he turned and sauntered toward the barn. He knew this barn well - all the smells, noises and certainly the stall occupants - and it wasn't so hard to think of this place as his home now. He heard light footfall signaling Teresa's return, and then her familiar lavender smell told him when she was close. When she stopped next to him, Johnny offered his arm and asked her to come with him.

"We should be getting back to the Institute, Johnny, it's getting late." She took his elbow and he led her outside and toward the small building he would be calling his own soon. "It's cold out here!" she said lightly, snuggling in closer. "Did you leave something in the office?"

"Yeah," he said slowly, stepping onto the small porch and pushing the door open. A trace of warmth trickled out from the inside from the struggling fire in the stove. They quickly stepped in and shut the door. "Sit down for a minute, querida. I'll get the fire going again."

"Johnny, we really should be going . . ." The statement was heavy with unspoken questions.

This was the time. Stoking the small stove helped him to order his thoughts. With the fire blazing again, Johnny turned to the young girl but found the words more difficult to find than he expected. He dropped his head and fiddled with a piece of bark that had flaked off the wood in the fire. Seeming to know he wanted to say something important, Teresa waited patiently.

Finally, he said it. "I'm not going back with you and Scott."

Leaving his mouth with apparent ease, the words actually left Johnny's throat feeling as dry as the bark he picked at in his hand. If he ever wanted a second of sight, this was the moment; would Teresa truly understand?

"What do you mean?" she stammered. "Of course you're coming with us!"

"No, honey, I can't. Don't you see. . ."

A rustle of motion brought her directly in front of him. "I don't see, Johnny, and neither will Scott or Murdoch! You need to come home. You've learned so much and

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doing so well! You'll be fine!" He felt her soft hands on his, and realized she was reassuring him; she didn't get his meaning.

Johnny dropped the bark and firmly took her hands in his grip, but was unable to lift his head and feign meeting her eyes. "You don't understand," he started.

"Understand what, Johnny? That you're part of a family? That we all love you and want you home?" Teresa's voice quavered with the last few words and Johnny felt his resolve wobble. Then the smell of gun smoke came to his mind, and he gripped her harder. "Johnny, that hurts!"

"This is my home now!" he blurted, giving the girl a shake. "Here! This place. I can't go back to Lancer. Ever."

"What?" Teresa whispered, shocked. "No! That's not true!"

"Teresa, it's too dangerous. You know that. You saw that. I can't go back." The hard edge he'd hoped for in his voice simply wasn't there and Johnny cursed himself for sounding like he was pleading.

"Dangerous? For who? You?" Now he could tell that she was fighting tears, and he released her with a small shove and turned his back.

"For everyone. Elsom was just a taste of it. I can't risk everyone's life by being there. I can't even protect myself." Johnny wrapped his arms around his chest, trying to feel any measure of warmth from the small stove because, suddenly, he was chilled to the bone. "Don't you see that I would die slowly?" he whispered.

"Johnny," Teresa tried to speak, but was unable to conquer her quiet tears. Instead she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his back and letting the tears flow.

He stood straight, not allowing the gesture to sway him. Inside, he felt like a corner had been turned and he was all alone. It was done. Now he had to tell Scott.

There was no point in trying to talk any more. Johnny waited patiently until Teresa stopped crying. By then, the office felt too close. Johnny wrapped her up in her coat, and slipped his on just before taking her hand and leading her to the door. Collecting his cane, he opened the door and they stepped outside. Teresa was mostly quiet, reduced to an occasional snuffle as he led her from the livery to the street.

As they had done almost daily for their weeks here, Johnny and Teresa walked the edge of the city, this time in silence. Neither one could find any words. After a while, Johnny felt a tickle on his cheek.

"It's snowing," he said.

"Just a flurry," Teresa whispered. "It will be over in a minute." She hugged his arm more tightly.

"You need to get inside." Johnny stopped and listened carefully to the passing traffic. A man called - one of his drivers - and Johnny waved the cab to a stop.

Before mounting the step into the coach, Teresa took Johnny's hand. "Johnny, I ..."

He quieted her with a small smile and a hand on her cheek. "I'll be fine, *querida*," he said. "I want to walk."

"Okay," Teresa replied. She sounded lost and defeated, and Johnny bit his lip. Then, after a moment, he heard her settle into the cab, sniffing.

He told the driver to take her to the Institute then turned back to the young woman. "I'll be along in a while." Johnny could only imagine her nodding mutely, unable to speak. The driver clucked, and the coach pulled away. Johnny stood for a moment, hearing the noise of the wheels on cobblestone recede among the other noises of the city.

Deciding to retreat for a while, Johnny returned to the livery and finished his duties checking in the cabs and horses, and checking out a pair of evening cabbies. He and Harry counted the receipts, locked them away, and shut down for the night. His partner bid him goodnight. Johnny was fully aware of how quiet he'd been and knew Harry was curious – the tone of his voice gave that away and Johnny smiled sadly to himself. As a blind man, he'd come to realize how clear unspoken words could be.

He still felt unsatisfied. Johnny paused on the sidewalk in front of the livery to collect his thoughts. Positioning his cane to take some pressure off his leg, Johnny reflected on what he had said to Teresa.

Home. He knew Lancer would always be home in his heart and he could never return. He felt the need for moral reinforcement before speaking to Scott and decided to seek out Sarah and Colin. Not one to talk out his problems, Johnny just needed to hear the two of them together for a little while. They were a rare warm spot in this Godforsaken city, and he needed that warmth as reassurance that he could stay here.

Johnny turned and began to move thorough the crowd using his sharp sense of hearing and his cane, the map to the Llewellyns clear in his head. Letting his mind wander a bit, Johnny noted that his leg wasn't bothering him too much today, and that led to the idea that maybe he was getting used to the cold. That idea made him frown; no matter how well he did here, Johnny knew that deep inside, he hated it here and always would. Every little feeling of comfort or familiarity killed a little more of the Madrid inside him.

Johnny missed the perfume of chaparral and mesquite and sage, longed to feel a hot Santa Ana in his face and breathe dry air. He missed Barranca and Murdoch and Maria. But he also knew this was where Johnny Lancer had to stay if the people he loved were to be safe.

A deep sigh cleansed those thoughts from his mind. Using the sound of the crowds and the feel of the ground under his feet, Johnny turned down the street that would lead him to the small house of his new friends. After walking a bit, using smells, sounds and familiar greetings to guide him, he smelled the bread shop and knew he had two blocks to go. He turned the corner.

The smoke smell tickled his nose well before the sound of shouting people and Johnny's instincts sharpened. He walked a little more quickly, keeping a clear vision

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of where he was in his mind. More voices indicated a growing crowd where there should be quiet streets. He pushed his way through the people, his cane tip telling him exactly where he was. The smell of smoke eventually dominated everything.

"Where are the firemen?" a woman cried. "Those people need help!"

Johnny's heart jumped and he pushed his way to the forefront. The heat of the fire touched his cheeks and the direction it came from made his stomach turn. He grabbed an arm to his right.

"Whose house?" he demanded.

There was a second of hesitation before a man said, "That blind couple . . ." Johnny pushed himself off the man into the face of the growing inferno.



Scott entered his grandfather's small office feeling a bit out of place and a little stunned from what he had seen in the past day. Harlan Garrett sat behind a large mahogany desk that was as sterile in appearance as Murdoch's was down to earth. His grandfather motioned Scott to come in and rose to his feet in greeting. The smile on the older man's face, for some reason, set the fine hairs on the back of Scott's neck at attention. He stopped just inside the door and slowly closed it behind him trying to pinpoint why he was suddenly on edge.

"Sit down, my boy. Drink?" Harlan's smile didn't change any as he approached the sideboard. When Scott nodded shortly, Garrett poured a pair of brandies. "Just acquired this. Imported, you know, and I must say I haven't tasted anything better. A toast to your brother's success?"

That's when it hit the blond Lancer why he was uneasy. As he accepted the crystal glass, he got the clear impression that his grandfather's smile was of the 'cat that ate the canary' type. Scott felt his eyes narrow as he held the drink aloft. "How about to his happiness instead?"

Harlan hesitated, but the smile never faltered. "Of course. To Johnny Lancer's happiness, then."

They both took a sip, and the elder Bostonian motioned for his grandson to sit. As Scott did so, Harlan turned to his office window. "Look at that bay. Not a more beautiful sight anywhere, I'd say."

"That's debatable, but it is a nice view." Scott felt himself growing tense. "Nothing beats Lancer to me."

Harlan turned slowly and settled in the chair behind the elegant desk. The smile was gone, but his eyes were bright. Scott felt a chill, recognizing the look from when his grandfather had secured a particularly lucrative deal. "I'm sorry to hear that. So, you are planning to return to California, then."

"Yes, of course. With Johnny and Teresa."

There was a moment of silence as their eyes locked. Scott got the distinct impression that he was being evaluated. Finally, Harlan spoke. "You may want to rethink that, Scotty."

The younger man felt his heart beat a little faster, as he suddenly felt like prey under a predator's gaze. "I don't have to rethink it. That's why I'm here. To bring Johnny home where he belongs."

Garrett leaned back in his padded chair, his eyes still on his grandson, the fine brandy put aside on the buffed desk. "My boy, think for a moment. Your brother has found a niche here. He's busy doing something he's good at aside from gunfighting – and is safe."

"He's good at a lot of things, grandfather." Scott, taking offense, felt his hackles rise in defense. Carefully, he put down the glass in preparation for the other shoe to drop. And he knew there was another shoe hanging in his grandfather's grip.

"But he's safe here. What if he were to return home and word got around that the infamous Johnny Madrid cannot defend himself? You can't protect him around the clock. His pride wouldn't let you, anyway."

Scott turned that over in his mind and he felt sick when a realization hit him. He leaped to his feet and pointed an accusing finger at the man who raised him. "You arranged Elsom's challenge! Somehow, you got the word out and made sure someone answered the call, didn't you?"

But Garrett was calm; too calm. He steepled his fingers together, his elbows on the arms of his chair and didn't even look insulted at the comment. "It was bound to happen. You know that. How do you know it won't happen again? Your half-breed brother's past has got to come back to him sometime. In fact, what do you think would happen if word got around here that he was a killer?"

Furious, Scott stood with clenched fists, fighting to keep from strangling the man sitting before him. Harlan continued.

"Boston society isn't as forgiving, you know. Nobody would want to do business with him and he'd be unemployable. Destitute."

"He can come back home to Lancer." Scott's voice was dangerously calm. He knew he had to hold his fury if he was to find out exactly what the older man had in mind. It didn't take long.

The smile that molded Garrett's mouth was as chilling as his eyes. "And as soon as word got around about his condition, he would be dead. All I ask to ensure your 'brother's' safety is for you to stay here and become my business partner. You will see that it's where you belong, Scotty. You will thank me, I know, when you are older."

Scott, suddenly feeling hot and smothered, exploded. He stepped forward and slammed his palms on the solid desk. "I can't believe you'd resort to extortion! That's exactly what this is!"

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Just then the door banged open and two very large, well dressed men burst into the room and grabbed Scott's arms.

"HEY!" the lean blond yelled, surprised, as he was easily pulled back several steps.

Harlan didn't bother standing, but motioned for the beefy pair to release the angry young man. They obeyed immediately. "It's all right, gentleman. I'm sure my grandson won't hurt me." Scott continued to glare at his relation as he straightened his sleeves. "You may leave. Thank you."

The two huge men vanished with amazing stealth that belied their size. The door clicked quietly shut. Scott wondered for a brief second where those men had been hiding.

Harlan continued, unruffled. "Extortion is such a dirty word. I think of it as 'Checkmate'."

Scott looked disgusted. "You are a despicable man," he growled.

"I will do anything to keep my legacy here and alive," the elder man said calmly. "And for your information, everything I know about Mr. Madrid is in a sealed envelope, locked in a safe in my attorney's office. On the event of my death or other infirmed state, it is to be turned over to the newspapers. I call that insurance. So, it's either Lancer without your brother or Boston with him."

Scott jabbed a finger at him and spoke with disgust. "You're good at this, grandfather. Too good. No doubt you've done this before."

"It does become easier. You'll see."

"I'd never stoop as low as you!"

Harlan smirked. "You think the west is rough? It's dog eat dog here, too - just not literally. You have no idea how low I'll stoop, boy!"

"What does that mean?" Scott demanded, his voice rising again.

"Don't make me show you. Stay here where you belong, Scotty."

Lancer's heir was at a loss for words. This was the last conversation in the world he had expected to have with his grandfather, but, somehow, he knew he should have expected it. Did gratitude make him blind to this man's motives all this time?

Harlan sat up and began to arrange papers on his desk. He spoke in a business like tone. "Be in this office tomorrow to take your place by my side. 8:00. Wear the suit I've provided you in your wardrobe. Now go. I have work to do."

Scott stood fast, his blood simmering in his veins. He slapped his palms on the mahogany desk and leaned in as close as he could. Harlan didn't flinch or back down. Scott locked his furious eyes on his grandfather's, and in a low, strong voice, said, "When hell freezes over, old man."

Then, he spun on his heel and strode from the office, slamming the door behind him.

Harlan Garrett barely gave the door a glance, but sadly shook his head in regret. "You have no idea how serious I am, Scotty," he said to himself.

Finding it difficult to center his thoughts, Scott stormed from the office building and down the street without a destination in mind. After a few blocks, his fury somewhat under control, Scott's mind began to ponder his next move.

Checkmate, his grandfather had said. How could I have been so naive to think he someday wouldn't treat me like he does a business partner? I should have had a clue with Julie and the Deegans.

First and foremost was how much to tell his brother and Teresa; this new development had left him in an awful position. Scott knew if he told Johnny what he just heard, the volatile young man's first impulse would be to pummel Harlan Garrett to a pulp; but then again, Johnny had been acting completely out of character since he left Lancer. Scott had to admit that in reality, he didn't know what Johnny would do, and that, in itself, added to his unease.

Would Johnny leave Boston? And if he did, where would he go? Scott had to bitterly admit that Harlan was right about his brother's safety at Lancer, especially if the old man followed up on his implied threat. Scott was well aware of Johnny's feeling of helplessness; that had been his biggest obstacle.

And what about Teresa? Would her knowing any of this put her in danger? Would not knowing put her in danger? Scott rubbed his forehead, a headache beginning to blossom from everywhere within his skull. The shock at seeing his grandfather at his worst had set Scott back a step or two and he felt like his life - which had been unbalanced at best lately - was careening down a path he didn't want to travel. He wondered if his heart would ever heal from this bitter betrayal of love. The first thing to do was to move from Garrett's house and figure out how to explain it to Teresa; for the meantime, Johnny was safe at the Institute.

It was out of the question to stay in Boston as Garrett wanted, but what about the consequences? Tormented by the awful choices in front of him, Scott wandered the busy streets of Boston pondering his first step. It hit him that Llewellyn may know more about this whole scheme, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt a drive to confront the man. Colin seemed sincere, and Johnny seemed to trust him, but Scott had been fooled by his wily grandfather one too many times. He had to speak to Colin to decide his allegiance. Scott turned on his heel and headed in the direction of the Llewellyn home.

When Scott was close to his destination, the troubled man was so deep in thought it took him a moment to realize that there was a smoky tinge to the light blanket of snowy mist that had rolled in with the dusk.

Fire!

Scott stopped and slowly turned, getting his bearings on the location of the smell. A shout in the distance snapped his head up and made him break into a run. He'd gone two blocks and turned a corner when he slammed into a busty woman

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dragging two screaming children. Forced to a stop as the trio shoved by, a milling crowd stayed his feet. Then his stomach sank as he looked over the heads in the crowd.

The Llewellyn's house was a blazing inferno.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Johnny used his cane and the direction of the heat to guide him. He skirted around the front of the house and found the short picket fence that ran the perimeter. Ignoring the screams of the bystanders to stop, Johnny dragged the cane tip over the rails, the blistering heat to his left telling him he was on the side of the house. Breathing was becoming difficult. The fence stopped at the back of the neighbor's house, and Johnny hopped over into the Llewellyn's back yard.

Forcing himself to take a second to orient himself, Johnny ran to the back of the house, feeling less of the heat on his face. He used his cane to break the rear window then dropped it to the ground. He yelled for Colin and Sarah and got no response. Coughing from the thick smoke that rolled out from the broken window, Johnny's eyes burned and watered uncontrollably, so he squeezed them shut - a difficult thing to do against his natural instincts, despite his blindness.

"Colin!" he yelled again as he scrambled over the window sill, ignoring the sharp pain of broken glass in his palms. Once inside, Johnny paused to recall the arrangement of the room and his current position in it. For a fleeting second, he missed his cane, but he positioned his arms in front of his body the way he'd learned from Colin and turned to his left. The dresser he remembered was still there. He jerked the table cloth off, sending something crashing to the floor. He dunked the cloth in the pitcher of water he knew was on a small table by the bed, and used the dripping cloth as a bandana around his nose and mouth.

Johnny pulled open the bedroom door and felt acrid smoke hit him in a thick wave. The heat was almost unbearable, but he felt his way down to the next doorway and kicked it in. He could hear hissing and the popping of consuming flame, but his senses told him the fire wasn't here yet; he had a precious few moments. He called out again, and felt for the bed. His searching hands found an unresponsive body.

Without taking the time to check for life, Johnny grabbed the form - Sarah, he realized - and threw her over his shoulder. He could feel burning flame all around, and realized the safest way out was the way he came in.

Johnny wobbled back into the hall and used one hand on the wall to feel his way. The incredible heat there raised instant blisters on his already bloody palm, but

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he forced his feet to move and his burning lungs to breathe. He found the doorway he wanted and staggered toward the back wall. Once at the broken window, he unceremoniously shoved her out the window.

"I got her, mister!" a man's voice called. "Come on out! The roof's about to cave in and the firemen are almost here!"

Ignoring him, Johnny turned back to the oppressive room and felt his way back into the hall to find Colin. Coughing deeply and ignoring the myriad of pains erupting on his body, he entered the bedroom again. This time, he could feel the heat near the ceiling and the burning embers raining down. When he touched the bed, the blankets were smoldering; a quick search revealed the bed was empty.

Johnny tried to call Colin's name, but, instead, erupted into a fit of coughing. As he turned go, he tripped over something and fell to his hands and knees. Ignoring the fiery pain in his hands, he felt around the floor and found a leg. Quickly, he found Colin's arm and drug him from the room and into the hall. As soon as he figured Colin's legs were clear, he heard a great and deafening crash.

A spray of hot ashes peppered in his face. With a surge of energy that came from a deeply engrained sense of survival, Johnny yanked Colin into his arms and stumbled down the hall. Brushing his shoulder against the wall as a reference, hot embers struck him as they fell from the engulfed ceiling. He could feel the fire licking the top of his head and smelled the acridness of burning hair as he made his way to the makeshift exit.

"JOHNNY!" Scott's voice sounded like angels from above and gave Johnny the spurt of hope he needed to make it to the window. Colin was yanked from his arms and he felt his hands on the window's sill just before things exploded in a brilliant flash of light.



Johnny's body hit Scott full in the chest, sending him reeling backwards among the flying debris and choking smoke. Instinctively, Scott wrapped his arms around his brother and they hit the ground rolling. Scrambling to place his body atop his limp brother when they came to a rest, Scott protected him from falling embers. He waited for what seemed like an eternity, and finally a hand on his shoulder set him in motion. He rolled aside onto to his back, coughing mightily.

"Mister? Are you all right?" The man speaking to him was covered in soot, his eyes and teeth white against the ashes on his face.

Scott stared at him for a shocked moment, then pulled his eyes away and turned them on his brother. Cough induced tears made it difficult at first to make out the details of the form crumpled on the dead grass, and he swiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. He felt the grit and grime of the fire scratch his face.

Grabbing Johnny's shoulder, Scott rolled his brother onto his back and patted his cheek. "Johnny?" he called between coughs. "Johnny! You hear me?"

"He's got a lot of blood there on his neck." The stranger knelt down and gently pulled Johnny toward him. "Check the back of his head."

Still coughing, Scott ran his fingers through the sticky mass of hair and felt a large bump. His fingers came away covered in blood. "Something must have hit him when the house collapsed," Scott said in a husky voice. They settled the injured man back onto the grass and Scott pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket. Gently, he folded it and pressed it against the wound. "Sorry, brother, it looks like those headaches will be back." Scott tore his eyes from Johnny's lax face and met the stranger's eyes. "What about the other two? Colin and Sarah?"

"Looks like the woman's still unconscious - too much smoke, someone said - but the man seems to be coming around."

"Someone send for a doctor?"

"I don't know."

"Can you get a wagon? There's a doctor at the Institute and it's closer than the hospital."

The man stood up. "I'll see what I can do."

When the man moved off, Scott finally noticed the surroundings. The fog was tinted dark grey from the ashes, and the scene of destruction around him looked like some eerie battleground. He kept the pressure on Johnny's wound as he craned his neck, his throat feeling raw as he coughed, and saw two small groups huddled around some things on the ground. He assumed it was Colin and Sarah, and he was glad to see they had help. He felt something tapping one of his hands and turned to find a woman offering him some water.

The firemen called back and forth to each other as they fought down the remains of the blaze. When the house collapsed, they were able to contain the inferno. Scott could see people, blending in with the black fog, standing around and watching.

"Thanks," he croaked, taking the glass and enjoying a big swallow. The woman, meanwhile, had dropped to her knees and started wiping Johnny's face with a damp towel. His face was peppered with blisters and nicks, his hair stiff in the places where the ends had burned. "Thank you," Scott managed to rasp, draining the glass.

"He's such a nice young man," the woman said softly as she worked. "He greeted me whenever he stayed with the Llewellyns. He always knew who I was. He's a wonder, this boy."

Scott nodded dumbly, his thoughts finally finding some order. The woman's gentle prattle calmed his nerves and he was able to focus on his brother, the encounter with his grandfather hovering in the background like a vivid nightmare. He had no idea how long they had been there when a voice broke into his thoughts.

"Scott! Let me look at him."

Scott jerked into awareness to see Dr. Boyer's kind eyes studying him. The doctor's hands were gently trying to pry his from Johnny's wound. "Oh," Scott said,

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pulling his hands away. "Sorry." The woman who had cleaned Johnny's face smiled at him sympathetically and offered a small flask. With trembling hands, Scott took a swig of something that burned his raw throat but felt wonderful once it hit bottom.

"It's all right. You look like you've suffered a bit of shock yourself." Boyer turned his attention to the limp figure of Johnny and frowned. "He's got quite a bump, but the bleeding has stopped," he clucked. "The burns don't look too bad. They'll be uncomfortable, but will heal. He may have a pretty good concussion."

"Did you check the Llewellyns?" Scott whispered, his throat still burning.

"Briefly. I think Sarah just had too much smoke, as did Colin, but he's got a good sized bump on his head, too. Must have been from something falling. They're both coming around." The doctor quickly wrapped Johnny's head. "There's a wagon over there," Boyer nodded to his left. "Let's get them to the Institute. You men! Give us a hand!"

Three young men materialized from the crowd and helped lift Johnny. The woman with the flask had a firm grip on Scott's elbow and steered the dazed Lancer to follow. Scott was first in the bed of the wagon and assisted in loading the other three. Colin began to protest dazedly, and by the time the wagon moved he seemed to be somewhat alert. Scott cradled his brother's head in his lap and spoke soft words of assurance to deaf ears.

"Scott?" Colin asked when he finally located the voice.

"Yes, Colin, I'm here."

Instead of calming, Colin became more agitated and, against Scott's suggestion that he lie still, managed to sidle up to the lean Lancer. "Scott, is there anyone else around? Who's driving the wagon?"

"It's that big attendant from the Institute. Dr. Boyer was here . . ." Scott still felt a little dazed.

Colin grabbed Scott's arm with painful force. His voice was urgent and raspy from smoke. "It wasn't an accident, Scott. The fire. Someone did it on purpose."

"What?" Shock made the word loud, and Colin shushed him nervously.

"Someone hit me. Sarah was asleep, and someone hit me when I was in the kitchen." He briefly touched the lump on the back of his head. "I heard a noise and was checking the house. It didn't knock me out, though, and I managed to get a swipe at him with my cane."

Remembering the intricate, heavy dragon's head atop Colin's cane, Scott had to ask. "Did you get him with the metal part?"

"Yes, I think I did, but I was on the floor. He hit me again before I could get up. I think; it's kind of blurry, actually, but I do know I hit him." Colin paused as Scott assessed this information. "And I think I know who did it."

"Who?" Scott said flatly, oddly afraid of what he was going to hear.

"Well, I'm sure he didn't do it himself, but he had someone do it for him."

"WHO?"

"Your grandfather. Harlan Garrett."

Scott's stomach flipped sickeningly and he unconsciously gripped his brother tighter. He was glad that Johnny was unable to hear this. Then he felt an odd sort of mask fall over his features as he said without emotion, "Go on."

Colin took a fortifying breath, topped with a cough, and began. "When Garrett interviewed me to teach your brother, I was in a different state of mind. I was angry and bitter at not being able to support my wife the way I felt she deserved. Being blind in this society is brutal, and I felt very put on and sorry for myself. Sarah, though, was happy and kept trying to convince me everything was all right.

"The money to teach your brother was good, but Garrett offered me something else. I think he knew all about me and picked me because I was angry and wanted more. And he offered it."

"Grandfather's good at that," Scott growled. "What did he want?"

Colin ducked his head. "It seemed so innocuous. All he wanted was for me to make sure Johnny came to Boston, which didn't seem so odd, but once we got here, he expected regular reports of your brother's daily activities. I started feeling like a spy. I knew it was more than well-meaning interest in his welfare."

"He was looking for an opportunity."

"Yes. He was the one that got Johnny's job arranged. I had to research Diamante and Garrett used that to blackmail him into taking Johnny on. It's turned out to be a good thing, however. Your brother has turned that place around and has a gift with horses and tack. He's quite welcome there now."

"You knew about the blackmail?"

Colin blushed. "Yes. I suggested it."

"I see."

"I knew I was going the wrong direction, but the money was . . . enticing. I couldn't stop myself. After all, it was only words I was selling, and look how well the stable set up worked out; that's how I reasoned it."

"Like I said, my grandfather is good at what he does," the bitter edge was clear. "There's more, I take it."

"Yes. Your brother began to make me see that money isn't everything. He has pride and self-confidence, but more than that, knows the value of family. I know what he put on the line to come here." Colin shifted slightly and momentarily touched the unconscious man's shoulder. His voice was full of wonder. "The more I found out about your brother from Teresa and Sarah, the worse I felt about myself. Can you imagine having to change who you are to keep your family safe? Walking away from Lancer like he did? At first I thought he was crazy; he was turning his back on everything I ever wanted. But after a while, I began to realize why he did it and what was truly important in this life."

Scott felt a knot begin to grow in his throat and he nodded, letting his eyes fall to his motionless brother. Suddenly, everything made sense – all the things Johnny

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said, the way he said them, and his reason for doing things in the order he wanted; Scott realized that when Johnny came east, he had no intention of returning to Lancer.

His brother was turning his back on his home and what made him who he was, forging not only a new life, but a new identity as well. No wonder the Johnny he knew wasn't to be found here - that Johnny was left behind in California. All this sacrifice was done to protect his family.

Burning eyes signaled Scott's sorrow at the loss of the brother he knew. Quickly, he wiped his eyes and felt a newborn determination to get him back, and as a result, heal his own heart. Realizing Colin was waiting for a response, he managed to whisper, "He is remarkable."

Colin cleared his throat. "Anyway, late this afternoon, right after you left, Garrett called me in and in essence, ordered me to kill your brother."

"What?" Scott's head jerked up and found Colin's face, looking for any kind of sign that he didn't really hear those words. Deep inside, however, he knew it was true.

Colin brought his hands together into a nervous ball. "I could tell by the questions what the intent was. I finally asked him directly if he wanted Johnny dead. He said yes. Then he offered more money than I could ever dream of having."

Ashamed, Scott felt his face flush.

"I turned him down and left. I think he sent someone to my house to shut me up permanently. I'd become a liability." Colin's voice broke. "My selfishness almost killed my wife and your brother."

"No," Scott corrected, feeling the anger rise. "My grandfather almost killed them and it's time he was held accountable."

"He's a strong and powerful man in this city, Scott. You can't go against him alone."

"I'm not alone. I have you."

Fear clearly flashed across Colin's face. His mouth opened for a moment, obviously ready to protest, but then it snapped shut. A shamed flush crossed his face, but then he set his jaw determinedly and spoke. "Yes. You have me. I will testify when you need me."

The wagon came to a jerky stop in front of the Institute and Scott's heart was lightened to see Teresa race from the front doors. Family; it was everything, he realized. And I'm making sure mine stays together.

Scott felt strangely energized, working automatically to get his brother and Sarah in the house. Teresa hovered at first then took lead on taking care of Johnny. Colin stayed by Sarah's side while they waited for Dr. Boyer to return.

Teresa settled in Johnny's room next to his bed and began to peel his clothes from him with Scott's help. The children that Johnny had befriended were sent to heat water and find bandages.

"His sleeves are burned," Teresa whispered. "So are his arms."

Scott grimly peeled away the sections of cloth that adhered to his brother's skin, glad Johnny wasn't awake. While Teresa began washing Johnny's face, Scott removed the pants, parts of which crumbled in his hands. He covered his brother's legs with a clean sheet. Johnny was unnaturally still. Teresa began to cry.

"He'll be all right, Teresa, I'm sure." Scott leaned over and gave her shoulder a reassuring rub.

"It's not just that, Scott. Johnny told me he wasn't going back to Lancer. Ever." She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and concentrated on washing each sooty finger clean.

"He did?" Scott felt his anger rise with the confirmation of his guess. Part of him still hoped all of this was a bad dream; the other part was ready to defend his family.

"He said it was too dangerous. That more gunmen would come looking for him, and he couldn't defend himself. He said we'd get hurt and he couldn't stand it." Her breath hitched. "Scott, he actually said he'd slowly die there." Tears fell freely at that point, dropping onto the ash on Johnny's skin and making salty spots.

Scott sank back, dazed and feeling suddenly trapped. The Johnny he knew was dead if he stayed or dead if he left. This had to stop. Now. He also knew that this conflict had risen to another level, a level that included men that didn't think twice about burning down a house occupied by a blind couple. He needed protection. Wordlessly, Scott twisted around and studied the room.

"What's wrong? What are you looking for?" Teresa sniffed again and managed to control her tears as she glanced at Scott.

"I know it's here. He didn't leave it at Lancer."

"What, Scott?"

"Johnny's gun. Where is it?"

"His gun!" She paused in her rinsing of the cloth. "Why? Scott, what's wrong?" Panic had crept into her voice.

Scott's eyes fell on the trunk. He reached to it, threw back the lid and began to dig. It only took a moment to find the worn rig on the bottom. He stood, and began to strap it on.

"Scott! What are you doing? You're scaring me!" The cloth forgotten, she rested her hands on Johnny's blistered arm, trembling.

"Teresa, I . . ." he couldn't keep the look of bottomless agony from his face, and his hands fumbled.

"What?" Teresa's voice was stronger.

"I think Grandfather did this. And more. I can't prove any of it, but I have to try."

"Did what? Hurt Johnny?" She stood, shocked.

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"I think he arranged for the fire." Ever so briefly, he relayed what Colin had told him, and Teresa's eyes grew wider with each word. When he finished, Dr. Boyer walked into the room.

"Let me see him in better light . . ." the doctor paused, eyeing Scott and Teresa. "Is there a problem here?" he asked slowly.

"No problem here," Scott said sternly, moving to the doorway. "But there is somewhere else."

"No, don't," Teresa begged, stepping in his way.

"Someone has to stop this madness," Scott said firmly, moving her aside and brushing by.

Protesting, Teresa began to follow him, but a groan from Johnny stopped her. Scott slipped out of the Institute as she turned back to their injured brother.



Johnny was sure someone was beating on his head with a stick but when he reached out to stop the action, all he found was open air. Instead, he pressed his palm against his forehead and groaned.

"Johnny?" Teresa's voice increased the throbbing, and he winced. The next time she spoke it was much quieter, and a cool hand was laid on his cheek. "You're awake."

She sounds so sad, he thought. How long have I been . . . here? It took a few more seconds for the pounding to recede enough for him to evaluate where he was. The roaring in his ears came and went with his movements, so he kept still, trying to recall what had happened.

The smell of smoke brought it all crashing down. Johnny struggled to sit up with his reward for the effort being a wave of nausea.

"I'd advise you to lie still, Johnny. Your head must hurt quite a bit," a man's voice said. Johnny's fuzzy mind tried to place it.

"Colin?" Johnny gasped, coughing. Each motion brought a new explosion in his head.

"He and Sarah are here at the Institute. You saved them, Johnny. They are going to be all right." The man's voice again - not Colin.

Something else niggled at him, and it took a few moments to find the thought amongst the pain. "Scott?"

"He went to Harlan's." Teresa's voice sounded tight with the statement. The man spoke again as Johnny coughed.

"You'll be doing that for a while, John. You took in a lungful." Dr. Boyer listened carefully to his patient's chest. "You're singed internally, which means we have to watch for pneumonia. I need to put a couple of stitches in that rock of yours you call a head. What were you thinking? Other than that, you're going to survive. Painfully for a while, but survive. The burns are superficial." Johnny felt the doctor ruffle his hair,

which made him wince in pain. "You needed a haircut, but that was a pretty drastic way to do it!"

Johnny tried to laugh, but it made him cough and his head exploded again. He noticed a flash of color against the constant ash grey with each stab of pain, but didn't pay it much heed.

"You sound awful." Another voice, low and raspy. "I want to thank you, Johnny."

"Colin?"

"Yeah. Sarah will be fine, too. Thank you."

"No need," Johnny replied, wondering if he was going to vomit now or later. Slowly, he tried to sit.

"Not too quickly, Johnny," Dr. Boyer said, helping him up. "Can you sit while I stitch your head?"

"Yeah," Johnny rasped, followed by a tight grouping of small coughs.

"Johnny, I . . ." Colin started, but the quick 'no' from Teresa caught Johnny's ear.

"What?" Johnny asked, fighting for focus and working to control the coughs.

"It's nothing, Johnny, really."

Johnny could always tell when Teresa was lying; the quaver in her voice always gave her away. This time, it was loud and clear even through the stampeding buffalo herd confined in his head.

An odd tugging on his head over the tender wound sidetracked any coherent thought, and his muzzy head finally figured out that the doctor was trimming the hair over where he was going to stitch. Completely distracted by the pain, Johnny worked to keep his stomach from revolting while Dr. Boyer stitched his head. Boyer didn't complain once about Johnny's coughing fits which made the task more difficult.

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut as the doctor worked. They felt gritty. In an effort to get a grip on one of the uncomfortable areas of his body, he blinked to start his eyes tearing to wash out the sand. It took a few blinks until he realized the ash grey had changed color.

It was dark when he shut his eyes and light when they were open. His confused brain took a few heartbeats to realize the implication. Slowly, he brought his hand near his face and was shocked to see movement - nothing clear, but definitely movement, like a shadow on a cloud. A fit of coughing and the related stabs of pain they caused distracted Johnny again, but his senses were tuned enough for Colin's voice to stop him cold.

"But Scott could be in danger!" The way Colin spoke quickly overrode any thought of his vision. Johnny slipped his arm from Teresa's hand and pushed himself to a sitting position using his elbow. He felt what must have been Colin's hand helping him up.

"You don't hold still for a minute, do you?" Boyer quipped as he quickly snipped the last stitch. As the doctor turned his attention to his patient's cut and burned

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hands, Johnny struggled to throw his legs over the edge of the bed. The doctor clucked with disapproval then quickly asked for fresh bandages. "I don't recommend walking around right now, Johnny."

"What kind of danger?" Johnny demanded, ignoring Dr. Boyer as his hands were wrapped. Johnny's senses fought to become alert around his various hurts and the persistent spasms of coughs were not only annoying, but painful. When Colin didn't respond right away, Johnny found his elbow with a newly bandaged hand. He gave the man a firm shake. "Tell me," he said in the flat, emotionless voice that signaled the rebirth of Johnny Madrid.

Colin didn't hesitate to tell him everything. The quiet distraction of Boyer's bandaging was easily ignored, but the steady pounding in Johnny's head hadn't lessened at all by the time the story was told. It had been difficult to concentrate on Colin's words when each painful throb washed out a bit more of the metallic grey that Johnny had expected to see for the rest of his life.

But Johnny couldn't dwell on hope right now. Harlan Garrett had managed to play him like a fool and his family was paying the price. He jerked his hand from the doctor and threw back the sheet covering his legs. The cold air on his hot legs made him hiss shortly.

"Johnny," Teresa started.

"Where's my pants?" Johnny demanded through clenched teeth, pulling the sheet back up and coughing again.

"Johnny, you can't go out like this," Dr. Boyer stated firmly. "That head wound alone . . ."

Something landed in his lap, and Johnny's fingers, sticking out from thickly wrapped palms, recognized a pair of his pants. He shook them out, the play of light momentarily distracting, but the realization that he was practically naked focused his attention on dressing.

"You aren't listening to a word I say, are you?" Boyer asked in exasperation.

"Sure I am, doc," Johnny rasped. "But listenin' and doin' what you say are two different things." Some kind of look must have passed between Boyer and Teresa, because the doctor sighed in resignation then Johnny felt fingers picking the remains of his shirt from his singed back. The warm burn of his skin became very sharp in the process, and when the doctor was done, a clean shirt landed in Johnny's quaking hands. The whole ordeal of dressing was both painful and exhausting and left him feeling slightly queasy.

Fighting to clear his head, Johnny again took Teresa's elbow. "My trunk," he coughed. "My gun is in the trunk."

"No, it's not," Teresa said quickly. "Scott took it."

"What?" Johnny pressed the palm of a hand on his temple in a physical attempt to clear his thoughts. "Then at least he's armed. Where's my cane?"

"I don't know," Teresa said.

“Take mine. Dr. Boyer found it in the front yard of my house,” Colin replied quickly, pressing the carved wood and dragon piece in Johnny’s hand. “The man that attacked me was probably going to keep it as a souvenir,” Colin growled. Then, in a softer voice, said, “I’d go with you but I just can’t leave Sarah.”

Johnny accepted the item and oriented himself by familiar sounds and the feel of a light breeze on his cheek. His vision was still patchy fog, but as he moved to the exit he noticed darker patches floating by – they were the things he was walking past. The images, although completely indistinct, were distracting and gave him a feeling of vertigo as he moved. His brain wasn’t used to having visual input anymore. Along with all the pain input, his mind had a lot to juggle. Johnny set his jaw and kept going; his senses would have to re-adapt on the move.

He was almost to the door when he heard hurried footsteps behind him and then felt the firm grip of Teresa’s hand on his arm.

“I’m going with you. If you say no, I’ll just follow, so don’t bother.”

Clearing his raw throat, Johnny realized he was actually glad for her support. He felt a little nauseous from trying to find his balance, and her being there helped. “Fine,” he croaked dryly. “But you gotta do what I say when the time comes.”

“And you’ll tell me when that is, I suppose?”

He pulled his arm tightly to his body, trapping her hand, and ignored the stars that resulted from another coughing fit. Finally able to speak again, he said hoarsely, “Hopefully just before bullets start flyin’.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Scott stormed from the Institute he had the presence of mind to button the heavy coat he wore to cover Johnny's gun. He went straight to the livery where Johnny worked and rented a carriage just big enough to carry his things from Garrett's house to the Institute. With an ironic snort, the thought struck him that at least his family wouldn't be staying in three different places anymore.

As he drove the familiar streets toward his boyhood home there were none of the warm memories that were there just the day before. Scott gripped the reins more tightly, the burning in his chest with each breath a reminder of how badly he'd been betrayed by his grandfather. Knowing he eventually had to go to the authorities, Scott was glad to have the chore of picking up his things first; it gave him a bit of time to try and control his anger enough to go over what he knew and what he could actually prove. He needed the time to present a logical case to the police. Knowing his grandfather and the resources available to him, Scott knew he had to have an ironclad case before taking action. The police would already be hesitant to take on a figure as important in this town as Harlan Garrett.

Suddenly, Boston seemed like a dirty place. Scott felt he wouldn't feel clean again until they all set foot back on Lancer land.

Snow-fattened clouds hovered high over the houses, seeming reluctant to embrace the city with its cleansing gift. The gas lamps lining the streets glowed warmly, casting orange light that reflected from the low ceiling of grey and illuminating the front of Harlan's house in an unflattering palette. Scott pulled the horse to a stop, stepped from the carriage and secured the rein to the hitch ring.

Steeled resolve drove Scott up the stairs and into the house. He didn't notice the figure step back into the shadows across the street watching him with eyes which glowed orange with angered fire.



Ephram Carver's arrangements were falling apart before his eyes.

He pressed his hand against the fresh wound that crossed his cheek. For a blind man, Llewellyn was accurate in his strike; the metal head of the cane had bitten deep. But Carver had proved his power over the invalid with his second blow. The joy in the whole thing was imagining Colin's slow, painful death in the flames and being able to relive the feeling every time he looked at the heavy cane he'd snatched from the unconscious man.

Then another invalid had come along and saved him! Ephram, in disgust, had hurled the cane in the front yard as he stormed from the scene. It was a worthless souvenir at that point.

Feeling deeply cheated, Ephram had watched from the crowd as the dark haired blind man saved the man and woman, rendering the whole event meaningless. And although the ecstasy of the event was gone, Ephram kept his head enough to know that this was nothing but trouble for him.

The throbbing cheek was a relentless reminder of his failure and the danger he was now in - his one possible witness was still alive. Although he was blind, Ephram knew well that loose ends were always a problem. A loose end is what put him in prison last time, and it wasn't going to happen again.

Patiently, Ephram lost himself in the crowd and watched the light haired man fawn over the dark haired meddler behind what should have been a bonfire of success. Instead, it was a flaming reminder of failure. Ephram knew the agent that hired him for this deed would be after him as well as the city authorities. Ephram realized he, too, was a loose end.

He had to get out of the city and fast, but he needed money to do so.

Ephram knew that his ultimate boss had wanted the occupants of that house dead. He didn't know why, and he didn't care. What he did know was that anyone saving the occupants could lead him to the money. All he had to do was wait. And now he was about to reap his reward.

When the blond man stalked from the Institute, he was armed with a handgun. Knowing the posture of revenge when he saw it, Ephram fell in behind the young man and followed him, hailing a cab when the young man disappeared in the stable. When he saw the man stop in front of a stately manor on Beacon Street, Ephram knew he'd hit pay dirt; the source of his money. He had his driver drop him several houses beyond, and then casually made his way to the front of the house after the blond stormed inside.

Now all he had to do was sit back and figure his next move. Ephram wasn't about to play the role of a sacrificial lamb. He settled into the bushes under the front window so he could hear what happened inside.

Ephram was the picture of patience, his surveillance telling him that the blond man and one other - a servant of some kind - were the only ones inside at the moment. After a while the sound of an approaching coach caught his attention, and

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between the branches of thick bushes he saw a nicely appointed coach pull up in front of the Beacon Street house.

Ephram's line of sight was perfect. First to exit the coach was a big man, familiar only in his bearing. He'd seen a lot of that kind before; big and physically intimidating, just like the man that had hired him for the fire job. Ephram found that type usually didn't hold the same mental level of challenge he was used to dealing with.

The second man out made him grin broadly - it was the man that had hired him for the job! With him gone, there was no direct tie to who supplied the money; an important fact to file away. The two men could have been related by the way they looked. Obviously bodyguards.

Last from the coach was an old man. The street light, hissing in the growing darkness, threw enough light to make Ephram smile again as it illuminated the man's face. Harlan Garrett! One of the richer men of the city! What luck! Ephram knew immediately that money would not be an issue here - there was plenty to be had. The coach rattled away as the trio ascended the stairs to the house.

Knowing patience to be a virtue, Ephram settled back into the growing shadows. There were at least five people in that house right now, and conflict was inevitable. Ephram knew that when the conflict was at its hottest, he would be able to make his entry unchallenged.

When he heard loud, angry voices inside, he rose to make his way to the back door. Then he heard the low murmur of voices near the street, and sank back into the umbra of the brush. In the deepening darkness, he watched as the couple paused in front of Garrett's house. Low voices indicated they didn't want to be heard over the arguing inside, which piqued Ephram's curiosity. Then the pair moved next to the blond man's carriage secured in front of the house, and one helped the other to get in. Now that they were closer to the gas lamp, Ephram parted the brush to clear his line of sight and immediately recognized another opportunity: A woman was being left behind in the coach!



They'd managed to snare a cab just outside the Institute. It wasn't one that Johnny knew, but he didn't care. He fished out what money he had and threw it at the cab driver before dropping heavily from the coach. He turned to help Teresa down as he hung heavily on the door. The cold air actually felt good on his hot skin.

"Johnny, are you all right?" she asked for the millionth time. He had to admit that he felt like hell, but nothing was going to keep him from Scott's side at this point. His brother needed backup, whether he realized it or not, and Johnny was going to do what he could.

During the ride to Garrett's house, Johnny's vision had gradually improved to the point where the cloudy figures were fairly defined. Clothing color could be

determined, as well as general body movements, but any detail of eye or hand was still lost in thick cloudiness. He'd decided to keep it all to himself for now - his returning eyesight could still be a fluke and disappear at any moment. Johnny missed his dark glasses badly; they were a shroud to his physical state and the advantage would help. Instead, he allowed the urgency of the moment to guide his motions and tried to ignore the dizzying movements he now saw and the constant burn of the skin on his arms and back. Helping Teresa from the coach, Johnny knew she shouldn't be here.

With Garrett involved, this was going to get ugly. Johnny just hoped the pounding in his head would recede enough to enable him to do what he had to do when the time came.

They left the cab well before Garrett's front doors. Johnny kept Teresa's mind occupied by having her describe the inside of the house in as much detail as she could recall, and she seemed to recall a lot.

"We're here," Teresa breathed, a little winded from supporting Johnny and talking. Loud voices could be heard inside. "Sounds like Scott's here. There's a carriage from the stable out front." She paused. "The stairs look a lot steeper than I remember," she said tentatively.

Johnny pulled her to a stop and forced himself to stand straight. The shirt material was rough against what he knew were growing blisters on his body. A flurry of tiny coughs made shooting stars of his tenuous vision; his hands throbbed. Pushing all the discomfort aside, Johnny squared his shoulders and brushed her hand from his arm.

"Do you know what you're going to do?" she asked as they moved to the stairs.

"Not yet, but somethin'll come to me," he rasped. "You need to wait in the carriage."

"No! I want to go in with you!"

Johnny shushed her, gently held her shoulder with one hand, and placed two fingers lightly on her lips. "We may need to get out of here in a hurry. Get the horse ready and wait for us."

After a moment, she agreed, and he helped her climb in. Johnny felt his way to the horse's head and untied him. The horse gave him a friendly nudge. Johnny's hand paused when he recognized the action - it was Dusty, Dr. Boyer's horse. Don't think doc'll mind the loan, he thought with amusement. Scott must rank on the horse's acceptable list, too.

"You'd better be quick, Johnny. I want to get out of here," Teresa whispered.

"So do I, *querida*, so do I." Johnny gave the horse a farewell pat and relied on the heavy cane to find the door in the meager gas light. For once, the darkness wasn't as frightening.

Squinting through the throbbing pain in his head, Johnny relied on the cane to find the stairs rather than try to sort out the swirling tones of black and grey his eyes showed him. The yellow light from the gas lamp edged everything in pale gold just

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enough for him to avoid the bigger obstacles, but the cane was the best way to define the stairs.

When he stepped onto the porch, Johnny paused for a moment to center his balance and focus on the door. He reached for the doorknob – a dark spot about hip high - but the door opened on its own accord and the biggest shadow of a man Johnny had ever seen darkened the doorway. It was difficult not to respond to the sight, but Johnny kept his head bowed as he drawled, “Expectin’ me, were ya?”

A powerful hand dragged him inside and his head swam sharply.

Johnny was roughly shoved into what he figured was the very chair he'd graced the day before. Lamplight illuminated the ghostly shadows that he could now see were furniture. Scott was easy to find – he was the blur that wouldn't stand still across the room.

“Johnny!” The words were clear through the buzzing in Johnny’s aching head. “Are you all right? You shouldn’t be here!”

“You know me,” Johnny said with a smile. “I’m never where I’m supposed to be.” Now that he was sitting quietly, the headache was more tolerable and he was able to concentrate on what he could see. The sting of his burns, however, was relentless, but, slowly, he was able to push the distractions aside.

Colors, stained yellow by the lamp light, slowly crept into the shadows. He could see that there were two enormous man-shadows – ‘bookends’, he thought – one next to him, and the other keeping Scott on the other side of the room. He missed the tactical advantage of the dark glasses hiding his eyes as he unobtrusively surveyed the room, ‘But I’m still invisible to them’, he thought with satisfaction.

Automatically, Johnny had picked his first target - the bulky shape standing to his left that looked, even as a frothy blob, like hired muscle. The bookend blob by Scott was in the same category, but Johnny had to get around the one at his elbow first.

Another moving shadow on one of the chairs across from him was Harlan. The old goat's voice made that identification easy.

“Calm down, Scotty. I don’t like to see you like this.”

“Well, you won’t be seeing me for long, grandfather, so that should solve your problem!”

With his first target in mind, Johnny just had to wait for an opportunity. A particularly sharp stab of pain fingered out, spider like, from the stitched area of his head. He inadvertently ducked his head and touched the sensitive area with the fingertips of one hand. After a moment, the pain faded, and Johnny looked up just in time to see the second bookend use one ham-sized hand to push his brother down into a facing chair. Johnny noticed at that moment that he could see Scott's eyes as well as the fury there when Scott shoved the offending hand from his shoulder. Then his agitated brother turned his head and looked at Johnny.

As soon as Scott saw Johnny's face, he knew - Johnny could tell - and the slow smile that pulled on one side of Johnny's lips made Scott's mouth drop open in shock as they locked eyes. Moving his hand to again touch the sore spot on the back of his head, Johnny took a fleeting second to press his finger to his lips; 'Our little secret, brother,' he thought. Scott's mouth clamped shut and he pulled his eyes away from the miracle to face his grandfather again. Johnny could only imagine the thoughts now running through his brother's head, but it was clear that Scott knew to keep Harlan's attention away from Johnny, as he launched into another verbal engagement with his grandfather.

The noise was an irritating distraction because it brought flashes of pain and light to his view for a few moments, but when it finally faded away to the previous dull throbbing, Johnny's vision had cleared even more. He could now see that each bookend had a sidearm tucked away in their respective waistbands, and that Scott wore his familiar rig. 'It sits well on him', Johnny thought crazily. He smiled tightly at that thought.

Harlan had dismissed Johnny as any kind of threat; the ex-gunfighter knew that from the way the old man and the bookend musclemen ignored him. Tactically, that was a good thing, and he knew Scott realized that, too. Now Johnny had to figure out how to use their element of surprise to get out of here since it was clear that Harlan knew his gig was blown with Colin's testimony. The more accusations Scott threw at Harlan, the more Johnny realized the extent of Harlan's treachery.

He and Scott had to get out of here for Scott's sake - this betrayal would cut deep, and his brother's heart couldn't take much more. Johnny tensed, preparing to move.

Everything changed in an instant when a thin specter of a man stepped into the room with Teresa in his bony grip.



"I wouldn't." The wiry man stepped through the dining room arch, one sinewy arm wrapped around Teresa's neck with a long fingered hand covering her mouth while the other hand held a large knife to her throat. Teresa's eyes were huge with terror and her fingernails were buried in his forearm. He didn't seem to notice. "Mr. Garrett isn't going anywhere until he pays me what I'm owed."

There was a moment of shocked silence, broken by the indignant roar of Garrett. "Who do you think you are? I don't owe you anything! Get out of my home!" He pushed himself to his feet, and the two bodyguards tensed to move. Scott grabbed Harlan's arm and pulled him back down.

"Don't antagonize him! He'll hurt her!" Scott barked, his eyes burning into the stranger.

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The wiry man gave a skeletal grin and continued to stare at Garrett. "He's right, you know. Nobody makes me the fall guy, Garrett." He tightened his grip on the girl and she let out a terrified squeak and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Harlan sputtered, straightening in indignation. "I've never seen you before in my life!"

"Maybe not," the man said calmly. "But he has." His eyes roamed to the behemoth man standing next to Johnny. "And that ties me to you, Garrett. I know when I'm expendable. I'm just making sure I get my due before I disappear. And I plan to disappear on my own terms." The dark, predator eyes refocused on Harlan.

Scott rose slowly, trying to force the man to look at him. "I won't let you hurt her," he said firmly.

The man's eerie smile never faltered. "That's up to Mr. Garrett," he said darkly, his nearly black eyes never leaving the old man.

"Don't go near him, Scotty. You could get hurt." Finally, a tinge of worry edged in Garrett's voice, the implication clear - he didn't care what happened to Teresa; only his precious grandson held any value.

Scott instantly flushed, his hands curling into fists. Trying to keep his fear at bay, Scott hoped the stranger didn't realize the implication Garrett's tone held. The man's eyes flicked to Garrett, and then slid slowly back to stop squarely on Scott. The hope died; this man knew exactly what Garrett valued.

Apparently, the bodyguard closest to Scott figured it out, too. He reached for the intruder, but the thin man moved with incredible speed. In less than a heartbeat, the knife thumped deeply into the guard's chest as Teresa was shoved roughly into Scott's arms, bowling him over. A rough tug at his side as he fell told Scott that the Colt had been stolen from the holster as he broke Teresa's fall. Scott froze on his hands and knees, Teresa below him trying to breathe with choked, raspy breaths, as the press of cold iron behind his ear told him who had the weapon. The stuck bodyguard wheezed once, then died.

"Don't!" Harlan ordered the second guard who apparently had made a threatening move. "He'll hurt Scotty!"

Doing what he was ordered to do, the second guard growled, "You're a dead man, Carver."

A hand twisted in the back of Scott's collar and he was hauled to his feet. Gasping for breath, his eyes found Johnny's as his younger brother stepped aside enough to be seen from behind the second guard. Johnny's fingers stuck out from the stark white bandages on his hands, and were the only indications of his anger as he gripped the cane tightly. The big guard still blocked Johnny from being able to get to Scott. He was heartened to see that his brother regarded him clearly, meeting his eyes squarely. He wondered just how hard it was for his brother to stay there and pretend blindness.

Scott's eyes dropped to Teresa as she scooted across the floor to Johnny and settled shakily at his feet. Johnny's fingers relaxed and he dropped a hand to the top of the young woman's head. "You all right, *querida*?" he asked softly.

Scott watched as Teresa twisted her head up and nodded, rubbing her throat. Johnny dropped his eyes to meet hers, and Scott saw that she instantly knew Johnny was better. Her eyes widened again, and she gave a little gasp, but she snapped her mouth closed and turned back to Scott in surprise.

Scott met her look and couldn't help but smile a tiny bit. The gun dug deeper in his neck and the moment was gone.

"I have some money in the safe," Harlan sputtered indicating the hall with the wave of an arm.

"Then get it," Carver replied smoothly.

Harlan got shakily to his feet and took a pair of steps, then stopped to glare at the stranger. "You have no idea who you are dealing with."

"The grandfather of a dead man if you don't do what I say," Carver replied as he lifted up Scott's collar, making him choke.

Harlan moved off without a word and disappeared down a hall.

"The butler isn't going anywhere, either, in case you're wondering," Carver said casually. "I left him in the kitchen after he let me in."

"Well, he was kinda rude," Johnny said with his soft drawl, drawing the intruder's attention as Harlan scurried off. Both hands rested on the dragon's head in a relaxed pose. He looked the picture of calm to Scott, and Scott wondered what his brother was up to. Teresa also glanced up at him then back to Scott, questions clear in her eyes.

Carver eyed Johnny and his cane then dismissed him with a smirk.

The remaining bodyguard was not at all happy. He glared at Carver, his fists clenching and unclenching in barely reined in fury. Scott realized that the anger made that man the wild card in all this, and he frantically hoped that Johnny could see enough to realize that.

Hurried footfall brought Garrett back into the room, "This is what I have! Take it!" He held up several packets of banded money.

When the thin man turned to look at it, the remaining bodyguard's arm moved. Two shots rang out and filled the room with the acrid sting of gunpowder. Carver had been faster, and the only connection between Harlan and the arson was dead on the floor. The big body blocked Johnny's path to his brother.

"Scott!" Teresa cried, getting to her feet. Johnny grabbed her arm and held her back. "He's been shot!"

"Scotty!" Harlan gasped from the couch, where he'd cowered from the confrontation.

"Hold still," Johnny hissed lowly.

"But he shot Scott!" she sobbed. "Let me look!"

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Teresa struggled against Johnny's arm, then, realizing Carver still held the Colt to Scott's chin she stopped, trembling uncontrollably.

Harlan started to approach his grandson. Scott's shirt was flowering crimson from high on his side, the red fingers moving outward on the white linen from where the bodyguard's bullet struck. He sagged briefly in the stranger's grip, but managed to keep his feet.

"Better listen to the blind man," Carver said, hauling Scott a few steps backward. Garrett came to a frightened stop, his face ashen. "Your boy here's still breathing. That can change."

"I'm all right," Scott managed to gasp. "I think it just grazed me."

Carver turned coolly to Garrett. "Suddenly, there isn't enough money there for me, Mr. Garrett. Give it to your boy, here." Garrett held out the pile of cash and Scott accepted it with bloody hands. "Stuff it in your shirt, Scotty," Carver ordered. Scott did so, slowly and painfully unbuttoning his shirt and tucking the money inside. His captor waited patiently, knowing he held all the cards in this hand.

Carver dragged Scott backward around the edge of the room toward the front door. "Garrett, I'll keep your boy until tomorrow, ten o'clock. I want fifteen thousand dollars delivered to me at the fountain by the pier. The blind man brings it. You hear me? Any sign of anyone else, and your precious grandson is dead." He pushed the muzzle hard into his captive's neck, making Scott wince. "Clear?"

"You can't do this!" Garrett begged, supporting himself on the back of a chair. "He needs medical attention! I'll pay you what you want!"

"Yes, you will," Carver smiled. "Tomorrow."



Johnny could follow Carver's movements as he circled the room to leave. Not wanting to tip his hand, Johnny kept his head bowed as, Madrid-like, all his senses began to work together and a plan of action naturally fell together. Outwardly, he appeared calm as he carefully tracked the man's path with his peripheral vision and extremely acute hearing. Johnny knew Carver didn't see him as a true threat which gave him a slight edge. As a result, he had to take a chance that Carver wouldn't adversely react to any of his movements.

So Johnny turned toward the pair, shuffling forward until his toes brushed the downed bodyguard. He got as good of a grip as he could with bandaged hands on the cane, and shifted his weight.

"Don't move, blind man," Carver growled.

Johnny jerked at the noise as if surprised then sprang into motion when the pair was at their closest. His eyes flicked to his target and the metal dragon lashed out with accurate speed.

The cane bit hard and Johnny's aim was impeccable. The dragon caught the man just under the chin as an upward jab, making the surprised gunman jerk back.

Scott, reacting to his brother's motion, twisted slightly and yanked the gun down with a two handed grip on Carver's arm. The Colt fired a wild round, and Scott fell away.

Johnny took a step closer to follow up with another jab, but Carver kicked Scott away and freed his arm, swinging it up in an arc that caught Johnny in the jaw with the butt of the Colt. Johnny staggered backward; his head exploding in sparks of agony, and fell aside to his knees.

All he heard was a dull roar mixed with a shrieking his fuzzy brain finally identified as Teresa's screams. Johnny's newfound vision whirled sickeningly as he swayed and tried to keep his balance. He felt more than saw a whirl of motion next to him, heard some unintelligible shouted words that made him wince in pain, and then everything was drowned out with endless buzzing.

He flung his arms around to maintain his balance, and then he felt steadying hands grip on his arm. Johnny was dragged to his feet, and he swallowed the nauseous bile that rose in his throat from the motion. His head felt like a lump of molten iron and was nearly impossible to keep upright.

"He's got Teresa!" he finally heard, realizing it had been shouted at him several times before becoming comprehensible. Finally finding his balance on his feet, Johnny fought to control the sheer pain and clarify what he was seeing.

Scott pulled on his arm, dragging him toward the door. Johnny blinked hard, forcing clear vision as they crossed the threshold to the porch. The circle of gas lamp light spotlighted a vague black form as it climbed into Scott's carriage and made motions to gather the reins.

Scott yelled and raised his arm as if he held a gun then bolted down the stairs. Johnny tried to follow, but lost his balance on the first step and lurched into the side rail. As he hauled himself to his feet, he remembered something.

Johnny swallowed hard and pressed his lips together. The carriage began to move away with a jerk, the horse dancing nervously in the traces as Scott ran toward him. It took a second, but Johnny finally managed an earsplitting whistle that brought tears to his eyes.

Through his swimming vision, Johnny saw the carriage jump forward, and then bounce to a stop. The driver slapped the reins wildly, but then Johnny whistled again and Dusty shook his head, violently fighting the bit. One more slap of the reins and Dusty reared.

Scott's shadow reached the side of the carriage and Johnny saw him drag Carver from the seat. Quickly, Johnny recovered his footing and half-stepped, half-fell down the remaining stairs. He clutched the rail to slow his uncontrolled descent and stumbled when he hit the bottom.

Johnny couldn't hear much through the roaring in his head, but the circle of lamplight clearly framed the forms of Scott and Carver as they fought. Noticing with an odd floating detachment that it was hard to walk a straight line, Johnny had

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almost reached them when his feet tangled in something and he fell to his knees just short of the struggling pair. A gunshot sounded, and bright orange muzzle flash pinpointed the location of the gun. There was a loud grunt, and Johnny heard something hit the ground with a thud as the fight escalated.

Crawling a few inches, Johnny felt the hot barrel of his Colt and fumbled to fit it into his thickly bandaged hand. He reared back on his haunches in time to see one of the forms go down hard. The standing form was wraith-like thin, and Johnny knew it was Carver.

Carver bent and pulled something from his boot and made a smooth, sweeping motion toward Scott.

Johnny raised the Colt and fired, aiming with instinct alone. The sound blinded him with pain for a second as Carver lurched back a step, his attack aborted. Johnny shot again, his head feeling like it too was going to explode. Carver crumpled in the street.

Johnny's hands dropped, and he wondered if he was going to vomit. He heard a rush of motion, and pried his eyes open enough to see Scott on his hands and knees and Teresa quickly checking him.

Then she came to him, and Johnny sighed in relief, closing his eyes to try and ease his throbbing head.

"Grandfather," Scott croaked, struggling to his feet and wobbling to the stairs. With the danger gone, neighbors cautiously began appearing in the yellow ring of light, afraid to come close.

"This one's dead!" a man announced as he bent over Carver's body.

"Help me up," Johnny slurred, grabbing Teresa's arm. Unable to speak through choking sobs, Teresa did as he asked and wrapped her arm around his waist. He held her shoulders tightly with one arm, and the other dangled loosely at his side, the Colt in his bloody grip. His closeness must have helped Teresa gather herself, as her crying dwindled to breathy gasps. They followed Scott up the stairs. "I'm gettin' ta hate stairs," Johnny mumbled. Teresa let out a short, sniffling laugh, edged in hysteria.

When they entered the house, the bright lamps made Johnny's eyes water and he stopped Teresa until he could see again. He heard the young girl start to cry softly again, and he blinked to clear his vision.

Scott was on his knees next to his grandfather, who was lying on his back. There was a dark stain trailing from under his form. His head bowed, Scott gently crossed Harlan's hands across his chest to cover the bright red stain in the middle of his chest then sat back on his heels, motionless, bloodied hands resting on his thighs.

Then Johnny remembered the wild shot fired during the struggle between Carver and Scott. The bullet had found a mark after all.

Try as he might, Johnny found that he couldn't keep focus. With the threat of conflict now past, his physical injuries made themselves known one by one. Teresa had left him leaning against the wall and moved to Scott's side. Johnny slowly slid to

the floor, trying to blink away the horrid throbbing in his head. His eyes settled on the prone form of the bodyguard across from him and he noticed with detached fascination as his sight undulated and slowly sharpened into focus.

There's so much color, he thought weirdly, knowing it was an odd thought for the moment. His skin felt like fire and his hands began to throb in unison with his head. It took quite an effort to roll the pulsing, leaden mass on his shoulders to find his brother, but he was driven to do so.

The only thing he could hear over the constant buzzing was his own breathing, and Johnny found the sound interesting. He watched Teresa and Scott for a moment and smiled to himself; it was the sweetest sight he'd ever seen. Johnny fought desperately to keep his lids open knowing his brother needed help with his grandfather, but lost the battle.

EPILOGUE

Side by side, Scott and Teresa sat outside Johnny's hospital room and waited. They held hands tightly, each taking comfort in the presence of the other. Scott's neck held a fresh bandage where the wild shot in the house had grazed his throat just before killing his grandfather. His side held a trio of new stitches and a square of gauze. Teresa had a much smaller bandage where Carver's knife had left a mark. They both knew they had all been lucky.

The police had finally left after getting their statements and shaking their heads in disbelief. Harlan Garrett had surprised them all. Scott, however, was more than surprised; he was disgusted with himself for not seeing it all ahead of time. As Garrett's heir, Scott knew he would have to go through his grandfather's things and now he was afraid of what he would find when he did. What else hadn't he noticed about Harlan Garrett?

Scott was unable to shed tears for the man that raised him. He was able to look back on his life in Boston and realize what kind of role the man really played. Technically his grandfather, there were none of the emotional ties that should be expected with the blood relation. In reflection, Garrett ran Scott's life just as he ran Garrett Enterprises, with the anticipated payback being the carrying on of the Garrett name. It was a childhood as cold as a Boston winter, and Scott's feelings toward his grandfather were as dead as winter grass.

Living at Lancer had taught him the true meaning of family, and it wasn't the selfish focus Garrett had possessed. Lancer strength came from standing together with trust, love and respect. That strength is what Scott now knew he had to fall back on to resolve the loss of Alexandra within himself and find peace. Until now, he'd not only avoided that connection, he'd pushed it away. It was like he too had been blind in another way and been blessed with new vision.

Never again, Scott swore. Grandfather's legacy is what I make of it and it will be to stand by my true family. Always.

And that made their first priority very clear: Getting home.

Johnny's door cracked open and the two of them rose to their feet as one. A nurse stepped out and gave them an encouraging smile. Dr. Boyer appeared right behind her.

Dr. Boyer waved the nurse on as he spoke to the pair. "Well, he needs to keep still for a while, but your brother's awake and going to be fine," he said. "I get the impression that keeping still may be a problem."

Teresa laughed shortly, and Scott felt a weak grin touch his face.

"You have no idea, doctor," Scott said, offering his hand. Boyer shook it firmly.

"Visiting hours were over a long time ago but I told the nurse to let you stay a few minutes. I'll be back in the morning myself." He nodded a farewell and followed the nurse down the hall.

Scott and Teresa slipped into the room and immediately stood by their brother's bed. White bandages swathed Johnny's hands and the left side of his face was noticeably swollen. The purple outline of the gun butt stood out on the pale skin of his jaw line. It was his eyes, however, that caught their attention. The bright blues sparkled and followed the pair with ease.

"Hey," Johnny croaked.

Teresa took his hand and sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh, Johnny, it's such a miracle."

"A painful miracle," he mumbled as he squeezed her hand. Then he turned his eyes to Scott. "I'm sorry about Harlan."

"So am I," Scott replied lowly, void of feeling toward the man that raised him. He found himself unable to hold his brother's gaze. "I'm sorry I didn't see all this earlier."

"He was good," Johnny said. "Real good." After a second, he dropped his chin and gripped Teresa's hand a little tighter. "I did it again, though. If I hadn't fought back maybe Harlan. . ."

Scott quickly put his hand on his brother's shoulder, gripping it firmly, forcing him to meet his eyes once again. "Don't. You did what you always do, Johnny. You did your best to protect your family. It's not a fault, it's a strength and I wouldn't have it any other way. It's who you are. I won't have you punishing yourself again for being who you are." He paused and ran his hand through his hair with a tired sigh. "My grandfather designed his own fate and is solely responsible for the way things ended. Understand?"

A silent agreement passed between them with their gaze. Johnny tried to nod, but, instead, hissed in pain. He closed his eyes and let his head sink back into the pillows.

"Johnny? You all right?" Teresa asked anxiously.

"I will be as soon as the hammer stops pounding in my head," Johnny replied quietly. "Think I'll just keep still for a bit, if ya don't mind. . . ." His voice trailed off tiredly.

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Teresa released Johnny's hand and stood, taking Scott's elbow. "We'll be back in the morning, then," she said. "We all need some rest before we go home."

"Home." Johnny whispered the word and smiled, his eyes still closed. After a moment it was clear by his rhythmic breathing that he'd fallen asleep.

Finding it hard to leave, both Teresa and Scott watched him in silence for a few minutes. It was Scott that finally broke the spell and turned Teresa toward the door.

Home - he couldn't get there soon enough. Tomorrow, he'd arrange for his grandfather's burial and sign whatever needed to be signed for Garrett Enterprises to be run by the Board until spring. Nothing here was going to keep him from celebrating the holidays at Lancer.

His family was safe. The next thing to do was to unload a house, and he happened to know someone that needed one right now.



They were only one day late getting on the train.

It had taken a little more time than Scott had expected to convince the Llewellyns to move into Harlan's Beacon Street house. Willing to part with anything connected to his grandfather, Scott was ready to sign the property over to them on the spot. Colin wouldn't accept it. Instead, he agreed to stay in the place and take care of liquidating the contents and encouraged Scott not to make any rash decisions concerning the house until next year.

The extra rooms in the house would be used for anyone in the Institute needing a place to stay. Colin, still ashamed at his part in this whole affair, found that being surrounded by the trappings of luxury he'd always wanted was a constant reminder of where he'd gone wrong. He appreciated the substantial roof over his head but found himself anxious to move back into the small house by the Institute once it was rebuilt in the following summer.

Scott requested very little be saved for him; most were items of his mother's that Harlan had carefully stored away as well as a few small pieces of furniture that would be shipped west. It only took a day to sort through things; most of the items were definitely Harlan Garrett's and Scott had no use for them.

It took another two days to lay Harlan Garrett to rest and relinquish Garrett Enterprises to the Board of Directors for the time being. Using a suggestion from Dr. Boyer, Scott requested a full audit of every detail of the business. That would easily keep the Board busy until spring.

The funeral was quick and quiet. The company paperwork was mind numbing. Scott couldn't wash his hands of both necessities fast enough, then finally, they could leave Boston.

Sarah, Colin and the rest of the Institute members that had embraced Johnny and Teresa as one of them were all in the foyer to bid them farewell. They presented Johnny with a new cane since Murdoch's had burned along with the Llewellyn's

house. It had a metal head like Colin's, but the figure was of a horse, ears pinned back into a flowing mane. The eyes were inlaid topaz. Johnny ran his fingers over the piece, appreciating the beauty, then leaned heavily on it as they stood to go. His thigh gave barely a twinge, but he still had a small problem with balance from the head injuries. Dr. Boyer had said it would go away eventually, and Johnny figured it was a small price to pay for getting his sight back.

As the hail and farewells came to a close, Johnny tilted his head, listening. "Cab's here," he said, still hoarse from the fire's smoke.

Scott glanced out the small front window. A light snow was beginning to fall, but the coach was visible. He laughed shortly. "Well, that's appropriate."

"What's appropriate?" Teresa asked curiously. She peeked out the window and smiled.

Johnny slowly approached the door and Scott opened it for him. Just as he stepped outside, he saw the driver approach the horse's head to tie him, and saw - for the first time - the familiar bump the horse gave the man.

Surprised, Johnny said, "Dusty's a palomino?"

Colin couldn't resist. "What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a palomino before?" he teased.

Johnny grinned, recalling the moment everything had changed for him when he decided to take a chance on the slight man. "I just haven't seen that palomino," he answered smartly. "And you'd think a horse named Dusty would be brown."

"Dusty's short for Gold Dust," the doctor informed him from the small gathering in the foyer.

"He acts so much like Barranca they must be related," Johnny mused, watching the driver secure the horse.

Scott frowned. "Two surly palominos are too much. It's a good thing there's a country separating them."

"Barranca ain't surly. He's just picky." Johnny corrected as Scott rolled his eyes. Johnny slowly started down the front steps. "Harry," he greeted with a grin, offering his hand as the driver approached. "I thought stable managers got to stay in the nice, dry barn on days like this."

"I consider it a special booking," Harry said as they shook hands. "Everyone ready?"

All their things fit in Johnny's trunk. Scott hadn't come with much, Teresa's things had burned in the fire, and Johnny opted to leave his Boston clothes behind and wear his gun belt home. Scott didn't care that wearing the weapon went against Boston style; he was very happy to see the Colt on his brother's thigh once again.

The ride to the station was in comforting quiet. None of them took for granted what was ahead. Each of them had their own wounds that needed healing, both physical and emotional, and each knew that time was the only thing they needed now that they were together again.

HEALING OF THE HEART

As the west bound train headed to the station, the trio settled into their seats for the long ride home.

THE END